

## Right Now

tions—and assigns a score based on this feedback—sellers are able to build not just track records, but positive reputations. The nature of on-line commerce requires impeccable service: as amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos once explained, the customer who gets poor service at the corner store tells five or 10 friends, but the one who gets poor service on the Internet tells a million friends. Because the Feedback Forum isn't limited to the captious customer, satisfied buyers are encouraged to praise responsible and honest sellers.

In a controlled field experiment, Zeckhauser and colleagues at the University of Michigan were able to measure the impact of reputation on auction prices and sales. Their results suggest that a seller with a longstanding, superior reputation on eBay will sell more merchandise, and at higher prices, than a seller new to the site.

The researchers collaborated with a vintage-postcard dealer with a near-impeccable reputation on eBay (2,000 positive comments and one negative). Alongside his established eBay User ID (the name under which goods are auctioned),

the dealer created seven new User IDs that appeared on eBay as unrelated either to him or to each other. Because they had not sold anything, these new “sellers” had no reputation. The dealer then organized matched pairs of vintage-postcard sets of equivalent value, assigning one set from each pair to his established ID, and distributing the other sets randomly among the new IDs. Finally, he auctioned off the postcard sets during the next 12 weeks, using all eight identities.

The selling prices that the established dealer received were, on average, 8.1 percent greater than those of the new sellers. “This translates to about 12 to 13 percent higher profit, depending on your assumptions about the cost of goods,” says Zeckhauser. (In general, when expenses are fixed, profit margins rise faster than selling prices when the latter go up.) Additionally, the established dealer sold 63 percent of his postcard listings (124 sets), and the new sellers 56 percent (111 sets). Zeckhauser recognizes that these profit differentials are fairly small (the median selling price

for the sets was \$14.99), and suggests that reputation may matter more for expensive goods.

Perhaps the most perplexing of Zeckhauser's findings is the willingness of users to leave feedback at all. According to his study, half of all buyers do—and, surprisingly, only 1 percent of those responses are negative. Such voluntary and apparently selfless participation violates conventional economic theories, which generally predict self-interested consumer behavior and free-riding. Zeckhauser ascribes the high participation rate to simple courtesy, akin to saying “Thank you.” But he admits the altruism is curious. “The Feedback Forum illustrates Yhprum's Law,” he says, explaining that Yhprum is Murphy spelled backward. “Systems that shouldn't work sometimes do.” ~CATHERINE DUPREE

RICHARD ZECKHAUSER E-MAIL ADDRESS:  
[richard\\_zeckhauser@harvard.edu](mailto:richard_zeckhauser@harvard.edu)

RESEARCH PAPER URL:  
[www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/postcards/](http://www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/postcards/)

### TRAITS OF GIBRALTAR?

## Introversion Unbound

**A** CENTURY AGO, psychoanalysts declared that the human personality was largely fixed by age five. More recently, biologically oriented psychologists have detected characteristic signs of temperament in infancy. Even so, personality psychologist Brian Little, lecturer in psychology and a former Radcliffe Institute fellow, is “wary of spurious genetic postulations and claims of a genetic basis for fixed traits.” Another of psychology's pioneers, William James, M.D. 1869, asserted that our psychological traits are “set like plaster” by age 30. Little counters that James was “only 50 percent correct—we are half-plastered. There is a heavily genetic aspect to the first stratum of personality. But our brains evolved a neocortex, which enables us to override these bio-

logical impulses to act in a certain way.”

In a series of papers and a forthcoming book, *Human Natures and Well Beings*, Little bucks the current trend of biological determinism in psychology. He argues for the existence of “free traits”: tendencies expressed by individual choice. Little ticks off the “Big Five” personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—and suggests thinking of them as musical notation. “Fixed traits are like a chord, five notes played at once,” he explains. “But you need to extend personality *temporally*. Over time, traits might be expressed more like an arpeggio, with one or another note dominant at any given time.”

Furthermore, Little argues that traits do not exist in the abstract, but are



Brian Little as extravert

evoked in important ways by our “personal projects.” He defines these commonsensically: personal projects are meaningful goals, both small and large, that can range from “put out the cat,



Brian Little as introvert

## Right Now

tween a born extravert and a pseudo-extravert? Usually you cannot.”

Acting “out of character” can mean acting away from one’s character, but can also be behavior chosen on *behalf* of character, says Little, adding, “Character traits have an evaluative dimension, but *personality* traits are generally not evaluative.” (He notes that the *Journal of Character and Personality* evolved into the *Journal of Personality*, and asks, only half-kidding, “When did we lose our character?”)

Courage often means acting out of character. For example, while extraverts seek out reward cues, introverts, who have lower pain thresholds, instead tend to avoid punishment cues. “An introverted kid in a soccer game who is kicked hard in the shin might show her pain and hear someone say, ‘Don’t be a wuss,’” says Little. “But the introvert who hobbles back onto the field with a tear in her eye is even more of a hero than the extravert—she’s acting out of character for the sake of her team.”

In such instances, says Little, analysis of character in terms of free traits and personal projects opens “lines of commerce” between psychology and moral philosophy. “As scientists, we cannot adjudicate these moral questions,” he says,

“but we can inform their adjudication.” He refers to the work of Amartya Sen (who returns to Harvard in January as Lamont University Professor), who argues that even though having “rights” is well and good, those rights mean little if one is precluded from the means of converting them into viable projects. “Human flourishing,” says Little, “is achieved through the sustainable pursuit of one’s core projects.”

Although free traits can advance core projects, prolonged periods of overriding one’s inborn temperament do take their toll. “It exacts a price in health, and can cause burnout—unless you have a restorative niche where you can indulge your first nature,” Little explains. “After an hour or two in front of a class, my introverted side restores itself by taking a quiet break in the washroom, or stepping outside for a breath of fresh air. With spouses and bosses, we can strike a bargain: I’ll act out of character to advance our joint project if you will grant me a restorative niche. What we need is a Free Trait Agreement.”

—CRAIG LAMBERT

BRIAN LITTLE E-MAIL ADDRESS:  
[blittle@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:blittle@fas.harvard.edu)

quickly,” to “transform Western thought, slowly.” Individuals activate their free traits, expressing or stifling inborn tendencies, in service of “core projects”—the endeavors linked to their deepest values. “Out of love for our wives or kids or our professions, we enjoin ourselves to act ‘out of character,’” Little says. “For example, even though I’m a classic introvert, when I give a lecture for my students I perform with great passion. Introverts, when they are ‘on,’ become pseudo-extraverts. Can you tell the difference be-

## PARK BENCHES FIGHT TERROR

# Sidewalk Bulwarks

**T**HE 1995 TRUCK BOMBING of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City hastened a revolution in urban design and planning. Architectural terms and security phrases like “Jersey barriers,” “setbacks,” and “bollards” turned up as people began to consider the need to guard against car and truck bombs. Similarly, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, made design security an issue not just for important buildings like the White House, but for every large corporation and building complex. Nearly two years later, many cities are now clogged with hastily erected concrete barricades.

Jersey barriers (which the New Jersey

Highway Department introduced in 1955), ring the Washington Monument and block off Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. Bollards, the concrete pots and metal posts designed to stop trucks, surround corporate headquarters and public sites like Times

Square. With no sign that the threat of attack has abated, design professionals say, nevertheless, that the new emphasis on building security poses a danger of its own: subverting important aspects of public space.

Intrusive, highly visible structures

like Jersey barriers may actually foster more worries than they prevent, heightening fears that there is something to be afraid of. In response, Alex Krieger,

Introduced in 1955 by the New Jersey Highway Department, “Jersey barriers” are now widely used for protection and security.

