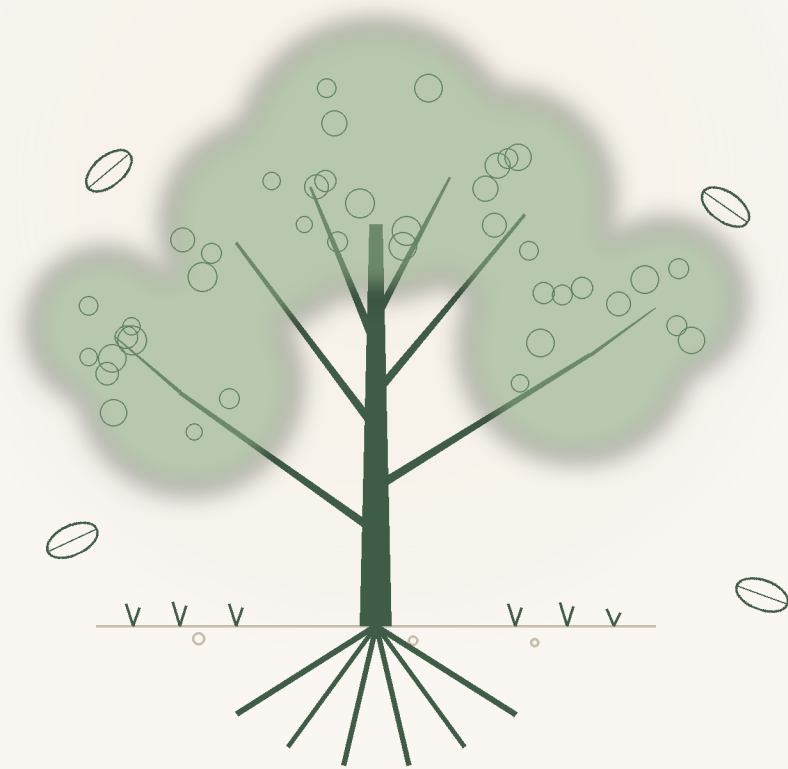




# What I'm discovering as I learn to know myself

*And how it brings us closer to others*

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## Introduction

I've taken personality tests many times over the years, and I also run workshops where I have others take them. Each time, the same questions come back. What in me has always been there, and what was built? Does a label like "melancholic" or "Advocate" say something solid, or only a part of me, at a given moment? And above all: what's the use of knowing it, for myself and in my relationships with others?

This text is a personal reflection, informed by reading and research, not an exhaustive scientific report. It starts from three notions we often mix up: temperament, character and identity. It revisits a useful caution, one that distinguishes the popular "temperaments" (melancholic, choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic) from current scientific models. It touches on the question of testing a child. And it draws on examples from my own life, to arrive at a broader question: how do we accept in others what differs from us, without wanting to change it and without pinning a label on it?

## Three notions not to confuse

**Temperament** refers to tendencies present early in life, with a biological basis. The model of psychiatrist Robert Cloninger distinguishes four: novelty seeking, harm avoidance, reward dependence (the need for approval) and persistence. A Swedish twin study finds that harm avoidance and persistence have a heritability of around 0.50.

Concretely, these four dimensions show up as follows. Novelty seeking is recognized in a person who quickly grows bored with routine, likes to change activity, place or idea, and makes decisions quickly, sometimes impulsively; a person low on this trait prefers the familiar, thinks at length before acting and rarely changes their mind once a decision is made. Harm avoidance is seen in someone who readily anticipates what could go wrong, feels uncomfortable with uncertainty, stays reserved with people they don't yet know, and tires quickly in the face of effort or stress; a person low on this trait stays confident in the face of the unknown, is socially at ease, and keeps their energy even under pressure. Reward dependence is observed in a person sensitive to others' approval, warm, attentive to other people's emotions, and who needs to feel a social bond to feel good; a person low on this trait is more independent, less affected by what others think of them, and keeps their emotional distance even in a group. Persistence, finally, is seen in someone who keeps up an effort despite fatigue or obstacles, who aims high and finds it hard to leave a task unfinished; a person low on this trait gives up more easily as soon as the effort becomes costly or results are slow to come.

**Character** refers to what is built through learning and maturation: self-directedness (a sense of one's goals), cooperativeness and self-transcendence, in Cloninger's model. The same study finds a lower heritability for self-directedness (0.29). The difference between the two is a matter of degree, not a clean separation: both have a genetic part and an environmental part.

Concretely too, self-directedness is recognized in a person who takes ownership of their choices rather than attributing their cause to circumstances, who sets clear goals and sticks to them, and who has a fairly realistic sense of their strengths and limits; low self-directedness shows up instead as a feeling of not being in control of one's life, the absence of a clear purpose, or a self-image that is either too devalued or, conversely, too idealized. Cooperativeness is seen in a person at ease trusting others, able to put themselves in someone else's shoes, ready to help without being asked, and guided by a fairly firm sense of what is fair toward others; low cooperativeness shows up as more distrust, less concern for the common good, and a tendency to favor one's own interests in disagreements. Self-transcendence, finally, is recognized in a person able to lose themselves in an activity or a cause bigger than themselves, sensitive to what connects them to others and to the world beyond themselves, and open to a spiritual or existential dimension of existence; lower self-transcendence corresponds to a more concrete, more self-centered footing, without this being a flaw in any way.

**Identity** is something else again: it isn't a trait, but the story we tell ourselves about who we are. Psychologist Dan McAdams defines it as an internalized, evolving narrative, one that links the reconstructed past, the lived present and the imagined future, with a sense of meaning. Traits answer "what am I generally like?"; identity answers "why does my life make sense, to me?" It is

built mainly during adolescence, and keeps being reworked throughout life, particularly through trials and turning points.

A personality test like 16Personalities or the Big Five measures traits. It measures neither pure temperament, nor character alone, nor identity. This is one of the reasons why recognizing yourself in a profile doesn't say everything about who you are.

A related question naturally comes up: what do the personality traits measured by a test like the Big Five actually look like, concretely? One clarification is needed first, in keeping with what precedes: contrary to what a test that sorts people into a category suggests, the five broad personality traits are not types but continuous dimensions, on which everyone sits somewhere between two poles, often closer to the middle than to an extreme.

Openness to experience is recognized in a curious person, drawn to new ideas, art, abstraction, who likes to question habit; at the other pole, a person prefers the concrete, the familiar and tried-and-tested ways of doing things. Conscientiousness is seen in someone organized, reliable, who plans and follows through on what they undertake; at the other pole, a person is more spontaneous, less attached to order and planning, which hinders neither creativity nor flexibility. Extraversion is recognized in a person who draws energy from the presence of others, likes to talk, act, be stimulated; at the other pole, introversion shows up as a need for calm and solitude to recharge, without this meaning shyness or social difficulty. Agreeableness is seen in a person inclined toward trust, cooperation and conciliation; at the other pole, a person is more direct, more competitive, more inclined to defend their point of view even at the cost of disagreement. Neuroticism, finally, often presented inversely as emotional stability, is recognized in a person who feels negative emotions more intensely and more often, and worries easily; at the other pole, a person stays calm and stable even under pressure.

These five dimensions partly overlap with the temperament and character of Cloninger seen above, without mapping onto them exactly: conscientiousness, for example, brings together elements of persistence (temperament) and self-directedness (character). It is a different model, built with a different method, the statistical analysis of the vocabulary that describes personality across several languages, which arrives at convergent results without being identical. Neither model sorts people into types: both place them on continuums.

## **A word of caution: two very different "temperaments"**

When I was told I was "melancholic," that word did not come from Cloninger's model. It comes from a much older tradition: the four temperaments of Hippocrates and Galen (melancholic, choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic), stemming from the theory of the four humors, which attributed personality to four bodily fluids. This theory was abandoned by medicine after the 1850s. Current science defines no fixed link between these secretions and personality. Some researchers, such as Hans Eysenck, later built modern models (extraversion and neuroticism) that partly overlap with these four profiles, but through different, empirically validated mechanisms. The four classic temperaments are still used as an image, in certain circles, but not as established science.

That doesn't mean the description was wrong for all that: a person who likes order, who thinks before acting, or who has a pronounced sensitivity can very well recognize themselves in the portrait of the "melancholic." But it does mean that this word doesn't carry the same weight as a trait measured by a validated instrument like the Big Five, and that it's better taken as a vivid image rather than a diagnosis. It's useful to know which model a word applied to us comes from, before taking it as scientific truth.

## Why be cautious with a personality test before age 16

I haven't found a study that fixes age 16 precisely as a scientific threshold. But several findings converge to justify caution before that age, or around it.

**Traits are less stable until growth is complete.** The reference review by Roberts and DelVecchio (2000) shows that a person's consistency relative to others (their ranking on a trait) increases progressively from childhood to around age 30, then stabilizes. This consistency generally continues to increase through the thirties before stabilizing, with studies covering the longest intervals showing noticeably higher consistency after age 50 than before age 30. Measuring a trait before that age therefore means measuring something that is still moving even more.

**Identity is only truly built during adolescence.** As seen above, McAdams places the construction of one's self-narrative, and therefore of identity, from adolescence onward. Before that, a child does not yet have the cognitive capacities to link their past, present and future into a coherent story. A personality test taken very early therefore risks measuring a moment, not a person.

**The risk of a label that hardens.** A review article on the subject raises a different argument, more psychological than statistical: giving a child a type risks locking them into a fixed-mindset belief ("that's just how I am, I can't change"), which then becomes part of their identity to defend rather than to question. Here we find again the effect seen above regarding implicit theories of personality: believing traits are fixed pushes us to perceive fewer nuances, in ourselves as in others.

**What really changes before age 16.** Temperament, being more biological, is partly present early. But even it expresses itself differently depending on age, upbringing and context. Character, meanwhile, continues to build throughout childhood and adolescence: self-discipline, cooperation, a sense of responsibility are learned over time and through experience. Testing very early therefore mostly captures a snapshot of a character still under construction, resting on a temperament that is already there but not yet fully expressed.

## **A personal reflection: order, generosity, and the tension with others**

I've been told before, when talking about temperament, that I was "melancholic": I like order, things in their place, and at the same time I know myself to be very generous. But this sense of order sometimes bothers people who don't like order in the same way. Is that temperament, or character?

Probably a mix of both, and untangling them precisely isn't always possible. A liking for order corresponds to a specific facet of conscientiousness in the Big Five (sometimes called "orderliness" in the literature), which has a hereditary component but also strengthens with age, as shown in the section on maturation in the professional report. Generosity is closer to agreeableness, itself also shared between heredity and environment. These are therefore not two opposing traits: one can very well be both orderly and generous, they are two different dimensions.

The tension with people who prefer disorder is therefore not a disagreement about who is right. It's a difference in trait meeting another difference in trait. Neither person needs to be wrong in this encounter. What helps is not determining which of the two ways of doing things is the right one, but naming the difference for what it is ("I need order to feel good, you function differently"), then negotiating shared ground rules where necessary, without trying to convert the other person to one's own way of being. This is the idea the next section develops, backed by research findings.

## The role of life experiences: becoming disciplined without being born that way

I wasn't a particularly disciplined child. It's rather through life experiences that I worked on myself and became more disciplined. Research points in this direction.

A meta-analysis of 44 studies covering 121,187 people (Bühler et al., 2024) finds that life events have real, though small, effects on personality, and that work-related events (finishing school, a first job) have more marked effects than relationship-related ones. A study by Hudson et al. (2019), conducted with 377 students over 15 weeks, goes further: it isn't the wish to change that matters, but the actual completion of specific behavioral challenges. Participants chose from around fifty conscientiousness-related challenges offered over the semester, and the more they actually carried through, the more marked the rise in that trait. Accepting a challenge without carrying it through, however, did not produce the same effect, which confirms that it's repeated action, not intention alone, that counts.

This confirms a simple intuition: discipline doesn't fall from the sky and doesn't depend only on one's starting nature. It is built through repeated actions, often triggered by life circumstances (a new responsibility, a difficulty to get through), more than by a simple act of will. That's good news: even a trait with a genetic component remains open to what we do with it.

## Accepting the other without wanting to change them: what research says

What I sense, as a facilitator, finds fairly direct support in research on what are called implicit theories of personality. Work by Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu and Dweck (2001) shows that people who believe traits are fixed ("that's just how he is, he won't change") perceive groups as more homogeneous, rely more on stereotypes, and more readily attribute others' behavior to a fixed nature rather than to context. Conversely, those who think traits are malleable and context-dependent perceive more variety within the same group and stereotype less. This finding holds among adults as among children, in both Western and East Asian samples.

Seeing a personality difference as a threat is often a way of treating it as fixed and general ("he's just disorganized, period") rather than as one tendency among others, tied to context. Seeing that same difference as diversity means recognizing that it coexists with other qualities in that person, and that it can even vary depending on the situation. This is a stance one chooses, and it seems to have a real effect on the quality of relationships.

That doesn't mean accepting everything unconditionally. Knowing oneself also helps in setting clear boundaries ("I need this to function well") without this becoming a judgment on the other person. A four-year longitudinal study finds that self-acceptance is linked to better mental health at the time it is measured, and that it buffers the effect of difficult events, even though it doesn't by itself predict long-term change. Accepting oneself thus seems to be a condition for accepting others, more than an end result in itself.

A related question often comes up in this work of self-knowledge: how do we avoid comparing ourselves to others while learning to know ourselves? Part of the answer lies in the very nature of these traits: temperament and character are not value scales where one position would be better than another, they are different configurations, each with its own strengths and costs depending on context. Comparing one's persistence to a colleague's, or one's cooperativeness to a friend's, amounts to comparing two answers to different questions. The research on implicit theories, already cited above, suggests a concrete path: the more traits are perceived as context-dependent tendencies rather than as fixed, ranked labels, the less comparison takes the form of a value judgment. Knowing oneself, from this angle, is less about positioning oneself relative to others than about understanding one's own configuration: what serves us well, what costs us, and what requires work, independent of what the person next to us does or is.

This question of knowing how to welcome difference isn't limited to the personal sphere. It also runs through family, friendships, and more broadly all of life in society, where we are constantly in contact with temperaments and characters different from our own, without having chosen them. A parent, a spouse, a friend or a loved one don't need to become a version of ourselves for the relationship to work; they need to be understood for what they are, with shared ground rules negotiated rather than imposed.

The same principle takes on particular weight in a professional context, and it's a question that speaks directly to the role of a manager. Research conducted with more than 500 employees

across seven large companies (Canning, Murphy, Emerson, Chatman, Dweck and Kray, 2020) shows that organizations whose leaders believe people's qualities can develop, a so-called "growth" culture, show stronger perceived collaboration, innovation and integrity than those whose leaders believe talent is largely fixed from the start. Employees of these organizations also report greater trust in, and commitment to, their company. A manager who keeps in mind that temperament is relatively stable, but that character keeps being built through experience, has a useful compass: they can stop expecting every team member to think and function like them, and instead look at how each person's particular configuration can contribute, while remaining demanding about what, within character, can and should develop over time with support. It is a culture that values each person without giving up on helping each person grow.

## Receiving and giving feedback: feedback as respect for the other person

A related question arises as soon as we notice, in someone else, a trait that isn't just a difference to welcome but that genuinely causes a problem, as seen above. How do we talk to them about it without judging them as a person? And conversely, how do we receive that kind of feedback ourselves without shutting down?

A landmark meta-analysis covering more than three hundred studies (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996) offers a useful, almost counterintuitive, finding here: about a third of the feedback interventions studied had a negative effect on the performance of the person receiving it. What distinguishes feedback that helps from feedback that harms is not its severity, but its target. Feedback focused on the task and on what can be adjusted produces a positive effect; feedback focused on the person, touching on who they are rather than what they did, produces a negative effect, even when the original intention was good.

This finding echoes everything seen above. Telling someone "you're disorganized" targets the person, as if it were fixed once and for all. Saying "this way of doing things caused a specific problem, here's what would help" targets the behavior, and leaves the door open to change, exactly as the research on implicit theories of personality suggested above. Giving feedback this way is a concrete way of stepping toward the other person without reducing them to a label.

Receiving feedback requires the same work, in the other direction. Feedback on a specific behavior deserves to be heard for what it is, information about an action, not a verdict on one's entire worth as a person. That isn't always easy to do in the moment, but it's what allows feedback to be used to grow rather than to defend oneself or shut down.

## Personality and vocation: do traits prepare us for a mission?

I like to think that each of us has a calling, a mission, something our personality prepares us for. This question goes beyond what psychology can settle: whether our traits are given to us for a specific mission, or whether they are simply there, with no particular design, is a question of meaning and personal conviction. What research can speak to, on the other hand, is how the feeling of having a calling works once we experience it, and what makes us live it fully or not. That is firmer ground, and it's the one I hold onto here.

**Perceiving a calling, and living it, are two different things.** Researchers Dik and Duffy, who have worked extensively on this notion in the psychology of work, distinguish the experience of feeling a call (perceiving a calling) from actually putting it into practice (living it). A synthesis of a decade of research on the subject shows that both are linked to a stronger sense of meaning at work, greater life satisfaction, and stronger engagement, but that these effects are markedly stronger among people who actually live out their calling, not just those who feel it without putting it into practice.

**Having the right traits isn't enough to fully live out a mission.** Research on character strengths (Peterson and Seligman) points in the same direction: it isn't having a strength that produces meaning and well-being, but exercising it, actively and repeatedly. An early experiment by Seligman and colleagues (2005) shows that using a signature strength in a new way increases happiness and reduces depressive symptoms for six months. And a finding by Allan and Duffy (2013) specifies that this active use matters even more for the sense of meaning people give their lives among those whose sense of calling is weak or uncertain, not only among those who have already found it.

**What this says about discipline.** If I ask myself whether I can fully live what I do, supporting organizations, helping young people discover who they are, without the discipline needed to do so, research suggests a two-part answer. On one hand, no: a trait or an intention isn't enough, it's the repeated exercise of a behavior that produces the desired effect, whether on the meaning we give our work or on the trait itself. On the other hand, it isn't a fixed fate: as the previous section shows, discipline is built through action, often through life experiences, it isn't a starting condition one either has or doesn't. Fully living out a calling therefore doesn't depend on a fixed nature, but on what one decides to practice, day after day.

What psychology doesn't say, and what I leave open here, is where this call comes from and why it is given to us. That's a question beyond this text.

Here is where I stand in relation to my faith: I believe that God prepares each person, through their personality, temperament and character, for the mission entrusted to them. This conviction is anchored in Scripture, which is my point of reference. I present it as a conviction of faith, not as a scientific thesis.

There is a lot of talk today, in the professional world, about leadership; people are asked to become leaders. But you cannot lead others without first leading yourself, and leading yourself begins with discovering yourself: knowing your temperament, working on your character, before

you can influence anyone at all. In the circles that shaped me, we often speak of society's spheres of influence (family, education, the economy, government, the media and the arts, sometimes religion itself), and of the idea that influencing them requires this inner work beforehand.

This work is lived on two levels. At the personal and social level, it starts with knowing oneself, temperament, character, values, in order to live at peace with oneself and with others, without comparing oneself to or wanting to change who one is not. At the professional level, this same work becomes a lever for leadership: a person who has learned to know themselves and to discipline themselves has more consistency and credibility to lead a team or an organization.

For an organization, this translates into a few concrete choices: encouraging staff to know themselves, with the caution called for around personality tools, valuing the development of character and not only technical skills, and cultivating, as the research cited above shows, a culture where people's potential is seen as capable of growth rather than fixed.

For the person themselves, this means taking the work on oneself seriously before seeking to influence others: recognizing what, in one's temperament, is to be welcomed as it is, and what, in one's character, deserves to be worked on; setting concrete challenges rather than mere intentions, as the research on intentional personality change showed above; and keeping in mind that this personal discipline is what then makes a real influence possible on the spheres one is called to act within.

## What I take away from this

Four ideas keep coming back, once these readings and this reflection are put together.

The first is that no single word says everything about who we are. Temperament is not character, and neither one is identity. A word like "melancholic" can ring true without coming from solid science, which invites us to hold it lightly.

The second is that knowing oneself is not a finish line, but ongoing work. Who we are at 25 isn't fixed, discipline is built through action, and self-acceptance is maintained rather than acquired once and for all.

The third is that how we think about personality changes how we look at others. Believing traits are fixed pushes us to judge and to want to change the other person. Seeing them as tendencies, tied to context and coexisting with other qualities, opens the way to accepting difference without treating it as a threat, or as something to correct.

The fourth is that accepting a difference and resigning oneself to a flaw are not the same thing. Temperament has no moral value, these are variations to be respected. Character, however, carries a dimension temperament doesn't: in Cloninger's model, a low score in self-directedness or cooperativeness is not neutral, it is associated with more relational difficulties. A character trait that hurts others or gets in the way of moving forward is therefore not something to welcome as mere diversity, it's a point to work on, through choice and discipline, as shown in the section on the role of life experiences. Saying "that's just how I am" to understand oneself is not the same sentence as saying "that's just how I am" to resign oneself to it.

## Conclusion

At the end of this reflection, one thing seems clearer to me than at the start: the goal is not to find the right word to describe oneself, nor to compare oneself to a profile, a colleague, or anyone else. The goal is to make peace with oneself.

Making peace with oneself means accepting one's temperament as it is, without judging it better or worse than someone else's. It also means welcoming the part of one's character that still needs work, without holding it against oneself, but without resigning oneself to it either. And it means learning to see oneself without the constant comparison to the person next door, who has neither the same starting point nor the same path to walk.

This peace with oneself also extends toward others. Welcoming one's own inner diversity, one's different facets, prepares us to welcome that of others without experiencing it as a threat. This sometimes calls for knowing how to self-regulate, to step aside to make room for a way of doing things different from one's own, without experiencing it as a loss. Stepping toward the other, in this spirit, doesn't mean erasing oneself or giving up who one is: one can move toward the other, welcome them, adjust, without going silent. It is this balance, between opening up to the other and staying true to oneself, that seems to me, in the end, to be what this whole reflection was trying to shed light on.

This peace with oneself is not a fixed finish line. It is maintained, it is reworked, as everything I have gone through here shows. But it is, I believe, the real condition for then living well with others and, for me, for moving forward in what I feel called to. Knowing oneself serves no purpose if it doesn't first lead to accepting oneself.

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