

Christina Berndt

## **Individuation**

How We Become the People We  
Want to Be The Path to the I Who  
Will Fulfill My Needs

272 Pages

Rights Sold: Italy  
ISBN 978-3-423-26236-1

*Sample translation by Emma Rault*

## **Contents**

### 1. Introduction

We're all trying feverishly to find ourselves and we talk about our 'true self.' But nowadays psychologists know that there is no such thing. People's personalities begin to change from day one. About the big question of how we got to be who we are—and how we can

become who we'd rather be.

### 2. So Much Is Possible

Our personalities can undergo much more extreme change than people commonly assume. For too long the scientific community believed what high-school reunions often appear to confirm—that people tend to stay the same with the passing decades. But change is possible. This chapter presents the most recent research findings on the subject, outlining some fascinating examples of changing personalities.

A selection:

- a. From gang leader to psychology professor: Niels Birbaumer and his transformative internship
- b. From straight banker to gay hairdresser: Christopher Birch and his stroke
- c. From staunch urbanite to nature lover: Dottie O'Connor and her lung transplant
- d. From builder and ex-convict to compelling artist: Tommy McHugh and his brain hemorrhage
- e. From rookie student of Chinese to sudden language genius: Ben McMahon and his car accident
- f. From troublemaker to respected court-appointed forensic psychiatrist: Hans-Ludwig Kröber and his boundless curiosity
- g. From remedial student to gifted professor of mathematics: Harald Lesch and his skull base fracture

### 3. The Development of the Personality

Everyone changes. This chapter describes the things that determine your personality and how it changes over the course of a lifetime. The traditional watershed moments are especially significant here: puberty, first love, moving out of the parental home, settling down with someone, having children, the start of the midlife crisis, retirement. However, this chapter doesn't just deal with the changes that take place during these phases—it also explains how you can recognize at an early stage that your personality is changing, and explores some of the inner tools you can use to help protect yourself from negative influences and make better use of positive ones.

### 4. Personality Test: Which Type Are You?

### 5. Resonance – or the Major Decisions in Life

Even past our formative years, our personalities continue to change in response to the events of our lives.

It's not just the classic turning points described in Chapter 3 that play a role, but also the major life decisions that people make: What profession do I want to pursue? How settled do I want to be? What partner do I choose? How close is my relationship with them? Will I have children? And how career-oriented do I want to be? This chapter describes what is known by modern personality psychology about the impact of these factors and how important it is for people to reflect on the implications of these decisions for the self.

But it's not just the major opportunities and challenges that change our personalities. Small events that tend to be considered insignificant also shape who we become. Psychologists nowadays are engaged in an intense debate about the many microtraumas—or, put in positive terms, micro-experiences—that people undergo in the course of their lives. While significant traumas, injuries and life-altering moments doubtlessly have a profound impact on the psyche, it is also thought that constant criticism and recurring minor emotional injuries can affect our personalities. The second part of the chapter focuses on how these repeating assaults on the self change us and how we can best counter them.

## 6. Test: What Do I Really Want? What Life Suits Me?

### 7. Food for the Soul

It's not just life decisions and brain damage that can change our selves – factors that no one previously suspected were relevant can also have a major impact on who we are, from our gut flora to our sleep and our thoughts. This chapter explores the surprising links that modern science draws with the development of our personalities.

#### 7.1 Microbes Against Depression

#### 7.2 Sleep and Confidence

#### 7.3 You Are What You Think

## 8. Inventing Yourself Instead of Finding Yourself

Even if there's no such thing as a 'core self' that needs to be discovered, it's possible to let go of the idea of the self while still taking its needs seriously. On how you can find out who you'd ideally like to be and what life you really want to lead—and how you can start heading toward that life.

## 9. Bibliography

### 10. List of Abbreviations

### 11. List of People Mentioned

### 12. Acknowledgments

## Introduction

In the beginning, there was just similarity. When Paul and Jan are born in 1982, their family is delighted—twins! It's virtually impossible to tell the two boys apart, including where their personalities are concerned. They're both happy-go-lucky kids who like to seize life by the horns. They'll find their way in life, their mother thinks to herself—we don't need to worry about them. But in puberty the gap between the two boys begins to widen. Paul becomes an ambitious young man—he graduates from high school and enrolls in university. Jan, on the other hand, starts hanging out with a bad crowd, turns to crime and occasionally even becomes physically violent.

How is it possible that the lives of these two young men, who had such a similar start, ended up diverging so profoundly? What made one of them into a diligent student—someone who is capable of contributing to society and being held within the support system that exists around him—and the other, a selfish man who has no qualms about violating other people's rights and appropriating their property in order to satisfy his own needs? Is falling in with the wrong person at the wrong time enough to lead us irrevocably down the wrong road, or is that kind of dramatic change by definition the result of a combination of different factors?

How do we become who we are? That's a question almost every person asks themselves at some point—if not before, then certainly when they hit a turning point in life or find themselves in a crisis. Would I have become someone else if I'd been dealt a better hand? Why am I so quick to get angry or emotional or take it personally when faced with criticism? What has made me into the person I am today? How could I lead a better, happier life? And how can I protect myself against the negative influences that hold me back or scar me?

Researchers, too, are very interested in these questions at the moment. Psychologists, neurologists and sociologists are all trying hard to find out how our personalities are formed. The experts, however, are forced to concede that for many years they were approaching this with entirely the wrong assumptions. For a long time it was believed that the self has an unchanging core and that, after potentially having been steered off-track in our early years and warped by external events, we can set out to find ourselves later on and go on to achieve our true potential. Psychoanalysts, communists, existentialists and hippies alike were fascinated by the idea of self-actualization. To this day, many people believe that they have a stable inner center, and that all they need to do is find it and live in accordance with it. But it's becoming more and more apparent that there is no such thing as a "core self."

There's little doubt that we come into this world with a distinct personality that begins to manifest itself from virtually the moment we are born. But how it goes on to develop is influenced to a significant extent by what we experience and who we encounter. If we'd grown up in a different place, at a different time or in another family, we would be very different people. In other words, there's no such thing as discovering who we actually are deep down. That solid, immovable core doesn't exist.

"People's personalities begin to change from the very first day they're in this world," says Niels Birbaumer, Director of the Institute of Medical Psychology and Behavioral Neurobiology at the University of Tübingen. We are subject to influences that are difficult for us to control, and what we consider our "self" is something that we construct for ourselves as we see fit in a process of interplay with our surroundings, our life experiences, our allies and our adversaries. We invent our personality more than we discover it. The result is a self that's inserted in the giant jigsaw of life and that will change again with time—when the jigsaw pieces around it reconfigure, if not earlier.

The magic word here is "resonance." Originally this term denoted the phenomenon whereby acoustic systems vibrate along with an external source. But in everyday life, resonance doesn't just occur in our inner ears. More and more, this concept is also salient in the humanities.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa from the University of Jena recently explored the meaning of resonance in the context of life in society. He describes resonance as the feeling that arises when people are enmeshed in a



“relationship with the world.” Thus, we feel resonance when we do meaningful work that we get feedback on, when we look out over the ocean or stand on a mountaintop and feel our spirits soaring, when we spend hours engrossed in conversation with friends, when we’re moved by a piece of music or when our favorite soccer team scores a goal. Within this context, alienation is disturbed resonance.

But the field of psychology is increasingly preoccupied with the phenomenon of resonance as well. After all, the psyche, too, is a system that vibrates in step with external forces. It develops in response to events in our lives. Encounters and experiences reverberate inside it, change it and are fed back to the outside world. People are in a constant state of exchange with their surroundings, which influence their personality and their consciousness.

We adopt ideas from others; we adjust to the environment around us. We identify with the role of gang leader or covet an academic career, and cobble together justifications only in retrospect. The latest psychological research reveals the astonishing extent to which we rewrite and edit our memories. Even events that we consider formative in our lives were completely different in reality.

It should be noted that resonance is by no means always a positive thing. After all, we’re not just in tune with our surroundings when we’re at a meeting, making sure to regularly nod at our boss to signal our approval with a view to getting ahead in our career. We also resonate with the negative forces in our surroundings. We are social beings—we absorb what goes on around us. A loving environment can lead to a positive perception of the world, while a malignant environment can result in certain anxiety-inducing situations being experienced as negative time and again. Even xenophobia and fascism are the products of resonance—powerful ones, in fact.

The impact of this phenomenon reaches far beyond our spontaneous experience. Ultimately resonance is even written into our genes, as the new research discipline of epigenetics has convincingly demonstrated. Our experiences leave chemical markers on our DNA. And if the resonance experienced is particularly strong, the genetic changes are almost impossible to undo. This means that we can even end up passing down our experiences to future generations through our genes.

(...)

It exists, then—the possibility of a totally new self. But by the same token, every day we also face the risk of our personality changing for the worse. There are countless examples in medical history of brain injuries dramatically altering people’s personalities—turning a loving family man into a choleric man consumed by rage, for example—or bringing hidden talents to light, as with the British construction worker, criminal and heroin addict Tommy McHugh, who after having a brain hemorrhage turned into a highly-respected poet and painter.

Of course it’s not always as extreme as that. We all become aware as we get older of how much we’ve changed in the course of our lives. We suddenly grow interested in things we never used to care about, and the other way around: the same things that fascinated us when we were young now elicit a weary smile at best. This doesn’t necessarily mean that our personality has fundamentally changed. Someone in their mid-forties may not want to go to every single party the way they did back in their twenties, but they may still be outgoing, chatty and very much a part of the social world. Perhaps they just prefer to stop at each garden



fence for a chat on their way to the supermarket rather than having their social interactions in a nightclub. But there's also more radical change, the kind that sees former wallflowers turn into extroverts, or neat freaks into people who are late paying the bills and only tidy away their dirty socks when they're expecting visitors. "People's personalities can change to a surprising degree even without a brain hemorrhage or stroke to trigger it," says psychology professor Jule Specht. At the same time, though, repeated small affronts to our psyches—the mini-traumas that we experience at work and in our private lives—constantly chip away at our self-image.

In addition to serious physical or emotional injuries, our life decisions can also have a seismic impact on our personalities. Our choice of career and the decisions we make with regard to our family life are especially formative. Young people embarking on vocational training courses will soon find themselves becoming considerably more conscientious, while university students gain emotional maturity, as a team of researchers at Humboldt University of Berlin, headed up by psychologist Oliver Lüdtke, discovered. After retirement, meanwhile, we tend to see the phenomenon referred to as the Dolce Vita effect: people place lower expectations on themselves; they become more unreliable and focused on themselves. And people who move in with a partner tend to suddenly become less open.

And yet we are more than just the plaything of the events that befall us. After all, we also have a say in what we experience. The choices we make, in turn—college or not, partner or not—depend on our personalities. "Depending on how we throw the switches, we'll find ourselves faced with entirely different challenges in the course of our lives, which we will naturally adjust to—and which will leave their own marks on our personality," says Specht. That means that people can also work on their personalities. The potential for change is huge. People shouldn't feverishly try to cling to what they perceive to be their "self"—but at the same time they should take their actions seriously.

Of course, it's important to retain some degree of realism here: "You can still learn to dance at 55, but not everyone will still have the potential to become a flamenco dancer at that age," says Werner Greve, a developmental psychologist from the University of Hildesheim. But in addition to our physical limitations more than anything it is clichés that sabotage us: working on yourself is especially difficult when you're being pigeonholed into a clearly-defined identity by the people around you. In a small town, or in the workplace, where other people have long formed an image of who you are, it can be difficult to break out of those old patterns. "Often it's feedback from others that keeps us from changing," Greve says. "In a new context it's easier to change." Resonance, then, can also be an impediment to growth. In a new city, in a new job, with new friends and acquaintances, on the other hand, you can find new opportunities for resonance and design yourself anew.

What makes us into who we are? What circumstances and what decisions have the biggest impact? Do we only grow when we find ourselves faced with challenges—in our professional lives, or when we're raising children? Or are the changes we go through in these situations, if anything, negative? To what extent can we affect how our personalities develop? Where are the boundaries? And how can we manage to escape the influence of unwanted outside factors and create our own personhood? Remaining firmly grounded in the science, these are the questions this book seeks to explore.