

the cube

Imagine you are in a desert.

In your field of view you see a cube. Visualize the cube.

What does it look like? Is it far away or close to you?

There is also a ladder in the scene.

Where is the ladder? What is its relationship to the cube? Is it strong? Is it tall?

What is it made out of?

Next, envision a horse. Describe what the horse looks like.

Where is it going? Is it moving or still? Where is it going? Where is it coming from?

There is also a garden.

Where is it? What is its relation to the other elements in the desert?

Now imagine there is a storm in the desert. Describe the storm.

Is it passing? Is it violent?

results (do not read before you finish answering the questions!)

[Like Dot mag cube simulation](#) (may take a minute to load)

The cube is a symbol of how you see yourself. Consider some of the qualities of the cube you described. Was your cube accessible or impenetrable? Was it grounded? Or was it floating above the ground, weightless? What material was it made of - something strong, ephemeral, fragile?

The ladder is a symbol of your career. What was the ladder's relationship to the cube physically? Was it close to it? Was it leaning on it, was it standing up or lying on the ground? Did one element support the other?

The horse is the symbol of you see your lover(s). Was the horse moving or still? If it was moving, what direction was it headed in? Was it far away? Was it calm? Was it alive?

The garden is a symbol of how you see your friends and family. Where was the garden in relation to the cube? Was it a big garden? Were there many plants and flowers? Were they wild or maintained? Was it healthy?

The storm represents how you are currently dealing with trouble or conflict in your life. Was the storm near or far? Did it seem dangerous or not particularly harmful?

The Cube, and selfhood: on wanting to know what I am and what everyone else is and suffering from deep confusion always

The test above is from a game called "The Cube." It's a kokology game - kokology is the study of kokoro, which is Japanese for "heart" or "spirit." The game functions as a guided daydream, which can then be interpreted based on the mental image of the desert scene that the player constructs. It's also a pre-web 2.0 pop-psychology phenomenon. By this I mean that it is quite easy to imagine that if the book had emerged later than 2004, the games would be eaten up by any smart data collecting website with the guise of an attention attracting link ("What does your desert scene say about you?") and one might willingly help build an individualized data profile just by clicking for a few minutes. However, the Kokology books, created by Tadahiko Nagao and Isamu Saito, were published in 1998 and became bestsellers in Japan. According to wikipedia, Isamu Saito is a respected professor of psychology at Risho University in Japan, but I wasn't able to find anything else about him (separate from Kokology Books sellers). I learned this game through a friend, and have played it for fun with both friends and lovers. What I like about the game is that everyone gets to construct a virtual landscape that functions as a representative image for each player; a coherent imaginary world made up of five discrete elements, all together serving as a self-portrait. By mentally representing each element of the simulated reality, an opaque representational model of the self¹ materializes.

The mental simulation² of the desert scene is a virtual representational process underlying the emergence of a possible phenomenal world. Many cognitive scientists have argued that consciousness understands the self as an actual entity, but in fact it is a mental simulation of "self" that is part of a system of representation. For example, Thomas Metzinger has made the claim that the notion of the "self" is actually just the representational process by which we form the content of the "transparent self-model."³ It is transparent because it cannot be recognized as a model by the system using it. He argues that "we do not experience the contents of our self-consciousness as the contents of a representational process, and we do not experience them as some sort of causally active internal placeholder of the system in the system's all-inclusive model of reality, but simply as ourselves, living in the world right now."⁴ The existence of a coherent self-object is exactly what the personality quiz is designed to reaffirm - a flattening takes place during the act of representation, even if as a dynamic simulation, seemingly distant from the static image.

The online personality quiz is an addictive and omnipresent space on the internet where by answering a few questions, I can confine myself to a flavor of food, a type of animal, or a consumer brand. The process of objectifying or confining oneself to a type is what Freud described as a function of the super-ego, when "One part of the ego sets itself against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object."⁵ The objectification process is largely a representational process, one that we actively engage in online, in taking pictures, or even in daydreaming. There is a pleasure the reductive representational process that the "personality quiz" allows for. Adam Phillips tells us that "the super-ego casts us as certain kinds of character; it, as it were, tells us who we really are; it is an essentialist; it claims to know us in a way that no one else, including ourselves, can ever do."⁶ It's important to remember that pop-psychology is an industry and it's an industry that's doing very well. It might seem bizarre that there is a desire to be analyzed by a simple algorithm that divides and reduces a person into a limited number of categories, yet "personality quiz" gets searched on google hundreds of thousands of times a month, and a BuzzFeed Quiz posted four days ago has ~1.3 million views.⁷ The compulsion to identify with elementary objects cannot be accounted for as simply a form of entertainment. Both cognitive science

and psychoanalytic theory tells us that there is something within us that is inclined to self-objectify. Phillips asserts that "we so enjoy this picture of ourselves as objects" and asks "what is this appetite for confinement, for diminishment?"⁸ Humans have sought to explain behavior by categorizing personality into distinct types since Hippocrates incorporated the four temperaments: sanguine (optimistic and social), choleric (short-tempered or irritable), melancholic (analytical and quiet), and phlegmatic (relaxed and peaceful) into the ancient concept of humorism, which posited that an excess or deficiency in these four bodily fluids affect personality traits and behavior. Today, the most widely used personality quiz in the world is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.⁹ The MBTI is deployed by 89 of the Fortune 100 companies, the US government, hundreds of universities, and online dating sites.¹⁰ Last year alone, 2 million people took the test in 70 different countries (not including the free imitation quizzes online). With only 16 different types, it might seem unlikely that everyone is born with a four letter template that informs the behavior for a messy and incalculable life, made up of varied trials and tribulations. Many psychometric tests operate under the assumption that a personality is singular and essential, frozen and reliable - whether that be your constructed online dating profile, or even zodiac sign. There is something very beautiful about seeing each of us as a coherent image - the possibility of truly understanding ourselves is a promising idea. I often let people know that I am an INFJ personality type and that it comforts me to be labeled as such. By acknowledging this "type," I'm able to make sense of some of my more confusing behavioral traits, relying on my template to tell me that feeling misunderstood is common ("for my 'type'") and feeling all the more relief because of it. Systems of self-representation, may it be in an online profile or the guided daydream that the game allows for, projects a fantasy of wholeness onto each player.

The self-object that the personality quiz projects onto the player is a desirable object - its a coherent and linear story; marketable under a guise of understanding and connection. If you google the game, the first links read: "This 5 Minute Test Can Connect You Deeply With Anyone ...www.collective-evolution.com/", "Five Minute Personality Test - The Cube | Get In Her Mind ...www.getinhermind.com/sure-fire.../five-minute-personality-test-the-cube" and "How to connect deeply with anyone (in 5 minutes)."¹¹ The goal of the game is self-knowledge and discovery for all players involved. A cynical outlook would be that it's an opportunity to get your friends and/or lovers to spend five minutes paying attention to only you. The seduction of wholeness is revalidating the notion that you are an object of desire. We see ourselves as an object of desire for the first time in what Jacques Lacan calls the mirror phase. According to Lacan, when the infant sees herself in a mirror, she perceives an image of herself as whole, in contrast to the primordial fragmented existence she had experienced until that moment. For Lacan, it is this image of wholeness which constitutes the ego.¹² The image in the mirror is the coherent image that helps us form a sense of an internal self from the external image, in which the external image is more perfect and complete than we could ever imagine ourselves to be. The act of representation functions as a mode of recreating the ego-ideal¹³ that Lacan describes. It's the alienated interiority, the loved object at an uncrossable distance from the ego within the ego.¹⁴ Laura Mulvey draws upon the mirror phase in her pivotal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by arguing that "the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience."¹⁵ In any representation, completeness is both compelling and tragic. For example, photography promises a wholeness that Roland Barthes was famously drawn to but also terrorized by, in that he saw that "I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person; others-the Other-do not possess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object."¹⁶ But the coherent image making in selfhood isn't limited to these forms of mediation (photography, cinema, online profiles).¹⁷ It's simply why these forms of mediation are so desirable, so addictive to us. Self-objectivity was praised by Rilke in his letters to his wife on Cézanne, "He reproduced himself with so much humble objectivity, with the unquestioning, matter of fact interest of a dog who sees himself in a mirror and thinks: there's another dog."¹⁸

"Personality" is essentially a strategy for how to get by in a life given some fixed variables including physical body, environment, social environment, mental and physical health, etc. The personality quiz, like the Myers Briggs for example, is a tool for sharpening that strategy or understanding it - this does not necessarily mean a true understanding of self, but rather a reaffirmation of the mental image of "self" that is created. The enticing qualities of systems representation help us to decipher what is so exciting about a reductive model of selfhood. In order to construct acceptable images of self, a dialectic between recognition and misrecognition; a flattening, is necessary to make things bearable, Phillips writes, "were we to straightforwardly recognize the essential aspects of ourselves, we would not be able to bear the anxiety. Were we to see our desires all the time as they really are, we would be incapacitated. We are, in actuality, something we don't have the wherewithal to recognize."¹⁹ And with such paralyzing anxiety, how would we achieve all the successes we strive for? And so we impose a coherence that is both fiction and nonfiction, an image that is entirely representational. A New Age spirituality principle of self knowledge seized by consumer capitalism in data collecting corporations, the personality quiz offers us an image of coherence. This image is the strategy a digestible and desirable object that helps us get to work.

"He must have a lover of his own, some man or woman or animal whose absence hurt like a presence, some person that he poured himself into like a mold to remind himself of what he was."²⁰

¹ Opaque representational model is taken from Metzinger's transparent representational model. By consciously creating simulations - daydreams, images, online profiles - we are able to recognize and judge the content of the self model.

² Simulation is defined by the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time. The act of simulating something first requires that a model be developed; this model represents the key characteristics or behaviors/functions of the selected physical or abstract system or process. I am

defining the desert scene as a simulation because the objects in the scene are not static; they are dynamically interacting with the other elements like in a "real world."

³ Metzinger, Thomas. *Being No One the Self-model Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Freud, Sigmund, and Peter Gay. "'Mourning and Melancholia'" In *The Freud Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

⁶ Phillips, Adam. *Against Self-Criticism A London Review of Books Winter Lecture*. 1. Aufl. ed. Berlin: Epubli GmbH, 2015.

⁷ "This Colour Test Will Tell You How Old You Really Are." BuzzFeed. Accessed December 1, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/benhenry/all-the-pretty-colours#.evwMP5j7er>.

⁸ Phillips, Adam. *Against Self-Criticism A London Review of Books Winter Lecture*. 1. Aufl. ed. Berlin: Epubli GmbH, 2015.

⁹ "The Myers & Briggs Foundation - MBTI Basics." The Myers & Briggs Foundation - MBTI Basics. Accessed December 1, 2015. <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>.

¹⁰ "Uncovering The Secret History Of Myers-Briggs." - Digg. Accessed December 1, 2015. <http://digg.com/2015/myers-briggs-secret-history>.

¹¹ "search query: cube personality test" - Google. Accessed December 2, 2015. https://www.google.com/search?q=cube+personality+test&oeq=cube+&aqs=chrome.1.69i59j0j69i59j69i57j0l2.4259j0j7&sourceid=chrome&es_sm=91&ie=UTF-8.

¹² Lacan, Jacques, and He Fink. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience & ." In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2006, 2.

¹³ According to Freud, the ego-ideal is one component of the super-ego, the other component being conscience.

¹⁴ Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," in *Umbr(a): Sameness*, No. 1 (2002): 9-23.

¹⁵ Mulvey, L. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, 1975, 6-18.

¹⁶ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981., 14-15.

¹⁷ "An ongoing game, an anonymous personae, physical invisibility, and the possibility to be not one but many, these qualities at the root of the holding power and evocative potential of MUDs(multi user dungeons) as 'identity workshops.' Faced with the notion that 'you are what you pretend to be,' one can hope that it is true for he is playing his ideal self. Peter plays what in the psychoanalytic tradition would be called an ego ideal. Other players create a character or multiple characters that are closer to embodying aspects of themselves that they hate or fear or perhaps have not ever consciously confronted before." from Kiesler, Sara. "Turtle, Sherry "Constructions and Reconstructions of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDS" In *Culture of the Internet*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997.

¹⁸ (From October 23, 1907) Rilke, Rainer Maria, and Clara Rilke. *Letters on Cézanne*. New York: North Point Press, 2002.

¹⁹ Phillips, Adam. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*: Macmillan Press, 2013., 34.

²⁰ Kleeman, Alexandra. *You Too Can Have a Body like Mine: A Novel*.