

The Four Temperaments

"From the earliest times attempts have been made to classify individuals according to types, and so bring order to the chaos." Carl Jung

I first came across discussion of The Four Temperaments in writings about Waldorf and Steiner education. I therefore thought that they were a development of Steiner's – an anthroposophical teaching. I have since discovered references to the temperaments through history. The concept of temperament is thought to have emerged with Hippocrates dividing humanity into four basic groups around 450 BC. He saw the root of one's temperament as being derived from the humours (bodily fluids) dominant in the body: blood (sanguine), bile from the liver (choleric), phlegm (phlegmatic) and bile from the kidneys (melancholic). Amongst the ancient astrologers and philosophers individuals were classed according to the elements of the natural order too: respectively air, fire, water and earth.

In *Natural Childhood* by John B. Thomson et al, the temperaments, in relation to childhood, are described as such...

The Sanguine

The sanguine temperament is an extroverted temperament. The child lacks the fiery inner purpose of the choleric and is activated more by what is going on around her. She has difficulty in concentrating on one thing for long and a new event easily distracts her. This restless changeability can be a bane for parents and teachers. A sanguine is often light-footed and rhythmical, but also light-headed and light-hearted. The interest she shows in everything makes her popular and a good social bridge-builder. Parties are great fun for her and she is seldom alone. Her face is expressive and mobile and her eyes easily sparkle. She is more likely to have curly hair than straight. It is hard for her to bear antipathy from a friend or an adult, for she is most herself when she feels loved. In extreme forms, the sanguine can appear superficial and may be unable to concentrate on a game or to amuse herself for long. It is good to encourage the sanguine to stick to a task.

The Choleric

Choleric is an extroverted temperament and the child likes to assert himself. He is usually ready to tackle a job which would make others pause. He is not shy, but looks at you with a steady gaze. He walks with a firm step. His will to be out in front marks him as a leader. He likes to have the main role in a play or to organise others. He can inspire the group to complete a difficult task. It is not unusual to see him red with anger and with eyes flashing. This temperament likes to win but seldom bears a grudge. Opposing the Will of such a child generally gets the parent

nowhere. He needs to be appreciated and given things to do which challenge him and use up his excessive energy. He learns best from people who can do things well and whom he can admire. He doesn't easily learn from his mistakes. If guided well the choleric brings initiative and originality to his play. The temperament is fiery and this shows in his paintings, where strong colours, especially red, and strong forms dominate.

The Phlegmatic

Phlegmatic is an introverted temperament. This child doesn't easily connect with what is going on around her, for her interest is not easily aroused. Eating may be a prime attraction and she may be rounded and clumsy. She is generally easy to bring up, so she may not get the attention she needs. She enjoys comfort and doting parents may over-indulge her. She needs to be stimulated to action or to take interest. She is generally placid and doesn't anger except when extremely frustrated. She is methodical, keeping her things in order unless she is so spoiled that, for the sake of comfort, she abandons her orderly ways. She can be counted on to do what she sets out to do, although speed is no object. She has a certain stubbornness, making her resistant to new ideas. She adores routine. Her love for food makes her gain weight and parents should impose a sensible diet. She needs to be encouraged to join in with other children and to try new activities. When she has found an interest in others, the phlegmatic is loyal and steadfast.

The Melancholic

This child experiences his physical body as somewhat of a burden. Instead of moving with a light skip (sanguine) or a firm step (choleric), he drags his feet. A minor physical injury causes excessive pain and while he likes others to know this, he doesn't want to be consoled. Cold water is to be avoided for he needs warmth. He usually avoids social life and prefers to play by himself. Remarks easily wound and are long remembered. When surrounded by different goings on, he chooses what interests him and is not diverted by other things. He gives himself up easily to his own-world fantasies, which tend to be rich. This pre-occupation with his own world appears very egocentric and further increases his isolation. But it is an isolation which he appreciates. This inner concentration gives the melancholic a special depth and understanding which parents can appreciate. He also asks profound questions about God or death. Such lonely souls need a great deal of love and understanding, but too much sympathy is unhelpful, for he is to some extent in love with his own suffering. Making him aware of others can often help to take him out of his self-centredness. While he never wants to be the heart and soul of the party, he appreciates a warm social environment.

Through to the Middle Ages, the philosophy was prevalent, especially in relation to

spirituality. Physicians and philosophers alike used their understanding of the temperaments along with astrology in their daily affairs.

- Michelangelo's understanding of the four temperaments can be seen in his four sixteenth century sculptures: Evening – Crepuscolo (melancholic), Morning – Aurora (sanguine), Night – Notte (phlegmatic) and Day – Giorno (choleric).
- Later in the sixteenth century, Shakespeare is said to have developed his unforgettable characters upon an understanding of the melancholic, sanguine, phlegmatic and choleric types.
- In Rudolph Steiner's essay *The Four Temperaments* (1908), he documents a revival of the once-popular philosophy. "Particularly it must be of interest to learn how we can handle the temperaments pedagogically in childhood. For in education the kind of temperament must be carefully observed. With children it is especially important to be able to guide and direct the developing temperament, but later also it is still important for anyone in self-education."
- In 1979, George Balanchine choreographed a famous ballet called *The Four Temperaments* with music by Paul Hindemith. Dancers depicted the temperaments and the music was themed to each of the four classifications. In January 4 2000 *Time* magazine it was named 'The Best Dance Of The Century'.
- In the 1980s, the temperaments were revolutionised by psychologist David Keirse. His classifications are Artisan, Guardian, Idealist and Rational. See www.keirse.com.
- In John Gray's 1999 parenting book *Children Are From Heaven* (he penned the famous *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* series of titles), he discusses another modern version of the four classical temperaments. His categories are Sensitive, Active, Responsive and Receptive.

Today, discussion of the temperaments is usually limited to education, management and marketing. The classical temperaments are being replaced by modern varieties as outlined above. The idea of the four groups, and some original traits of each group are still being used nearly 2500 years after the idea was first documented.

Further Reading

"I like Donald Duck best! The 4 Temperaments" by Alan Whitehead in *The People Pool* a social studies manual for class 1 and 2 from his Spiritual Syllabus Series (02) 4787 5335 or order through Spiral Garden. Alan says that a comprehensive exposition on *The Four Temperaments* can be found in his book *A Steiner Primary School?*