

From Static Traits to Dynamic Gunas: A Triguna-Based Reconceptualization of Personality and the Self-Concept

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Abstract. This theoretical paper offers a fundamental critique of the Western trait-based model of personality and self-concept through the lens of the Indian philosophical framework of Triguna theory. We argue that dominant Western models, particularly the Big Five Factor model, reify personality characteristics as static, substantive “traits,” thereby overlooking their dynamic, processual, and contextual nature. In contrast, the Triguna theory from Samkhya-Yoga philosophy conceptualizes personality as the dynamic interplay of three fundamental psycho-physical energies or qualities [gunas]: Sattva [clarity, harmony, intelligence], Rajas [activity, passion, attachment], and Tamas [inertia, stability, ignorance]. This paper systematically deconstructs the ontological foundations of trait theory and constructs a novel, process-oriented model of the self-concept based on the gunas. This guna-based model not only accounts for the situational fluidity and malleability of the self that trait theories struggle to explain but also provides a prescriptive framework for personal development aimed at cultivating Sattva. The implications of this paradigm shift for personality assessment, clinical practice, and the very goals of psychological well-being are thoroughly explored.

Keywords. Triguna, Self-Concept, Personality Theory, Big Five, Samkhya Yoga, Cultural Psychology, Trait Theory

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PUBLISHED BY
Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya
Gayatrikunj-Shantikunj, Haridwar, India

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Introduction: The Crisis of the Static Self

The concept of a stable, enduring personality, composed of identifiable and measurable traits, has been a cornerstone of Western differential psychology for over a century. From the lexical hypothesis that culminated in the Big Five model [OCEAN: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism] to its biological substrates in behavioural genetics, the trait paradigm has achieved paradigmatic status [1]. This model has provided a common language for personality description and generated substantial research across diverse domains. Self-concept - an individual's cognitive representation and evaluation of who they are - is conventionally treated in trait models as a "characteristic adaptation" derived from and constrained by underlying basic traits [1]; this paper treats the two as tightly coupled, since a trait ontology necessarily shapes the self-concept built upon it, but the distinction is worth flagging at the outset. However, despite its widespread adoption, the trait paradigm faces persistent theoretical and empirical challenges that question its fundamental assumptions about the nature of selfhood.

This paper employs the OCEAN model not as its primary subject, but as a diagnostic instrument to expose how static trait frameworks generate rigid self-concepts. A trait ontology necessarily shapes the self-concept erected upon it, and the resulting self-perception can become a limiting, reified identity rather than a living, evolving sense of self.

Despite its widespread adoption, the trait paradigm faces persistent theoretical and empirical challenges. The person-situation debate revealed the limited ability of traits to predict specific behaviours across situations [2, 3]. While traits demonstrate impressive cross-temporal stability, they often fail to account for the substantial within-person variability that characterises daily experience [4]. Furthermore, the operationalisation of traits as fixed, internal entities risks what philosophers of science term "reification" - the treatment of abstract concepts as concrete realities [5]. The self-concept derived from this model can become a checklist of labels - "I am neurotic," "I am introverted" - which may paradoxically limit growth by fostering a "fixed mindset" about one's psychological nature [6].

This paper proposes that Indian philosophical psychology, specifically the Triguna theory from the Samkhya system and elaborated in texts like the Bhagavad Gita, offers a more nuanced, dynamic, and liberating framework for understanding personality -

one that, as a theory of constantly interacting material processes rather than fixed entities, directly addresses the substantialist and reifying tendencies just described. The gunas are not traits but fundamental constituent principles of all material reality, including the mind [7, 8]. They are in a constant state of flux, competing for dominance and shaping perception, cognition, and behaviour moment by moment [9]. This perspective aligns with recent developments in dynamic systems approaches to personality while offering a sophisticated philosophical foundation [10].

This paper will critically deconstruct trait theory, explicate the Triguna theory as a dynamic process model, map conceptual relationships between trait constructs and gunic interactions, and develop a novel "Guna-Based Self" model to explore its implications for psychological science and practice.

Theoretical Framework I: A Critical Deconstruction of Trait Theory

Trait theory is predicated on several key assumptions that a Triguna-based critique challenges.

Substantialism vs. Processism

Traits are conceptualised as substantive properties inherent to an individual. Neuroticism is treated as a "thing" the person has, a dispositional entity that resides within and causes behaviour [1]. This substantialist view permeates trait psychology. The Triguna view is fundamentally process-oriented. The mind is a field of activity [citta-vrtti] where the three gunas interact [11, 12]; what we call a "trait" is merely a temporarily stable pattern of this interaction, not a substance. This finds resonance in contemporary process approaches that emphasise the dynamic nature of psychological characteristics [3, 4].

Reification and Fixity

The statistical extraction of factors has led to the reification of traits as biological or psychological structures [13]. This reification can foster a "fixed mindset" [6]. The gunas, by contrast, are inherently mutable and can be consciously transformed through effort, lifestyle, and spiritual practice [12]. The Bhagavad Gita explicitly describes their fluidity: "Sometimes Sattva predominates over Rajas and Tamas... sometimes Rajas... and sometimes Tamas..." [14]. This stands in stark contrast to the relative stability assumed in trait models, though systematic personality change across the lifespan is documented

[15]. It should be noted that contemporary trait theorists have sought to preempt this charge by redefining traits as probabilistic, dispositional constructs rather than literal internal structures [10]. However, this study contends that such redefinitions remain in tension with the field's continued reliance on static, cross-situationally stable factor structures as the primary unit of description and measurement - a tension the guna-based model resolves by locating variability, not stability, as the basic explanatory unit.

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive & Evaluative

The Big Five model strives for a value-neutral description; it is “descriptive rather than explanatory” and implies no particular theory of personality [16]. The Triguna theory is explicitly evaluative and prescriptive. It posits a clear hierarchy: Sattva represents a state of clarity and balance that is desirable, while an excess of Rajas or Tamas leads to suffering and is to be transformed [17]. This evaluative dimension provides a clear direction for personal development that trait theory deliberately avoids, though it has clear implications for mental health [18].

Cross-cultural Limitations

The trait approach has been criticised for its ethnocentric assumptions and limited applicability across cultures [19]. While the five-factor structure has replicated in many Western societies, its cross-cultural generalizability remains contested [20]. The Triguna theory emerges from a different cultural and philosophical tradition and offers an indigenous framework that may better capture psychological experience in South Asian contexts and beyond [21, 22].

Theoretical Framework II: The Triguna Theory - A Dynamic Process Model

The Triguna theory posits that the entire manifest universe [prakrti], including the human mind, is composed of three primary qualities [gunas] in constant interplay [8].

Sattva: The Principle of Clarity and Harmony

Sattva is the principle of purity, light, harmony, and intelligence. It is characterised by clarity, wisdom, compassion, and contentment [23]. When Sattva predominates, the mind is calm, focused, and reflective. In psychological terms, Sattva represents

states of mindfulness, emotional balance, and cognitive clarity. Modern research on mindfulness and well-being shows remarkable convergence with these qualities [24].

Rajas: The Principle of Activity and Passion

Rajas is the principle of energy, activity, passion, and movement. It is characterised by desire, attachment, restlessness, and effort [25]. Rajas drive action and ambition, but in excess, leads to anxiety, greed, and aggression. In contemporary terms, Rajas manifests as achievement motivation, but also as perfectionism, workaholism, and stress-related disorders [22]. The activation of the sympathetic nervous system bears resemblance to Rajasic states [26].

Tamas: The Principle of Inertia and Stability

Tamas is the principle of inertia, darkness, stability, and substance. It is characterised by ignorance, delusion, lethargy, and resistance [27]. Tamas provides stability, but in excess, leads to depression, confusion, and apathy. In modern psychological terms, Tamas manifests as behavioural inhibition, psychomotor retardation, and depressive states [22]. The neuroendocrine dysregulation in major depressive disorder particularly hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis hyperactivity -parallels descriptions of Tamasic dominance [28].

The Interplay of Gunas

The dynamic interplay of the gunas creates human experience and personality [29]. All individuals have all three gunas in varying proportions, and this proportion shifts across situations, developmental stages, and moments [9]. The current guna predominance determines one's perceptual framework, emotional responses, and behavioural tendencies [7]. This constant flux stands in stark contrast to the relative stability assumed in trait models, though it aligns with experience-sampling studies documenting within-person variability in personality states [3]. Notably, the classical elaboration of this framework extends well beyond mental states alone: the Bhagavad Gita's later chapters classify food, sacrifice, charity, austerity, knowledge, action, the agent of action, intellect, resolve, and happiness each according to their sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic character [11, 30], underscoring that the gunas were conceived not as a narrow psychological typology but as a comprehensive principle organising all of experience and conduct.

Constructing the Guna-Based Self: Mapping the Big Five onto the Gunas

The OCEAN model is a framework for describing personality. However, because personality traits directly shape how individuals define themselves, deconstructing personality traits reveals the limitations of trait-based self-concepts. Below, we map each Big Five dimension onto guna dynamics to demonstrate how the same observable behaviours reflect entirely different psychological realities depending on the underlying guna predominance.

In accordance with the Triguna hierarchy, we describe the Sattvic manifestation first, followed by Rajasic and Tamasic expressions. This mapping reveals that a framework derived from static traits is impoverished and limiting, whereas a guna-based framework is fluid, context-sensitive, and amenable to conscious transformation.

1. Openness

Openness to Experience typically defined by aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, and fantasy [31] can be parsed into qualitatively distinct manifestations: Sattvic Openness: Manifests as a discerning, contemplative curiosity oriented toward wisdom and truth. It is characterised by reflective absorption, deep aesthetic appreciation, and a grounded exploration of ideas without craving or attachment [23].

Rajasic Openness: Appears as novelty-seeking, thrill-chasing, and restless exploration driven by sensory stimulation and ego-enhancement. It often correlates with impulsivity, scattered attention, and risk-taking behaviours [22].

Tamasic Openness: (Or rather, its absence) manifests as rigidity, dogmatism, and active resistance to new ideas. It reflects cognitive inertia, fear of the unfamiliar, and attachment to familiar patterns [27].

2. Conscientiousness

The Big Five treats conscientiousness as a single broad domain, encompassing narrower facets such as order, dutifulness, and achievement-striving [31]. The Triguna model differentiates qualitatively different forms:

Sattvic Conscientiousness: Arises from clarity, intrinsic duty, and inherent orderliness. It is steady, calm, and sustainable, reflecting the Gita's ideal of established-in-yoga action [32].

Rajasic Conscientiousness: Driven by ambition, desire for external reward, and fear of failure. It is

effortful, stress-inducing, and aligns with what contemporary research calls "neurotic conscientiousness" [33]. It leads to burnout and perfectionism.

Tamasic Conscientiousness: Characterised by neglect, disorganisation, and procrastination. It reflects inertia and an inability to sustain effort [27].

This distinction explains why conscientiousness correlates with both positive and negative outcomes depending on its underlying guna quality [33].

3. Extraversion

Trait theory positions extraversion as a stable dimension of sociability, assertiveness, and positive emotionality [31]. The guna model provides a nuanced understanding of its situational and qualitative variability:

Sattvic Extraversion: Manifests as warm, genuine, and compassionate engagement with others, arising from inner contentment and clarity [29].

Rajasic Extraversion: Driven by a restless need for stimulation, social approval, and external validation. The individual is highly talkative, seeks the spotlight, and may become agitated when deprived of social engagement [22].

Tamasic Extraversion (or Withdrawal): Presents as social withdrawal, lethargy, and apathy - an inert avoidance of interaction born of fear or low energy [27].

The trait label fails to capture this intra-individual variability, whereas the guna model explains it naturally through dynamic interplay.

4. Agreeableness

Agreeableness -compassion, trust, and cooperation [31] also reveals layered guna dynamics. Sattvic Agreeableness: Flows from genuine empathy, unconditional positive regard, and non-attached compassion. It arises from a clear perception of interconnectedness [29]. Rajasic Agreeableness: Involves strategic cooperation driven by self-interest, social approval, or fear of rejection. It is agreeableness used as a tool for attaining rewards or avoiding conflict [34].

Tamasic Agreeableness: Manifests as passive submission, lack of assertiveness, or apathetic compliance born of inertia and fear [27].

5. Neuroticism

In the Big Five, neuroticism represents a unitary dimension encompassing anxiety, anger, and depression [31]. In the Triguna model, emotional instability is understood as a departure from Sattvic balance: Sattvic Stability (low neuroticism): Represents emotional balance, resilience, and equanimity. The

mind remains clear and undisturbed even in challenging circumstances [23]. Rajasic Neuroticism: Manifests as the agitated energy of anxiety, irritability, anger, restlessness, overthinking, and hyperarousal [22]. Tamasic Neuroticism: Manifests as the lethargy, hopelessness, and psychomotor retardation of depression -energy blocked by heaviness and delusion [28].

Mixed anxiety-depression can be understood as a state of Rajasic-Tamasic dominance. This model suggests differentiated interventions: practices that reduce Tamas for depression and practices that calm Rajas for anxiety [35, 36].

Integration with Contemporary Personality Science

The Guna-Based Self model aligns with emerging trends while offering a comprehensive framework. Whole Trait Theory distinguishes between trait manifestations and explanatory mechanisms [37] -a distinction mapping well onto the guna framework, with gunas as the explanatory mechanisms. Similarly, the Cognitive-Affective Personality System emphasises if-then behavioural signatures across situations [38], which can be understood as patterns of gunic activation in response to triggers. The goal is not self-acceptance of fixed traits, but self-mastery through cultivating Sattva.

Implications and Future Directions

This theoretical shift has far-reaching consequences.

For Personality Assessment

The guna model calls for dynamic assessment tools that measure fluctuating guna profiles across situations and time, moving beyond static questionnaires [22]. While several guna questionnaires exist [39, 40], they typically provide snapshots. Future research should develop ecological momentary assessment tools to track guna states in real-time, examining fluctuations in response to triggers and practices. Such research could validate mappings between guna patterns and psychological disorders.

For Clinical Practice

Therapy becomes a process of “guna therapy” helping clients identify dominant guna patterns and prescribing specific interventions to cultivate Sattva [41]. A client with depression [Tamasic dominance] would receive different interventions [e.g., physical activity, stimulating routines] than one with anxiety [Rajasic dominance, requiring calming practices].

This aligns with the broader shift toward personalised medicine [42] and with calls for culturally sensitive therapies [19]. It also provides a theoretical foundation for the mechanism of action of yoga and meditation, understood as technologies for guna transformation [26].

For the Goal of Well-being

Psychological health is redefined not as the absence of “negative traits” but as the capacity to maintain a Sattvic state of equilibrium, engaging with the world with clarity and compassion [29]. This aligns with eudaimonic perspectives on well-being that emphasise meaning and self-realisation [34]. The gunas provide a sophisticated framework for understanding obstacles to well-being [excessive Rajas or Tamas] and the pathway to its cultivation [Sattva].

For Cross-Cultural Psychology

The Triguna theory represents an important indigenous psychological system largely overlooked in mainstream psychology [9]. Integrating this framework addresses calls to diversify psychology beyond Western constructs [43]. Future research should explore the cultural embeddedness of the guna concept and its utility in non-Indian contexts, potentially enriching global psychological discourse with a sophisticated, process-based model of the person.

Limitations

The Triguna framework is field-wide accepted within Indian psychological and philosophical scholarship; empirical validation against trait measures, as required within Western psychology, remains pending [8, 39, 40].

Conclusion

The trait-based model of personality, for all its descriptive utility, presents a static, reified, and culturally specific view of the self. The Triguna theory offers a powerful alternative: a dynamic, process-oriented, and prescriptive framework that conceptualises personality as the ever-changing interplay of three fundamental qualities. By deconstructing trait constructs like neuroticism and conscientiousness through the lens of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, we gain a more nuanced, explanatory, and ultimately liberating understanding of human psychology. While we have used the OCEAN model diagnostically to illustrate the limitations of static frameworks, our contribution is to both personality theory and self-concept - shifting from fixed traits to a fluid, guna-based understanding of the person. This Guna-Based Framework acknowledges situational fluidity, provides a

clear pathway for development, and integrates seamlessly with contemporary dynamic approaches. This Guna-Based Self model acknowledges situational fluidity, provides a clear pathway for development, and integrates seamlessly with contemporary dynamic approaches to personality. Embracing this paradigm shift invites psychology to move beyond cataloguing static traits toward understanding and facilitating the conscious evolution of the self. As articulated in the Bhagavad Gita, the journey is from the bondage of fluctuating gunas toward a state of transcendent stability and clarity: “The one who serves Me with the yoga of unswerving devotion, transcending these gunas, becomes fit for realizing Brahman” [44].

COMPLIANCE Not required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST None.

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