

The Trouble With Typing

By Thomas Condon

"The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names." – Chinese proverb

"Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."– Kahil Gibran

"Wisdom never has made a bigot, but learning has."– Josh Billings

"A quarter of a picture is worth 250 words."– George Carlin

"A formula is something that worked once, and keeps trying to do it again."– Haskins

"Penetrating so many secrets, we cease to believe in the unknowable. But there it sits nevertheless, calmly licking its chops." – H.L. Mencken

"Maturity of mind is best shown in slow belief."– Baltasar Gracian

"No theory is good except on condition that one use it to go beyond."– Andre Gide

"We are all much more simply human than otherwise." – Harry Stack Sullivan

When people are strongly impacted by the Enneagram they often become intensely occupied with the system. New students will buy books, go to workshops, and engage in a flurry of typing, working out the personality styles of their relatives, spouses, colleagues and friends. Suddenly, evidence of the Enneagram seems to be everywhere, the way we notice Japanese cars after buying a new Honda.

This stage is perfectly appropriate to discovering something new and revelatory. Learning about ourselves and others is fun, fascinating and useful and the best way to absorb a complex subject is to dive in and swim in its sea. Newcomers to the Enneagram often have a sense of dynamic enthusiasm, of making real progress, as if they finally have their hands on something solid. This might be called the "honeymoon phase."

Next comes the "sorcerer's apprentice" phase – named for a Mickey Mouse cartoon – when students get confused by the Enneagram's detail and carried away with new power. Students feel overwhelmed, like they are drowning in information, peering hard at something they can't quite see. They can also get "type happy"/ perhaps by overusing the system or unwelcomingly imposing their new knowledge on friends, co-workers and relatives.

The third phase to learning the Enneagram is "true mastery," which is as much an attitude as it is a mastering of the material. It comes as you integrate the knowledge and make it your own; understanding what the Enneagram really is while applying its insights with intelligence, respect and caution.

There's an old story about the Devil following a man who has just found the Truth. Someone sees this procession and asks the Devil, "Why are you, of all entities, following someone who has just found the Truth?" The Devil strokes his goatee, and replies, "He may have just found the Truth but I'm going to help him *organize* it."

While it's exciting to find a framework that seems to organize reality, personality typologies are notoriously double-edged. Just as they open you to a new view of human behavior, they can also close you to experience in a other ways.

Tools are value-free; a hammer can build a house or crack a skull and it's still just a hammer. The high side of learning about personality styles is that you can deeply comprehend the inner workings of yourself and others, something that has hundreds of uses. The down side is that you might apply the information too narrowly, to reinforce and justify your biases, to see a new set of stereotypes, or turn into one yourself.

The Enneagram doesn't come with a manual that instructs people on how to use it properly, but perhaps it should. This chapter is an attempt to catalog the ways the Enneagram is most commonly distorted or misused. If you are new to the system, I want to leave you with some useful cautions; some may not make sense right away, but you'll have them for future reference. I can speak with authority since I've made a number of these mistakes myself and long-term students of the Enneagram will recognize at least some of the pitfalls described. I'll also offer some constructive, common sense guidelines for using the Enneagram in a way that will point you towards the road to true mastery.

Educated Bigotry

People who object to the whole idea of personality typing often say that they dislike being labeled because it makes them feel trapped in a one-dimensional box. The irony is that the Enneagram aims to show you how you are already boxed. But it's true that the system's labels and categories can induce a mindset that is potentially limiting.

Part of the problem is words. We use language to describe our experience, and yet words tend to diminish and reduce. Among languages, English is more noun-based than verb-driven. It's easy in English to talk about active, living, subjective processes – like people – as frozen, objective *things*. To some extent, this "thingification" is inevitable, but it creates a distorting lens.

When you call a person by a number or a name that is related to a role – a "Three," a "Performer" or an "Achiever" – you are talking about a thing than a person. It's quite different to describe a Three as "a person who needs to perform and achieve." It also helps to think of an Enneagram style in terms of a dominant need or drive.

I once heard a song called "My Life Has Been Waiting For Your Love." Within the songs lyrics, the singer was saying that he had this "thing" he called his Life that had been waiting for this other thing called Love. The woman he was singing to presumably had two things: her Life and the thing she gave him, her Love. If he gave his Love back to her Life, she would then have three things.

In a way, all generalizing about personality is akin to bigotry. Psychotherapists are paid to employ a professional form of bigotry each time they meet a new client – it's called diagnosis. The therapist has to assess someone both individually and in terms of how that person fits with generalizations drawn from various schools of psychology.

Therapists are, however, carefully trained to tell a person apart from a type. If someone comes in to their office and says, "I'm a Christian," a therapist wonders what the statement means to the person. They don't immediately think "Christian, of course, everybody knows what that is." "Christian" is instead taken as important information about the client; the label is arbitrary, relevant only for what it reveals about his identity and map of the world.

Even if the client believes he's like everyone else, the therapist doesn't. Instead, she tries to understand why it's important for the client to see himself that way; how the belief is, paradoxically, an expression of his uniqueness. The therapist tries to see the client uncomparably to anyone else; she wants to know who the client is and who the client is trying *to become*. She compares the client to himself.

The advantage of diagnosis is that the therapist can generalize usefully and better decide how to work with a unique individual. An American therapist with a Swiss client would be crazy to ignore the cultural conditioning of Switzerland. Yet the therapist's first job is to comprehend her client's core individuality and then factor in the significance of the client's being Swiss.

Try to imagine instead a therapist who describes his current group of clients this way: "I have two Germans, a Kenyan, a Chinese, not to mention the Brazilian couple. It's good; I always get along with Germans and Kenyans are easy to change, too. Chinese baffle me, of course, but at least I don't have any French clients – God, those people get on my nerves! Next week I start working with an Egyptian. Now *that* should be a challenge."

Strange as it sounds, I have heard people familiar with the Enneagram talk in the same way. They say things like: "Twos drive me crazy, they're always invading me. I can't stand Eights either – they're so pushy. Fives are my kind of people, though; always so sweet and so shy. Of course, everybody loves Sevens." I've met Enneagram enthusiasts who asked for my Enneagram number before they ever asked for my name.

There is a way to use the Enneagram that is much like bigotry. The two most important ingredients of common bigotry are seeing the other person's identifying characteristic *first* and then continuing to see it in a way that eclipses the rest of them – mistaking a part of the person for the whole.

In Enneagram bigotry you look at someone, see their number first and then reframe all their behavior to fit your knowledge of their style. A complex individual then seems like a caricature, rather than a real person with a skewed point of view. Their personality style becomes the most outstanding thing about them.

The Enneagram describes how we make ourselves one-dimensional but it's possible to see what the system describes in a one-dimensional way. If you don't keep reminding yourself of the difference between a type and a person, then the material will delude you. You'll think you have people in a nutshell, but all you'll have are nutshells.

If I'm white and I see a "Black person" first before I see my friend Roma, then I'm practicing a form of bigotry. Roma happens to be a Nine so I could also see a Black Nine. If, instead, I try to see Roma first, then her "Blackness" and her "Nineness" become significant parts of who she is that emerge in the way she expresses herself. It's almost a matter of sequence.

Forging a New Identity

It's not too far a slide from seeing others in a bigoted way to seeing yourself as some walking, talking type. As you learn about your Enneagram style, you can get caught up in the *idea* of it, fashioning a new quasi self-insightful identity, a new persona to overidentify with.

Let's say I discover I'm a Two. I now make sense of my experience in a new way and understand behavior that has baffled me for years. After the initial shock, I begin to think of myself differently and say things like, "Well, I do these things because I'm a Two," or, "I'm a Two, so naturally I flatter people."

There's nothing natural about it at all. Overidentifying with the *description* of your personality style is exactly the same thing as being caught in its trance; you are simply replacing an old self image with a new one.

One expression of this is when people suddenly start to find their neurosis more interesting. Enneagram periodicals will sometimes carry articles by people describing their experience of their style. Some of these articles are useful but others are quite peculiar, recounting the ins and outs of the author's personality trance in a way that sounds pleased, as if the writer is fascinated with the new world of "me."

Such articles outline warped relationships, immature behavior and deluded goals often in a tone of bragging, juvenile glee. It's as if the writer feels endorsed or licensed by the Enneagram, not realizing that the system only describes their ego. The thoughts, feelings and behavior they list so proudly are exactly what they need to overcome.

In a similar way, people experienced with the Enneagram will sometimes talk about their personality tendencies in a way that sounds strangely *practiced*. They describe themselves with insight and yet somehow remain trapped. They remind themselves of what they should work on but don't sound as if they'll bother.

People also use the Enneagram as an excuse for neurotic behavior that they have no intention of changing. Some will say things like, "Don't blame me for being paranoid, I'm a Six!" or, "I can't be expected to work in an office – I'm a Four!" You may as well say, "Of course I'm limited; I'm an American, aren't I?" The result is a sweeping reversal of the point of the model.

A related distortion occurs when people use their style to create a new set of interpersonal limits, reflected in statements like, "I'm an Eight so I can't work with Fours. I don't make dinner plans with Sevens either – they're always late."

I once got a phone call from a prospective student who demanded to know my Enneagram number. When I asked why, she said she had been told to only continue learning the Enneagram from someone with a different personality style than her original teacher's. The idea was

that Enneagram styles are so influential that two teachers with the same style would teach the Enneagram in exactly the same way. Added with their own personality biases, their rendition of the material would be principally an expression of their egos. Actually that just sounds like *bad* teaching.

Groups of people who know the Enneagram can also use it in a distorted way. One function of community is to reinforce the identities of its individual members; everyone knows your story and expects you to act in a way that's consistent with how they see you. On the one hand this is the basis of comfort and belonging; on the other hand it means you're stuck, typecast, expected to conform to the consensus image others have of you.

I've heard people in Enneagram groups say things like, "Oh, he's our resident Five, ha ha ha!" or "Look: she's getting him more coffee – just like a Two!" Though it seems like a harmless habit, it may result in group members feeling destined to follow the script of their style rather than creating their own alternative stories.

While connection to groups who know the Enneagram may offer a sense of belonging or fulfill other needs, it's very important to be mindful of what you're reinforcing in each other, even fondly. A group can help its members evolve beyond their Enneagram trances or support their immaturities, sense of victimhood and desire to hide.

The Enneagram invites misunderstanding. It seduces us by seeming static, by offering neatly bounded categories that promise to contain and explain reality. It turns out the system points to something more profound and existential: the unnerving mystery behind everyday appearances, an invisible world that we may not feel equal to seeing.

In the 1950 movie *Rashomon*, an incident in a forest involving a thief and an elegant, upper-class couple leaves the husband dead and the thief charged with murder. The film dramatizes the trial testimony of the participants where the witnesses present four absolutely different, *equally* plausible versions of what happened in the forest.

At the end of the film you don't know what to think. Each person could be lying but all four are equally convincing in their telling of the event. The story ends on a haunting note of ambiguity, leaving you suspended in a void between equally valid subjective realities. You're forced to accept that there's no right answer, no absolute truth.

Sometimes the Enneagram induces exactly this feeling in its users. It implies that when we are most certain the world is one way, we are avoiding ambiguity and uncertainty. But the system itself induces uncertainty and the part of us that defends against those feelings in daily life also defends against the Enneagram.

Psychosynthesis founder Roberto Assagioli, used to say, "You never kill the ego, you only find it living in a larger house." Remember, your ego's job is to co-opt the new, to translate the unknown into the known. The Enneagram studies egos and presents a sometimes withering portrait of their efficiency, sort of like a negative cost-benefit analysis.

Your ego can react to the Enneagram's revelations by bureaucratically trying to hold onto its job, mutating to incorporate the new insights about itself while defending its basic position. Life is a

series of openings and closings and when we change or expand our model of the world, something in us won't let us go too far.

Part of what this means is that if you're going to work with the Enneagram in depth, it will take honesty every step of the way. There's nothing in the model's formulation that will automatically keep you on track. No matter how powerfully the Enneagram impacts you, it's still possible to warp it into a new version of the same old thing.

The Trap of Traits

The Enneagram is easy to learn but difficult to master. For practical purposes the essentials of the system can be grasped quickly and applied to daily life in myriad ways. But it is a complex matter with subtle depths and takes time to absorb.

Surfing is like that: you can become a passable board surfer rather quickly but it takes a lot of practice to get good. You need to develop a depth of experience and integrate the skill, to make it unconscious and reflexive. Until we make knowledge our own, it's like a rumor about something real.

Because the Enneagram is complex, many students search for shortcuts to simplify its usage. The most common form this takes is to seek a connection between people's outer behavior and their inner personality styles. Users will ask questions like, "My husband drives too fast, what does that mean?" It means he should slow down, but the questioner is actually asking: "What's the connection between observable external traits and a person's Enneagram style?" The answer is: just about none.

I have known many Twos, for instance, who tailgate while driving. If you think about it, that's logical within the Two script – somebody who doesn't want to be alone and needs to stay connected to others drives too close to them in traffic.

Are all tailgaters therefore Twos? No; the external behavior isn't proof of anything. If you realize – through other means – that a person is a Two, then the fact that he tailgates makes sense against the deep background of his personality style. The behavior may combine well with a dozen other things a person says and does, but in the end you'll need another strategy altogether for discovering someone's Enneagram style. To assume each tailgater in your rear view mirror is a Two would be more bigotry.

Another question runs, "I'm a Nine. What would be the best type for me to marry?" The correct answer is: a type that's healthy and one that loves you. There's no magic equation, nothing in the Enneagram that could possibly advise about such a decision. Nines and every other number in the Enneagram fall in love. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't – it depends on the individuals involved. The Enneagram can beautifully describe a likely dynamic between two individuals – what happens when the relationship works and when it doesn't. But it won't give you a formula for finding a mate.

It's probably only a matter of time before Enneagram dating services spring up. Author Helen Palmer has already described her horror at seeing newspaper ads soliciting romance with particular styles: "Nine seeks Seven for fun and romance." Again, imagine an ad that says, "Hand-

some Bulgarian looking to make beautiful music with that special someone. Only Brazilians need apply.”

Trying to connect behavior traits to personality styles is like confusing a math problem with a poem. The assumption is that some exact formula exists. Although the Enneagram labels people with numbers but it's not really mathematics.

Some people practice face reading. The claim is that you can look at someone's outer features, either in person or from a photograph, and determine their Enneagram style. This would be a fine thing if it worked but I've never met a practitioner of face reading who was accurate with any consistency. The technique ignores the influence of genetics as well as how a person's immediate mood might change the way they look the moment they were photographed.

When someone using face reading is inaccurate, the belief that it is *even possible* makes things worse. The practitioner is much more likely to stick to an inaccurate diagnosis despite feedback from the subject and the evidence of his own senses.

Face reading is symptomatic of a broader mentality. I've heard “trait happy” people say things like, “you can't be a Three, you have Seven hair,” or “you may think you're a One but you're not – Ones *always* make eye contact.”

It's not that there aren't some physical expressions of Enneagram styles; they just aren't rigidly constant. Overgeneralizing any part of what you learn produces an illusory, simplistic view of human behavior and turns the Enneagram into something perfectly stupid. The paradox of this material is that when you apply it loosely it leads you to a more precise diagnosis. Think of holding a small bird in your hand; if you squeeze your hand too tightly the bird will die, if you hold the bird too loosely it will fly away.

A last typical question runs something like, “Don't Eights always fight with authority?” The answer is: nobody *always* does anything. There is as much variety in the way people express Enneagram styles as there is within nationalities. I can meet Americans from other regions of the country and find them vastly different. Yet we still share associations and underlying references that come from being American.

The same is true with different individuals with the same ego style. If you heard a group of Threes talk about their lives, it would be clear that each person had a similar central world view and set of core assumptions. At the same time, each would plainly be their own person with an obvious independent identity.

As you apply what you learn to your life, remember that an Enneagram style is more than the sum of someone's visible behavior. The Enneagram describes the inner strategies that drive behavior, the “machinery in the basement.” It's not *what* people do, it's *why* they do it. A person has only one core habit of perception; when you identify that, you'll see how their external traits flow logically from it.

Sometimes after studying the Enneagram for a while it's wise to pull back and realize how little of you it's really describing. Also, when you talk about people and their personality styles, remember the most important words to use: *can, may, might, could, possibly, often* and *sometimes*.

Romancing The Enneagram

I have a cat who is prone to amnesia for the contents of her food dish. The dish can be in plain sight and piled high with food, but Kitty-San will approach the nearest human and plaintively cry to be fed. Sometimes a well-meaning family member will try to remind Kitty of her food by pointing a finger at the dish. Kitty always looks intently at the person's finger, never towards her food.

If the Enneagram points to the location of our true nourishment, there's still a way to mistake the finger for the food, to grow overawed by the system itself, "romancing the Enneagram," as author Don Riso calls it. Students often imbue the model with power, as though it has a life of its own. This invariably takes them further away from its true function since the Enneagram is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

As you read about the system you may encounter its legend. Some versions of the Enneagram come with arcane, esoteric packaging and claim that the system dates back centuries, possibly to ancient Babylon. The child inside of us enjoys a good story, and calling the Enneagram "ancient wisdom" is certainly colorful marketing. But many people believe the legend and invest the Enneagram with a mystical aura and make it into a mini-religion.

Imbuing the Enneagram with spiritual meaning is a mistake – it's a diagnostic system. If you imbue diagnosis with a transformative power, you wind up in the paradoxical position of exalting wounds and neurosis, while thinking this will someday bring you healing and salvation.

Some Enneagram students act as if they have joined a leaderless cult. They speak in hushed tones about the system's boundless truths and mysterious powers, as if the Enneagram sees all and knows all. They generally sound like a children describing a parent, in a passive relationship to a greater, wiser being.

When people start to worship the Enneagram they often stop using it. Harboring a fantasy about the system's magical capacities somehow relieves me of personal responsibility for changing. If the Enneagram is my religion, then all I have to do is read its books, talk about it with my friends and visit the altar of its insights. Someday, when I fully learn the system, "it" will transform me.

A related syndrome is to see inherent spiritual wisdom in Enneagram teachers, as though their mastery of the material makes them personally evolved or spiritually enlightened. Enneagram teachers are prone to exactly the same psychological distortions described throughout this chapter and book. If an Enneagram teacher seems to believe they are an Enlightened One, you'd be right to wonder what it means about their personal trance and unresolved childhood issues.

When people speak in a spiritually romantic way about the Enneagram, they are sometimes referring to the symbol and not the subject matter. Part of the Enneagram's mythos is that its nine pointed circle stands for "cosmic transformation." Since the system's exact origins are cloudy, it's possible to project all kinds of meaning onto the symbol, imagining it to be an oracle of divine wisdom or the face of God.

Symbols don't ripen and drop from trees; people make them up. The Enneagram's figure does go back centuries, but there's little evidence that it has always meant what it does now. The familiar symbol of the swastika, appropriated by the Nazis for modern horrifying ends, has been traced back to Zoroaster and has meant different things at different times. In India it once stood for "good luck."

There's also little evidence that the present, psychologically detailed form of the Enneagram goes back much further than the 1950's. There are traces of it in the work of Theosophical writer Alice Bailey and spiritual leader George Gurdjieff and hints of it in other systems; but basically the trail goes cold with author Oscar Ichazo. Since the 1950's the Enneagram has been significantly expanded upon by others, notably Claudio Naranjo, Helen Palmer and Don Riso. At this point, it overlaps considerably with modern ego psychology although many authors present it within a spiritual context.

Ancient Egyptians saw great spiritual power in domestic cats, partly because of the cat-habit of staring at people with a clear, steady, enigmatic gaze. My cat sometimes looks this way but often it turns out she's thinking about tuna. Spiritual systems are compelling but they need to be compared with and monitored against the plainness of your immediate experience. In the end, there's no greater mystery than daily life.

Nine Good Ways to Misuse the Enneagram

A marketing company that specializes in promotional mailing lists sent me a letter advertising their services. Markings on the envelope indicated that the letter had been returned to them once because they had the address wrong. The second time the address was fine but they had screwed up the postal code and spelled my last name "Condom." Printed next to their business logo was the company's confident motto: "*We re only as good as our information!*"

One way your ego can react to the Enneagram is to yoke it into serving your defenses. This leads to situations where you are doing two contradictory things at once – thinking you are breaking free while using the material to strengthen your trance. Some distortions of the Enneagram are more "style specific," in that they come easily to people within the bias of their style and are expressions of its neurotic tendencies. Here's a rundown of the most common:

Ones – Ones sometimes distort the Enneagram by turning it into the ultimate criticism. They may use the model as a basis for judging themselves and others, positing a new ideal self to strive for and become. They can see Enneagram styles in a too-negative way, overfocusing on what's wrong and broken; not allowing people to be more than their type. They may also form blanket judgments about other Enneagram styles: "Nines are lazy, Threes are liars, Sevens are dilettantes." Ones also fix their attention on others as a way of not looking at themselves.

Some Ones turn the Enneagram into an orthodoxy. They stop using their own words and adopt "Enneagramatically correct" adjectives to describe their personal experience, while imposing Enneagram terminology on others. Ones can also become literal-minded about the system, missing the metaphorical nature of personality styles, thinking they're as real as tables and chairs.

Twos – Twos sometimes distort the Enneagram by turning it into an instrument of seduction. Knowledge of personality styles helps the Two better blend with other people’s criteria to create synthetic personal connections.

Some Twos are self-critical and can feel unnecessarily bad about their own style. They’ll hate themselves for being a Two, especially if others around them don’t like it.

Other Twos feel entirely *too good* about their personality style. They relish being a Two as a kind of identity and blithely excuse themselves for manipulating others. They may take a subtle pride in their interpersonal powers and act exempt from the need to look at their behavior. Twos will sometimes also join Enneagram communities and lose themselves in a social context, evading the need for independent, solitary introspection.

Threes – Threes may distort the Enneagram by missing its depth, instead seeing people as two-dimensional stereotypes or walking bundles of information. Some Threes fix their attention on people’s surface behavior and are unable to recognize their individuality and souls. They may also get fascinated with the way the Enneagram “works,” seeing the system in an overly schematic, formulaic way.

Sometimes Threes use knowledge of the Enneagram to manipulate others in the service of achievement. “Just look for one of the tell-tale signs that places him or her into one of nine categories,” read an especially Threeish advertisement for the Enneagram, “then you’ll know everything you need to know about them and be able to change their behavior *without them finding out!*”

Some Threes get competitive about typing by trying to do it too fast; they may ask a person five questions and then confidently but erroneously announce the person’s Enneagram style.

Fours – Fours sometimes distort the Enneagram by believing its insights will cure them. They may use the system to pursue the one ultimate insight that will explain why they feel so flawed or alien. Study of the Enneagram becomes license to get newly mired in subjectivity, an excuse to postpone dealing with reality until the day they fully understand themselves.

Fours can find the model depressing and damning or feel insulted about being “just another unique person.” Some Fours convince themselves they are special for belonging to a “rare” species of the Enneagram, citing a invented statistic that claims there are fewer Fours than other personality styles. Groups of Fours may gather to celebrate their collective uniqueness, an in-crowd for those in the know.

Fives – Fives sometimes distort the Enneagram by holding it at an intellectual distance, enjoying it as an analytical system but not letting it personally touch them: “I could be a Five or at least one of the fear types. It’s very interesting to think about...” Like Fours, Fives can overvalue insight, believing that it automatically leads to personal growth, as if knowing *about* yourself is the same thing as knowing yourself.

If your defense is to avoid both intimacy and action by hiding in the study of complex subjects, then the Enneagram is a perfect refuge. Fives can get lost in the Enneagram’s study, mistaking a mastery of detail for depth, seeing the system as a set of esoteric principles that are divorced from daily life. Some Fives treat the Enneagram as a theory rather than a description of real people; the theory then limits what the Five can actually notice about others.

Fives will sometimes use the Enneagram as a way of knowing about people without being involved with them. They may form once-removed, social affiliations to exchange information about the model. A few Fives will avoid deciding on their Enneagram number as a way to resist social definition; the fear is that admitting their style could give others a weapon of control.

Sixes – Sixes sometimes warp the Enneagram into an excuse to avoid responsibility for their actions. They may fatalistically overidentify with their style, pretending to be a victim of their Sixness in a way that absolves them of the need to claim their power.

Some Sixes reject the Enneagram or overreact to the fact of typing, growing preoccupied with the potential dangers of such a system. Other Sixes may romanticize it, deifying both the Enneagram and its teachers. A system that seems to explain everything makes for imaginary security in an uncertain world; Sixes can think the Enneagram is The Truth and get dogmatic in its defense. Sixes may also misuse the Enneagram in the service of paranoia, using it mainly to justify their suspicions of people's hidden motives.

Sevens – Sevens sometimes learn the Enneagram intensely but quickly, acquiring a rapid overview of the model and then concluding too soon that they understand personality styles or dismissing the system as a set of restrictive categories. If they study the Enneagram further, they may try to stay noncommittal, refusing to be "boxed in" by their type, holding out for the possibility that they could have several personality styles.

Some Sevens get "trait happy" and stay fixed on people's outer characteristics. They may be attracted to formulas and equations as a fast way to learn the Enneagram, hoping to avoid the struggle of ploughing through the whole field.

Other Sevens may understand the Enneagram philosophically and idealistically but not experientially. They may put a positive spin on the material, overfocusing on each style's potential as a way to avoid the sting of the Enneagram's diagnostic depth, skipping over selective details to evade its darker truths.

Eights – Eights who tend to think in caricature will sometimes come to see Enneagram styles as a set of oversimplified cartoons. It becomes another way to see people two-dimensionally

Eights often externalize their psychological conflicts, so they may see Enneagram fixations in everyone but themselves. They are especially prone to deciding which styles they like or dislike, as if that's somehow relevant. An Eight might locate his shadow in others but then take the realization no further, instead using the Enneagram to justify his uncharitable biases and limits ("I never could stand college professors and now I know why; they're all a bunch of wimpy Fives").

On the job or at home, Eights can use the Enneagram as a tool for blaming or punishing. Some initially dismiss the system as meaningless; later they may warp it into a justification for why they can't change. Eights can miss the system's subtlety and see personality styles as cartoons. They can also grow so enthusiastic about the Enneagram that they overapply it, seeing people only as their Enneagram styles – more educated bigotry.

Nines – Nines can allow the Enneagram to exist in an atmosphere around them while taking no responsibility for what it shows them about themselves. "Other people tell me I'm a Nine..." is sometimes the refrain.

Some Nines might be chronically “unable” to decide on their personality style. Others admit to it but postpone facing the implications, focusing on how much work it sounds like or telling themselves that being a Nine is not as bad as some other numbers. There’s a quality of almost willfully missing the point, of adding the Enneagram to an already full plate of things that don’t matter.

Some Nines react as if the Enneagram has given them a suddenly documented identity. They may find false recognition from overidentifying with their style, brandishing their neurotic personality distortions as a badge of confused pride, as if to say, “See, this proves I exist: look how screwed up I am.”

Not Quite Getting It

Occasionally people study the Enneagram but fail to identify their personality style. There are a number of reasons for this, beginning with inexperience. Some people/who encounter the Enneagram are unknown to themselves and simply not used to observing their behavior in the way that the material asks them to. They’ve had no framework or use for self-knowledge; it hasn’t been their walk in life. Maybe they’ve been busy raising children, or had a demanding career; things went relatively well and they’ve not had the occasion or motivation to question their premises. Then, for whatever reason, they begin to.

Sometimes people don’t recognize their style because of the amount or quality of their exposure to the Enneagram. They mistype themselves based on their reading of a book or two. If you’ve not seen the Enneagram in action, it’s possible to misidentify yourself because you lack a living three-dimensional sense of the energy and real-world expression of each style.

Sometimes people study the system for a long time but maintain they still don’t know their own Enneagram style. They’ve said to me things like: “I’ve been exposed to many Enneagram teachers, I’ve read all the books; I know all about the Enneagram but I still don’t know my style. This teacher says I’m a Seven, that teacher says I’m a Nine. What do you think?” There’s sometimes a small smile at the corner of their mouth offering a silent challenge.

Each time someone has issued this challenge to me, it has turned out that they unconsciously knew their Enneagram style but were reluctant to admit it. Always lurking in the refusal was an intelligent, self-protective objection; the person either sensed that the revelation of their style was going to be overwhelming or they feared getting stuck and trapped in a way that is resonant with their personal history. As one woman said, “My father used to call me names all the time and this seems like calling myself a new name.”

A person could know their Enneagram style deep down but not *like* it. I’ve known manipulative, dependent Twos who thought they were self-sufficient Fives and this belief was an expression of Twoish pride. Some Sevens initially believe they are Eights because it’s more flattering to think of themselves as aggressive than afraid.

Sometimes people ask, “It’s not exclusive, is it? Aren’t we all nine styles to some degree?” While that may be ideally true, people often ask that question when they are unwilling to face the implications of their core style. If I’m connected to all nine, then the one style that unnerves me most is not as potent.

Once in a while I've heard a strange story about someone who believed for years that they had one Enneagram style and then realized it was an error. Often the person had accepted the diagnosis of a teacher or friend more experienced with the Enneagram.

If you discover that you have accepted someone's mistyping, you might ask, "what's been the secret benefit of allowing others to define me?" Perhaps it reflects a power you gave away to a teacher or someone you wanted to please. Almost invariably this is a veiled replay of a past relationship with a parent.

A woman once brought her grown daughter to a workshop. She was convinced the daughter was a Four, but during the course of the workshop the daughter realized she was a Six. This was startling and upsetting to the mother who, for some reason, still needed the daughter to be a Four. She later asked me, "Are you really sure that she's a Six? Don't you really think she's a Four?" I replied, "You know, in the end, it's probably none of our business what her Enneagram style is."

The Enneagram is not for everyone. If a person is reluctant to admit their Enneagram style, maybe they aren't quite ready for this kind of self-examination. There's no point in forcing the issue prematurely.

If you are ready, it's important to let the unsettling part of it touch you, to have an "Oh my God!" experience. The Enneagram is not arbitrary; if it hasn't made you uncomfortable, you may not yet completely understand its purpose. The most consistent physical sign that you've "got it" is an upset stomach.

Using The Enneagram Clearly

As author Clarence Thomson says, discovering someone's Enneagram style is ultimately an act of inference, a kind of educated intuition. Though there's no one right way to do it, there are some helpful pointers and guidelines.

People familiar with the major star constellations sometimes report growing confused when they venture into the wilderness. Away from civilization's competing streetlights, so many more stars are visible that the most obvious constellations become harder to see.

If you are a beginner it's especially important to restrict yourself to searching for one thing: someone's central pattern, what they do again and again. Otherwise it's easy to get overwhelmed by too much information and too many secondary distinctions.

Those who are good at identifying Enneagram styles often begin their assessment of someone by seeking an underlying feeling. Fives, Sixes and Sevens are fundamentally fearful, while Eights, Nines and Ones react from anger. Twos, Threes and Fours often display an absence of feeling or a quality of drama without depth. If you sense that someone is fundamentally angry, it might mean that they are an Eight, Nine or One. Choosing from three possibilities is then easier than choosing from nine.

Another way to eliminate possibilities is to mentally cycle through the Enneagram as you try to diagnose someone's style: "Not a One, not a Two, not a Three, maybe a Four, maybe a Five,

not a Six, not a Seven, not an Eight, maybe a Nine.” Even if you’re not entirely sure about the person’s core style, you may find that others can be clearly ruled out.

Confusing one Enneagram style with another is possible because some are outward look-alikes. Threes and Sevens can seem alike because both are externally organized and tend to lose themselves in activity. Ones and Fives may seem alike when the One is introverted and shy. Nines and Twos both often put the priorities of others before their own. As we have seen, adding subtypes and other fine distinctions can confuse things even more. Again, even when outer behavior is similar, it’s crucial to know what’s motivating the person. Internally these styles see the world in vastly different ways.

Sometimes it’s difficult to identify the personality styles of people close to you. One of my best friends took me years to identify; we had too much history together and I just couldn’t see him clearly. When I first met him he was prone to judgmental rages. For years I assumed he was a One, although that diagnosis never quite felt right. In the end, the only solution was to show him passages from an Enneagram book. Gradually it came clear that he is an occasionally explosive Nine.

If you are trying to type your friends, it’s best to approach the matter respectfully. Sometimes this means encouraging a dialogue. You might open an Enneagram book and say: “This friend of ours, she really fits this description right here. I fit this description here; this one seems like you. See what you think.” Your friend or acquaintance may surprise you by the style they choose. Then as you think about it you might realize, “Of course! I’ve been staring at that all along but haven’t been able to see it.”

Sometimes a context will confuse things. If you think your father was a Five but there were twelve children in your family, you might have to ask, “Did he withdraw to his study for days on end because of his Enneagram style or because he had twelve kids?” Even a gregarious Two would need time away from a family that large.

Often it’s hard to identify someone’s style because they are especially *healthy*. The person is less obviously caught in a compulsive pattern. In the end, though, they will still have one particular orientation and not another. Studying healthy people can also teach you about the gifts of each Enneagram style.

There are many published Enneagram tests that seem to work equally well. While none are 100% accurate, they at least stimulate discussion about what the Enneagram describes. Offering someone a test is another tactful way to get them involved and relieves you of the interpersonally sticky task of deciding your friend’s Enneagram style for them. Whatever you can do to avoid that position is wise.

Enneagram enthusiasts sometimes launch literal-minded projects whose goal is to precisely identify the correct adjectives that best define each type. Behind the idea is an assumption that somewhere there’s an “objective Enneagram” as real as a rock.

Actually, writers offer distinctly different versions of the system. Some Enneagram authors contradict others or slice the same pie in different ways. Some are clearly writing about people first while others are describing a theory through which they filter people.

There are incompetent renditions of the Enneagram but even its acknowledged experts will disagree about the personality styles of particular famous people – which means someone’s wrong. Enneagram experts are like blind people describing an elephant; each is clued into a different aspect of the same animal.

Partly this means is that there is no complete certainty to be had outside of yourself. You eventually have to make the Enneagram your own and take different versions of it in stride.

The Enneagram is a description, a model. The value and effectiveness of a model is in how precisely it matches what it describes and allows the user to apply the knowledge. In the end, however, a model is only a model. No one’s ever photographed an ego; it’s just a way of talking about something.

There is something about the Enneagram that allows people to think they understand it before they do. Unfortunately for the system’s reputation this sometimes means that a student will decide to teach it before they really know it, inevitably in a glib, stereotypic way.

The Enneagram will meet you where you are, at your best depth, so to speak, but it will not tell you what you don’t know about it. During the first eight years I worked with the model I learned it anew four different times. Each time I decided that I fully understood the material, a trapdoor opened, and I was dropped into new and unsuspected depths.

I’ve now worked with the Enneagram for 25 years; sometimes a new person’s Enneagram style is instantly obvious to me. With others it takes time and patient attention before their style comes clear. Someone will manifest Nineness in a way I’m not used to, but it’s eventually evident that Nine is their true style anyway. It’s often wise not to make up your mind too soon – determining someone’s personality style isn’t a contest and grabbing at a premature certainty will just steer you and others wrong.

Whenever you have a clear success, pay attention to your internal experience and memorize both the feeling of being certain and the sensory cues that led to the correct diagnosis. Be sure to distinguish this from the *desire* to be certain. In the future, you can then use the experience of true certainty as a touchstone, a guide to whether you are on track or not.

As you might imagine, people who are good at identifying Enneagram styles practice a lot. They read biographies, watch interviews on television and look for the Enneagram in movies, novels and real life. They also work to get out of their own way – to see past their personal likes and dislikes, avoiding snap judgments and interpretations in favor of paying attention to what is clearly emanating from others.

At the end of “The Book of the Grotesque,” mentioned in Chapter One, the narrator says that the old man who had written the book about people turning into grotesques had thought so much about his theory that he himself was in danger of becoming a grotesque. “He didn’t,” the narrator says, “for the same reason that he never published the book. It was the Young Thing inside him that saved the old man.”

If you use the Enneagram personally or professionally, it's important to keep a Young Thing alive inside you. Partly this entails having an open mind, staying alert to what people reveal about themselves, trying to see the total person even as they inhabit a particular personality style.

Late in his life, Milton Erickson was often asked the question, "What is hypnosis?" Typically he would pretend to think for a moment and then say, "I've only studied hypnosis for 50 years. It's too *early* to tell."

It helps to remember that the Enneagram is always deeper than it seems to be. As a system it can be worked with for years and still be yielding secrets. It is both comprehensive and incomplete, alive in a way that won't lie flat on paper. It will keep teaching you if you stay open.

Remember, too, that the Enneagram is a means to an end, not an end in itself; a floor, not a ceiling. Studying your personality style should ultimately make you feel like more of an individual, not less of one. If the system works for you – is useful, adds meaning and makes life better – then it's worthwhile; otherwise feel free to discard it and do something more fulfilling. Life's too short to waste your time.

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