Who are you?

The mind goes blank. The question feels so vast as to be irritating. We can’t easily see inside; we need psychological mirrors. The best mirrors are clever people (psychotherapists ideally) and, when these are lacking, good questions. And a pen and paper to trap our thoughts, which can be as furtive as shy deer.
What is the meaning of life? What is love? Who am I?

These questions have a bad reputation not because they aren’t valid, but because we don’t cut them up properly and they therefore remain unmanageable. The issue of who we are needs to be divided to be digestible. Not ‘Who am I?’ but ‘Who am I with work, with love, with friends, around children etc.? ’
The question sounds absurd, but unfortunately isn’t. Almost everything we are today is the result of patterns laid down in childhood that we have forgotten. Children are not constitutionally made to understand their own psychology. They can tell you about distant planets way before they have any grasp of their motives or emotions. The first ten years were blind. We now have to go back and reinterpret them.
Isn’t Freud overrated, discredited and now just plain wrong?

In some key ways, yes; but in the basic idea that much of who we are is unconscious and that our childhoods heavily determine our choice of partners, our sexual tastes and our consciences — all this remains, unfortunately, painfully accurate. We have no real option but to grapple with the tricky material.
What does this make you think of?

It’s taken from a ‘projection test’ devised by the psychologist Hermann Rorschach. The idea is to show you something ambiguous – and then let your imagination fill in the ambiguity in ways that releases some of your repressed fears, hopes and desires. Latently aggressive people will see aggression, the sexual will see a vagina, you will see…
At heart, men are really...
When you get to know them, women are...

A favourite technique of psychologists is the unfinished sentence which invites you to complete it without thinking too much — so that we’ll engage our unconscious minds and discover some important attitudes that we normally repress. Knowing yourself involves being very unfrightened about stuff. We’re all extremely strange; and that’s fine.
Draw your nuclear family on a sheet of A4; putting in parents, siblings, house, a sun, a tree.

This is suggestive – not science:
- Who you draw yourself next to is who you are closest to.
- Who you've put furthest away is emotionally most distant.
- The size you have drawn yourself is the size of your self-esteem.
- The house is an extension of yourself: it is the ego. Is it in good shape? Optimistic? Ordered?
- Windows imply your degree of communication. Does your house have a door?
(I) What do you blame your parents for?

(II) Why do you think they were the way they were? What were the pressures and difficulties they were under?

(III) What might a good friend of your parents say?

Parents have to take a huge share of the blame, of course. But blame can get in the way of a better understanding of things. Parents were themselves subjects to parents and psyches they didn't fully control. What do we start to learn and feel when we begin to think of our parents as — strangely — also themselves victims?
List five ways in which you are, after all, quite difficult to live with?

A good partnership is not so much one between two healthy people (there aren’t many of these on the planet), it’s one between two demented people who have had the skill or luck to find a nonthreatening conscious accommodation between their relative insanities, in large part because they have a good grasp of how they are difficult to live with.
List five things that are important to you in your life. How much of your time do you give to each of these?

There is a vast gap between what we say we value and what we actually end up doing. Paradoxically, we don’t pay most attention — or give most time and resources — to the things which, when pushed, we realise we care most about. We should, with a little more self-knowledge, narrow the gap.