

HUMORAL THEORY

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Humoral Theory

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Medicine, Psychology, Philosophy

Proponents: Hippocrates, Galen

1. Core Principles

The **Humoral Theory** (or Humorism) is the oldest known descriptive system, or typology, utilized for classifying all human individuals into a limited number of distinct categories based on physiological composition. This ancient medical concept posits that personality characteristics, temperament, and overall health are directly determined by the balance or predominance of four specific bodily fluids, traditionally known as the "humors." As a comprehensive system, the theory sought to link physiological states to psychological dispositions.

The foundational principle is that human well-being relies on a state of internal equilibrium. When these humors are mixed in their proper, ideal proportions, they produce a state of internal harmony and result in a well-balanced person. Conversely, an imbalance--where one humor is present in excess--causes specific personality traits, diseases, and temperamental characteristics to dominate the individual's disposition. The primary goal of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine was thus the diagnosis of the specific imbalance and the application of treatments intended to restore the correct proportional mixture of the humors.

2. Historical Development

The foundation of the **Humoral Theory** originated around 400 B.C. with the Greek physician Hippocrates. Hippocrates developed this framework as an explanatory system for both physical illness and physiological differences observed among people, initiating a move away from purely supernatural or divine explanations for temperament and disease. This typology is recognized as one of the earliest systematic attempts to classify personality traits based on biological factors.

The theory quickly integrated with broader Greek philosophical concepts regarding nature and the cosmos. Given the belief that man is a mirror of the whole of nature, many Hellenic thinkers believed that the four humors corresponded directly to the four cosmic elements--fire, earth, air, and water--that the philosopher Empedocles had postulated around 450 B.C. This elemental connection provided a cosmological justification for the biological model.

The longevity and widespread acceptance of Humorism were overwhelmingly secured through the dogmatic espousal of the theory by Galen of Pergamon, a prominent Roman physician and philosopher writing centuries after Hippocrates. Galen codified and expanded the Hippocratic model, linking specific qualities (hot/cold, wet/dry) to the humors and detailing their impact on

various physiological functions. As historical analysis suggests, the Hippocratic theory of the four humors, under Galen's authoritative guidance, "became the guide for all physicians until the Renaissance," establishing it as the unchallenged paradigm for Western medical thought for nearly 2,000 years.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The **Humoral Theory** is centrally defined by the interaction between the four bodily fluids and the corresponding temperaments they engender when dominant. This framework provided a straightforward mechanism for explaining the variance in human disposition.

The four humors and their corresponding temperaments are:

Blood: A predominance of this humor was associated with the element of air and resulted in a **sanguine** temperament. This character type was defined by being hopeful, active, cheerful, and generally optimistic.

Black Bile: Associated with the element of earth, an excess of black bile was linked to a **melancholic** temperament. Such individuals were characterized as sad, thoughtful, quiet, and prone to introspection and depression.

Yellow Bile (Choler): Linked to the element of fire, a dominance of yellow bile resulted in a **choleric** temperament. These individuals were seen as irritable, ambitious, impatient, and possessing a quick temper.

Phlegm: Associated with the element of water, a predominance of phlegm led to a **phlegmatic** temperament. This disposition was characterized by apathy, sluggishness, calmness, and emotional reserve.

4. Applications and Modern Analogies

Although the specific anatomical identification of the four humors has been superseded by modern anatomy and physiology, the underlying conceptual goal--to link constitutional biology directly to temperament--persists. The closest conceptual counterpart to the **Humoral Theory** in modern scientific discourse is the view that hormones are the primary physiological basis of temperament and constitutional disposition. This view holds that the endocrine system performs the regulatory function once attributed to the humors.

Evidence exists that supports the idea of biologically based differences in constitutional patterns that influence reactions. For instance, measurable variations in endocrine system components are significant, with studies indicating that the size of glandular tissue, such as thyroid or adrenal tissue, may vary greatly even among normal individuals, sometimes weighing three times as much in one person as in another. Furthermore, early psychological research by Wenger and Wellington (1943) demonstrated that autonomic responses in the same children tended to be stable over a

long period. These studies showed that some individuals inherently react with typically sympathetic responses to situations, while others exhibit typically parasympathetic responses, suggesting an innate, stable constitutional pattern influencing emotional and physical reactions.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite the enduring historical influence of the **Humoral Theory**, it faced significant limitations that eventually led to its replacement by modern scientific models. The core criticism centers on the theory's attempt to categorize the highly complex spectrum of human temperament into only a few specific, isolated types.

Modern measurement of physiological and psychological traits demonstrates that human variation is continuous, rather than discrete. While some investigators, such as Lacey, Bateman, and Van Lehn (1952), sought relationships between autonomic response patterns and personality measurements, later researchers pointed out that accurate measurement of autonomic functioning does not result in the isolation of a few specific types, as the humoral system suggests, but rather shows continuous gradations across the population. This continuous distribution fundamentally contradicts the neat, categorical typology of the four temperaments.

A further, critical limitation is the theory's near-exclusive focus on constitutional biology. Critics argue that even if stable constitutional patterns exist, they are not the sole determinant of the entire personality structure. Any comprehensive model of human behavior must also rigorously account for acquired habits, learned attitudes, cultural context, and environmental reactions. Therefore, relying solely on an innate physiological typology, whether humoral or hormonal, is considered insufficient for explaining the complexity of acquired human personality.

6. Further Reading

[Humorism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hippocrates \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Galen \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Empedocles \(Wikipedia\)](#)