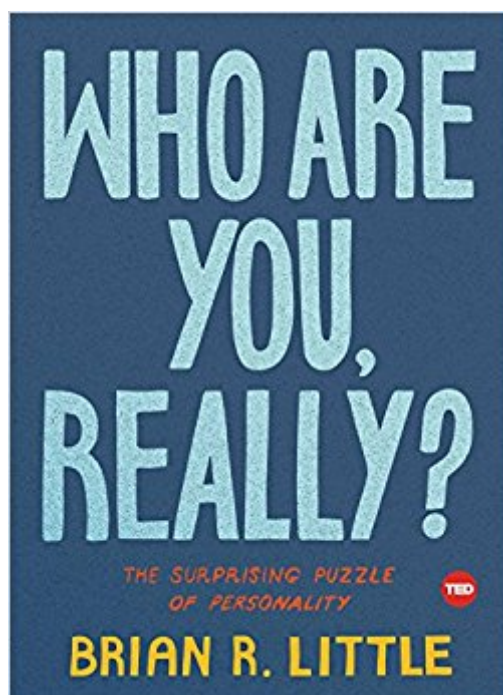


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# Who Are You, Really?: The Surprising Puzzle Of Personality (TED Books)



## Synopsis

This fun, smart read for anyone eager to better understand (and improve) themselves argues that personality is driven not by nature nor nurture—but instead by the projects we pursue, which ultimately shape the people we become. Traditionally, scientists have emphasized what they call the first and second natures of personality—genes and culture, respectively. But today the field of personality science has moved well beyond the nature vs. nurture debate. In *Who Are You, Really?* Dr. Brian Little presents a distinctive view of how personality shapes our lives—and why this matters. Little makes the case for a third nature to the human condition—the pursuit of personal projects, idealistic dreams, and creative ventures that shape both people's lives and their personalities. Little uncovers what personality science has been discovering about the role of personal projects, revealing how this new concept can help people better understand themselves and shape their lives. In this important work, Little argues that it is essential to devote energy and resources to creative endeavors in a highly focused fashion, even if it takes away from other components of our well-being. This does not mean that we cannot shift from one core project to another in the days of our lives. In fact, it is precisely that ability to flexibly craft projects that is the greatest source of sustainability. Like learning to walk, forcing ourselves out of balance as we step is the only way in which we can move forward. And it is the only way that human flourishing can be enhanced. The well-lived life is based on the sustainable pursuit of core projects in our lives. Ultimately, *Who Are You, Really?* provides a deeply personal itinerary for exploring our personalities, our lives, and the human condition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dr. Brian Little is an internationally acclaimed scholar and speaker in the field of personality and motivational psychology. He is a Fellow of the Well-Being Institute and Director of the Social Ecology Research Group in the Department of Psychology at Cambridge University. Previously, he taught at McGill, Oxford, and Harvard Universities. Dividing his time between Canada and the UK, Dr. Little is also a Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus at Carleton University in Ottawa, and he lectures worldwide on personality, motivation, and well-being. *Who Are You, Really?* is his third book.

*Who Are You, Really?* So, how are you doing? Are you happy? Are you accomplishing the things that matter to you? Are you living up to your capabilities? Are you able to love and be loved? Are you physically well? Is there some laughter in your life? If you answer yes to all such questions, we might say that you are flourishing. If you answer with an emphatic "No!" or even an eyeball-rolling "Seriously, get real," you might be better described as floundering. And in between these extremes, we might find you in the middle, doing reasonably well considering the circumstances. Biogenic traits deeply influence whether you flourish or flounder. You may be temperamentally predisposed to viewing your life positively and optimistically, even though the objective reality that you confront might be rather bleak. Or despite living in a relatively safe, nurturing, and prosperous environment, you may see your life as half empty, or utterly miserable. The forces of nature and nurture that provide answers to "Who are you?" are also key to answering the question "How are you doing?" The relation between these biogenic and sociogenic influences can be simply graphed as: Whether you are flourishing or floundering, in other words, is partly determined by the combination of biogenic and sociogenic sources that impinge on you during the course of your life. These aren't the only influences, but we need to understand how they work before we explore how your personal projects empower you to deliberately design who and how you are. So let us begin with a brief tour through the inner biogenic and the outer sociogenic forces that shape your personality. 3> Imagine a microscope that dips under your skin and zooms down to reveal your tissues, organelles, cell nuclei, chromosomes, and genes. It darts up to your brain and homes in on a single neuron firing a squirt of neurotransmitters and the explosion of activity in associated cells. It then zooms out to focus on the physical body reading this book wondering about who it is and how it's doing. This

It is the biogenic you. Within personality psychology, those who study the biogenic perspective explore how your relatively stable personality traits influence your quality of life. These stable traits correspond to differences in brain structure and function—those microscopic events we just saw when zooming in on the inner you. These biogenic features can be assessed by measures of electrical activity in various regions of your brain or through analyses of patterns of neurotransmitter activity. They can also be revealed through personal genomic analysis, which can now be done for roughly \$200. In *My Beautiful Genome*, the Danish science writer Lone Frank relates the fascinating account of her quest to examine aspects of her personal genome and its links to her health and personality. She discovered that she had a gene variant that predisposed her to negative emotionality and what she most agreeably describes as her “own miserably low score on agreeableness.”<sup>3</sup> Some of these biogenic personality traits will incline you toward being happy or healthy or accomplished or, conversely, will explain why you despair over life’s various hiccups. Let’s say your life is flourishing right now—you are happy, healthy, and successful, certainly compared to your mopey best friend, but maybe even in an absolute sense. This may be due to your having biogenic features of temperament and personality that dispose you to adopt a positive outlook. Even when life sucks, your stable dispositions make you resilient and buoyant. You continue to grow and prosper. Indeed, you may have paranoia, the delusional belief that other people are plotting your well-being or saying good things about you behind your back.<sup>4</sup> Your friend’s stable traits, in comparison, may not be conducive to flourishing at all. She is angry and defiant and unsatisfied, and according to her mother, she was like this from birth. She is temperamentally disposed to being ill-disposed. She flounders. <sup>3</sup>> Did you know that it is virtually impossible for you to lick the outside of your own elbow? And did you know, strange as it may sound, that how you responded to that piece of information—whether and how you attempted the pursuit—might provide a hint about the stable traits you are born with and that form the bedrock of your personality? Let me explain: While there are thousands of ways we might distinguish people on the basis of their traits, personality psychologists have reached a consensus that people vary from one another along five basic dimensions: the Big Five traits. The Big Five have major consequences for how our lives play out.<sup>5</sup> If you would like to get a quick assessment of where you stand on these major traits, the Appendix provides some questions that can guide your own self-assessment.

In *WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?* Professor Brian Little presents some surprising research findings on personality. This is a fun book, and an easy read. The author writes well, and his ideas are

presented clearly and concisely. Most people think of personality as one's attributes--such as how extroverted we are, or how detailed we are. But an overlooked aspect of personality is not just our attributes, but what we are DOING. This activity is identified by our "personal projects." The exciting part is that we can modify our projects to better mesh with our personal attributes. So, an introvert would feel a sense of accomplishment and likely succeed, on a poetry project. (And not so much a run for political office.) By shifting to a "doing" perspective on personality, we give ourselves lots of options to improve our sense of well-being and accomplishment. We can consciously choose and adapt our projects. We can use a general principle to select our projects: "Projects that are meaningful, manageable, and connected with others, and that generate more positive than negative feelings, their well-being will be enhanced." For example, projects that are internally motivated, rather than being done under pressure from someone else, will give us greater happiness. Ask yourself WHY you are doing a "self-help" project: "Who instigated it? If they spring from your own vision of a possible self, you are likely to feel better while pursuing them." Projects that are manageable, rather than chaotic also leads to greater sense of well-being. The author calls this project "efficacy." He explains that efficacy is one of the top predictors of well-being: "Efficacy best predicts whether a person feels that their life overall is going well." Although we should try to arrange projects to match our personality attributes, Dr. Little also recommends leaving a little room for chance: "Hone your skills as the athlete you always dreamed of becoming, but be ready to change course if you begin to demonstrate a strong passion for science." Similarly, if you dream of writing poetry, leave the door open to writing about music. All in all, I found WHO ARE YOU, REALLY? to be a fun, intriguing read, with some meaty ideas. I especially like the idea of being proactive in choosing projects that give me greater satisfaction. Don't miss the Appendix, which has an interesting personality evaluation. Advance Review Copy courtesy of the publisher.

Who Are You Really is a TED Talk, not a research book or study. It reads like a talk, not a book. It is peppered with mild laugh lines to keep the audience with the speaker. You can see them coming, and you can hear Little cash in. Basically, you are reading a script. The script is a self-help through self-identification course. Little segregates people into buckets and deals with them that way. Do it yourself, and gain some perspective, perhaps. Or change your approach, your projects and your

sensitivities to be more effective. There are five buckets: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (OCEAN). On a scale of 1-5, you rate yourself, and formulas assign you a personality. If you are not self-aware or at least honest with yourself, this is the book for you. The scoring however, doesn't make sense. For example, the average score for Conscientiousness is 11. But the formula is question 13 (maximum value 5) less questions 3 and 8 (maximum value 10). For Agreeableness, you add scores from questions 2 and 12 (max 10) and subtract from the score from question 7 (max 5). The average score is somehow 12. This quickly puts everyone in the bucket Subhuman. Possibly the most valuable chapter tackles authenticity, buzzword without equal in western society. Little says we can have multiple authenticities, conflicting authenticities, and private authenticities. They are all valid and authentic. Plus, we need to understand their strategic value, and not just wear them on our sleeves. Bravo. David Wineberg

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