



Wellbeing and geometry

Description

Will a bacon sandwich kill you? ([Guardian](#)) Probably not. It's all about moderation. It seems that *moderation* is the most persistent health advice on offer. In the second century AD, Galen, the Greco-Roman medical philosopher, said

The best temperate man [sic] is he who in the body seems to be in the mean of all extremities, that is skinniness and fatness, heat and coldness . . . and regarding the body this is the best temperate man. Similarly in his soul he is in the middle of boldness and timidity, of negligence and impertinence, of compassion and envy. He is cheerful, affectionate, charitable and prudent.

Health, temperament and geometry combine in the ancient mind, which inevitably implicates architecture. Architecture and health have always been closely related, not least through the tradition of counting in fours.



The geometrical aspect of this wellness-balance formula relates to a

square, or a circle, divided into four, i.e. two axes that cross at right angles to make a grid, as indicated by Vitruvius. For the symbolic imagination, and as expressed in much traditional architecture, the resultant orientations (N, S, E and W) relate to the movement of the sun across the sky, which in turn carry certain connotations: east is the direction of new beginnings, west symbolizes its conclusion, etc.

In an informative 1991 article, psychologists Robert Stelmack and Anastasios Stalikas remind us of the many ways that such four-fold geometrical tabulations get expressed in different cultural contexts, both modern and ancient: eg the four seasons, four ages of man (childhood, youth, prime and old age), and the four elements (earth, air, fire and water).

Before empirical science took hold, scholars would deploy fourfold schemas to construct their arguments and explanations, and to establish relationships across different phenomena.

Such mappings would not necessarily be obvious, direct, or automatic. Neither would the correspondences be particularly systematic, agreed or canonic. There's something about the number four though that persists to this day.

Poets, philosophers, scientists and architects ancient and modern latch onto four-fold schemas. Following the Romantic poets, Martin Heidegger references the "fourfold" of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities.

Colourful personalities

Carl Jung's model of personality types was based on the four psychological functions of sensation, intuition, feeling, and thinking. It's convenient that there are four functions, rather than three, five or six, as this enables psychometric tables to be drawn up, such as the Myers-Brigg's personality mapping system operating with a four-by-four classification.

For Galen there were the four humours or temperaments. The **phlegmatic** person is relaxed and passive. The **melancholic** is sad, and the **choleric** is impulsive and restless. The **sanguine** is easy

going. These are the four classical temperaments. For Galen, they also pertain to personality traits such as boldness, timidity, negligence, impertinence, compassion and envy.

These temperaments have colour correlates and each pertains to a bodily fluid, or humor. A phlegmatic temperament obviously associates with phlegm, mucus, which ought to be clear. Melancholy is literally "black bile." We know of bile as a product of the gall bladder and the digestion of fats. Black bile was simply any darkening substance detected in the blood or skin. The sanguine pertains to blood, and by association the colour red. The choleric is simply bile, which is ordinarily yellow. The diagnosis of disease was mainly indicated by changes in colour, which in turn related to an imbalance between the humors.

Then, as now, good health was about balance, though I don't suppose it guarantees it.

References

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- Stelmack, Robert M., and Anastasios Stalikas. 1991. Galen and the humour theory of temperament. *Personality and Individual Difference*, (12) 3, 255-263.
- Vitruvius, Pollio. 1960. *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*. Trans. M. H. Morgan. New York: Dover Publications. Written c 50 AD.

Notes

- The Galen excerpt is from Galen's book *On Temperaments*, as quoted by Stelmack and Stalikis, p.259.
- The picture above is of a sculpture by John Isaacs called "I can't help the way I feel," 2003, exhibited in the Wellcome Trust Gallery, Euston Road London.
- Also see posts: [Circles and how to get out of them](#), [Unearthing the trickster function in Icelandic myth](#), and [Intoxicated by colour](#).



Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. fourfold
2. Galen
3. health
4. humors
5. Karl Jung
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