

The Enneagram from a Systems Perspective

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Many people who work with the enneagram see it as a system for describing nine basic personality types. Each of the nine points around the edge of the circle is said to represent a constellation of personality traits whose origin lies in a core motivation that's unique for each of the nine types.

Personality describes the workings of the psyche at the level of the human ego. At the ego-personality level, conscious awareness is powerfully influenced by the limitations of the physical body, because the body is capable of assimilating a very limited quantity of information at one time. As a result, we need a mechanism for filtering out unwanted information, so that the cognitive-perceptual system doesn't become overloaded.

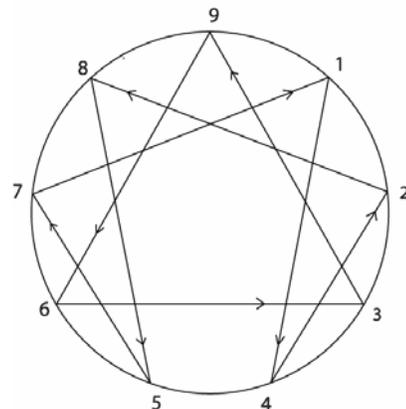
The general nature of the cognitive-perceptual apparatus that performs this filtering is familiar to cognitive psychologists. What is not known, however, is how this filtering process is affected by individual differences. We know that different people tend to see the same event in different ways, but we haven't known why. The enneagram can help account for those differences because of its focus on basic motivation. It's likely that what we notice depends very much on our motivation, that it's our motivation that informs the filtering mechanism.

Working with the enneagram, it's possible to predict not just the general workings of perception, but to predict differences in perception—in how people see the world—based on personality type. This has many practical applications. It can help managers understand the group dynamics of project teams, counselors to understand the motives of clients, and ordinary people to get along better with friends and family members.

However, the enneagram is more than just a tool for personality assessment. It has much broader applications—applications so broad (and deep) that it's hard to express them in words. George Gurdjieff spoke of the enneagram as a symbol that reveals “the law of the unity of the many.”¹ As paraphrased in Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, Gurdjieff took the position that that all knowledge can be described by the enneagram—that the symbol itself conveys this knowledge to anyone who has the ability to grasp what is there.²

Gurdjieff's teachings are arcane and hard to follow, but his description of the enneagram as a symbol that *reveals the law of the unity of the many* clearly shows its systems orientation. It can be used to describe the nature of everything as a whole, the nature of the elements that comprise the whole, and the relationship between the parts and the whole.

The enneagram is not just an idea, but also a geometric figure (see figure). When we use the enneagram to describe the human psyche, it can show three main things: (a) the psyche as a whole (represented by the



The Enneagram

¹ www.endlesssearch.co.uk/philo.enneagramtalk.htm

² http://www.endlesssearch.co.uk/philo_enneagram1.htm

circle), (b) the nine key energy centers within the psyche (represented the nine points), and (c) the relationship between the nine energy centers and the psyche as a whole (represented by the lines of flow inside the circle).

The personality self sees the world through the lens of only one of these energy centers, and therefore has only a partial view of things as they really are. There's nothing wrong with this; in fact, it's unavoidable on a certain level. What's important to realize is that the personality self is only *part* of the human psyche—the part designed to function in ordinary life. Psyche-as-personality is not the same thing as psyche-as-soul, and psyche-as-soul is not the same thing as psyche-as-spirit. If we think that personality as “who we are,” then we're likely to fall into the trap of trying to reform the personality—of trying to literally remake it into something bigger or better than it is. And this is an impossible task.

What we need to do instead is to realize that personality is a limited vehicle. The enneagram can show us not only those limitations, but also ways to work within them and to see beyond them. So the enneagram is particularly valuable as an aid in transformative work, because it can describe not only the relationship between different levels of consciousness, but the process by which integration of the psyche can begin to take place.

This focus on integration is a key element of the systems perspective. In systems theory, nothing is ever studied in isolation, but always in relationship to the system of which it is a part. The goal is to find ways of better integrating different elements of the system, so that it can function in a more balanced way.

Since the enneagram is by nature systems-oriented, working with the enneagram from a systems perspective enhances its usefulness as a transformational tool. In the last section of this paper, I describe some of the ways that this might work. But first I need to provide some background on the basic assumptions of systems theory and to discuss what transformation looks like from a systems perspective.

What is a Systems Perspective?

The systems perspective can be described in various ways. I've chosen to interpret it in the way that makes most sense to me, a way that focuses on four key dimensions of life: intelligence, relatedness, openness, and creativity. The last paragraph describes how these four dimensions relate to the human psyche.

Intelligence. From a systems perspective, life is intelligent. The majesty of this intelligence is reflected everywhere we look—in the geometric patterns of the natural world, in the natural rhythms and cycles of our lives, in the miracle of procreation, and in the measured way that our planet progresses around the sun.

Because life is intelligent, nothing exists that doesn't belong here. Nothing that happens is really out of control or off the charts. Even the most chaotic situations contain within them the seeds of order, and even the most static, rigid structures eventually give way to forms that are more flexible.

Chaos is a necessary element in growth, in that the only way for a stable entity to grow is to first let go of its stable state, in preparation for change. During the letting go phase, the entity or system will appear chaotic to one degree or another. But this chaotic phase is a necessary

part of the growth process; only by passing through a period of chaos is it possible for the system restabilize at a higher level of integration.

Connectedness. From a systems perspective, nothing in life exists in isolation. Everything in life exists in relationship to everything else.

Since life exists on many levels, the relationship between things can be described on both horizontal and vertical dimensions. On a horizontal level, everything on a given level of life is linked with every other thing on the same level of existence. Despite outward appearances of separation and difference, we are all connected. No part of life is isolated from any other part.

On a vertical level, everything is related via whole-part relationships. What this means is that everything in existence is both an entire universe that is complete within itself (a whole) and at the same time is an element (a part) within a larger order. Implicit in this perspective is the idea that life exists at many levels. Therefore, the physical universe that we see cannot be the only universe that exists, although it's the one we most easily perceive.

Openness. From a systems perspective, an system is said to be *open* if it allows for a high degree of freedom and flexibility and *closed* if it does not. To the extent that a system is open, it can be called a living system, whether it is literally a live organism (like a plant or animal) or something that functions like one (like an organization or natural cycle).

Systems theory favors open systems for a number of reasons. First, although open systems may appear less stable than closed systems (because they're tolerant of change and experimentation), they're actually *more* stable than closed systems because they're more dynamic—they can respond quicker and better to the needs of the moment. As a result, open systems can adapt to changing circumstances, becoming a stabilizing influence during times of chaos and a progressive influence during times of stasis. Second, open systems are more resilient than closed systems. Their sensitivity enables them to avoid or deflect many potential blows, while their responsiveness enables them to recover more quickly from those blows that are unavoidable. Third, open systems tend to be more creative than closed systems. Their creative focus often enables them to find the “silver lining” in negative situations, so that what looks like a potential setback can become an opportunity for creative adaptation.

Creativity. From a systems perspective, creativity is the process by which open systems evolve and transform themselves. Creative activity doesn't occur in a vacuum, but as the result of the interaction of polar opposites. Examples of opposing pairs include order vs. chaos, light vs. darkness, winning vs. losing, right vs. wrong, and limitation vs. freedom. When the conditions are right, these pairs interact with one another in a “dance of the opposites.” When this happens, it usually produces inner friction, outer conflict, or both. This conflict, if properly contained, builds up pressure like a steam engine. And this pressure can lead to creative breakthroughs. There's a sense of literally breaking through to a higher level, and a consequent release of tension. Such breakthroughs can be minor or major, and they can occur in any arena of life.

Often, one of the ends of the spectrum appears more desirable than the other: we tend to like order but not chaos, light but not darkness, winning but not losing, etc. But from a system's perspective, neither pole is better than the other. In fact, they are not really even separate from one another, because systems theory assumes that that everything is interconnected. If we really take this to heart, then we can begin to play with the idea that forces are *appear* to work

against one another might actually be working *in tandem* (as a single whole) at some higher level in order to invite a creative response.

The Human Psyche. From a systems perspective, human beings are living systems that embody these four concepts of intelligence, relatedness, openness, and creativity. The consciousness within a human being is intelligent and exists both as a whole (in relationship to all the elements that compose it) and as a part (in relationship to the web of consciousness in which it participates). It has the dynamism and adaptability of an open system and the creativity to devise ingenious solutions in the face of obstacles and conflict.

To summarize, the approach I'm taking to systems theory has five main assumptions:

- that life is *intelligent* and therefore orderly (systematic) in the most fundamental sense
- that everything that exists is *connected to everything else*
 - in a *horizontal* sense (it's part of the Web of Life)
 - in a *vertical* sense (it's both a *whole*—a complete system—and a *part* of a larger whole—an element existing within a larger system)

that systems must be *open* to remain vital (they must interact appropriately with other systems on the same level and with systems above and below them)

- that open systems are *creative* in nature, and that this creativity leads to *transformation*
- that *the human psyche is a dynamic, open system that embodies intelligence, relatedness, openness, and creativity*

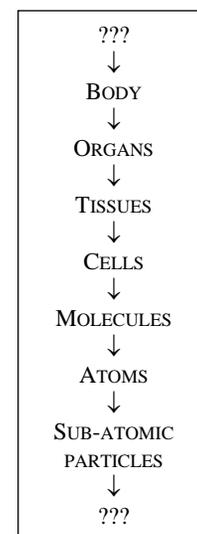
Transformation from a Systems Perspective

As mentioned above, everything in existence is connected with everything else, and everything that exists is both a part (in relation to the larger system of which it's a element) and a whole (in relation to every element of which it is composed).

The nature of this whole-part relationship can be seen in the illustration to the right, which uses the human body as an example.

This illustration is a simplified version of an illustration on pp. 28-29 of *Janus: A Summing Up* (1978), a seminal book by eclectic systems theorist Arthur Koestler. The question marks at the top and the bottom of the column are there because of the principle that part-whole relationships are infinitely regressive.³ What this means is that, whatever level you look at, it always exists as both a whole and a part. So even though we may not be sure of what comes at the next level up from the body or at the next level down from sub-atomic particles, we can be sure that something occupies this slot (whether or not we can detect its presence).

To capture the idea that everything in existence is both a part and a whole, Koestler coined the term *holon*, “from the Greek *holos* =



³ Interestingly, Koestler only puts question marks at the bottom of his chart, perhaps to avoid raising the question of what might exist at a level that is higher than the human body.

whole, with the suffix *on*, which, as in proton and neutron, suggests a part” (p. 33).⁴ According to Koestler,

all complex structures and processes of a relatively stable character display hierarchic organization, regardless [of] whether we consider galactic systems, living organisms and their activities, or social organizations...A hierarchy consists of autonomous, self-regulating holons endowed with varying degree of freedom and flexibility... [and] which manifest both the independent qualities of wholes and the dependent qualities of parts (p. 31, *italics* his).

Koestler continues by apologizing for using the word “hierarchy,” because of its traditional association with rigid, authoritarian structures (what modern system theorists would call closed systems). His preferred term would be *holarchy*. All he wants to stress is that systems include many layers or levels, not that one level is better than another (i.e., that the top levels are better than the bottom levels or vice-versa). What Koestler is trying to do here is to present a paradigm that captures the multi-layered or multidimensional nature of life. This is an approach that sharply contrasts with paradigms that reduce everything to a single level (e.g., behaviorism, empiricism, or materialism).

Whenever we compress a multidimensional reality into a single layer—which is what happens when we study life from a reductionistic perspective—it’s like taking a many-layered wedding cake and smashing it into a single layer. Although the one doing the smashing can argue that “it’s still cake,” subjecting the cake to this kind of treatment destroys its delicacy, beauty, and symbolic value.

When we live our lives without an appreciation of its multidimensional nature, we exist in what cosmologist-meditator Ken Wilber calls *Flatland*—a place where much of the richness and beauty of life is reduced to a sorry shadow of its real glory. Once we get used to living in Flatland, the existence of other dimensions of consciousness begins to seem like a dream or fairytale. We begin to think of transforming our lives only in terms of horizontal possibilities for expansion—going more places, acquiring more stuff, or doing more activities. (Even the expression “expanding our horizons” reflects the idea that expansion can only happen along a horizontal axis!)

When we get tired enough of living in Flatland, we tend to translate our desire for material stuff into a desire for transformational stuff (like spiritual experiences or tantric bliss with a partner), all the while remaining on the ego-personality level (because it’s all we know). This materializing of spirituality is what Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trunpa Rinpoche called *spiritual materialism* and what Ken Wilber calls *translative change* (as opposed to transformational change). He terms this kind of change *translative* because it simply translates the quest to find satisfaction from ordinary activities (like finding the right husband, job, or pastime) into the quest to find satisfaction from self-development activities (like finding the right therapist, personal guide, or spiritual community).

For real transformation to occur, we have to leave the level of the personality self, either delving into the depths below or ascending into the heights above. We have to get in touch with the psyche as it exists beyond the world of Flatland. It’s not that translative change is without worth, but just that it’s not a ticket out of Flatland.^{5, 6}

⁴ See Chapters 1 and 2 for a longer discussion. As an early systems theorist, Arthur Koestler is a major source, either directly or indirectly, for many writers who came later, including Ken Wilber.

⁵ See pp. 26-35 in his autobiography *One Taste* (2000) for a discussion on the topic.

However, for many of us, the vertical dimension doesn't seem very real, because we live in a culture where Flatland has become the norm. It's hard to seek change in a vertical direction when we have little experience with this dimension of life. Only when the vertical dimension of life begins to become real to us can we see the personality self not just as a whole (as a self-regulating, autonomous entity) but as a part (as the bouncy offspring of a more mature intelligence).⁷

Unfortunately, Wilber so wants to stress the importance of transcendence (change on the vertical dimension) that he implies that once the self is transcended, the self at the level of personality ceases to matter or even disappears: "Authentic transformation is not a matter of [changes one's] belief[s] but of the death of the believer...[when transformation is authentic], the self is not made content, the self is made *toast*" (p. 27, *italics mine*).

To say that transformation causes the self to "become toast" is a very dramatic statement. Can it really be true that once someone is transformed, the personality self is literally burned up? If it is, then transformation doesn't sound like a very attractive prospect. Without a personality self, how would we be able care for our families or relate to our friends? And how would Wilber manage to write an entire autobiography—and this is where the quote comes from—full of personal anecdotes and musings?

I find it hard to take Wilber's statement literally. I think what he wants to stress is the radical and unexpected nature of the transformational process, which is different than most people imagine. A breakthrough to other levels of consciousness can be a big shock for the personality self, especially for people who come from a culture that tells them that the personality self is the only self there is. A breakthrough experience can cause a pole shift in the psyche: the center of gravity is no longer located exclusively in the personality. From a certain perspective, it can seem like the personality has actually died.

But if the personality literally died, we would lose the ability to function in ordinary life. Although this occasionally happens to people on the spiritual path, it's not usually seen as necessary or desirable, because it makes a person unable to function in ordinary life. (In Western culture, it can land you in a mental hospital, as well.)⁸

The personality self is an easy target because of its limitations, because of the way that it restricts and biases our point of view. But the limitations it imposes are what enable us to function in a physical body at an ordinary level of consciousness. Without these restrictions, most people would feel overwhelmed, confused, or even crazy. But we don't like the idea of limitation, so we pathologize the personality, calling it flawed, neurotic, or defective. The

⁶ Sixties radical Jerry Rubin wrote about this problem his autobiography, *Growing Up at 37* (1976). After losing interest in political revolution, he became a junkie for every new group or method that seemed to offer a way to change his life. It took him a long time to realize that he going round in circles.

⁷ I don't know whether everyone likes this image as much as I do—it's a little funny and silly. But it helps remind me not to take my personality self too seriously.

⁸ See *Spiritual Emergency* (Stanislov & Christina Grof, eds., 1989), for more on the relationship between mental illness and spiritual states. For a discussion on what happens when spiritual practitioners lose the ability to function on the level of the personality self, see pp.181-185 in *Halfway Up the Mountain*, by Marianna Caplan (1999) and the last chapter in *The Unknown She*, by Hilary Hart (2003).

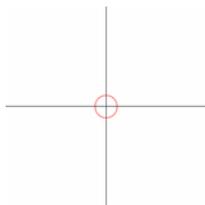
more we do this, the more we program ourselves to believe it. And the personality gradually becomes constellated around those beliefs.

But from a systems perspective, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with either the personality or with ordinary states of awareness. The personality is simply one aspect of the psyche and ordinary awareness is simply one level of consciousness. It's only when we lose the sense that these levels exist that serious problems arise, because then we're living in Flatland, and this can give us the feeling that we're trapped in a place we can't get out of.

Realizing that the personality is actually a holon—both a part and a whole—helps us work with it in a balanced way. When we relate to it as only a whole (but not a part), we can become too self-centered or bossy. When we relate to it as only as part (but not a whole), we can become too compliant or dependent. Over time, these tendencies become habits, and the habits become chief features of the personality. We believe that there an intrinsic part of the personality. But they aren't intrinsic. They arise because we lack the ability to see ourselves “holonistically.”

To function optimally, the personality self needs to be in “right relationship” with both its constituent elements and the larger psyche of which it is a part. When it gets out of sync, it needs to be realigned. Getting all the parts in working order involves deep level psychological work, the kind that helps us heal and align the unintegrated parts of the personality. Getting the personality aligned with the Higher Self involves transformational work. I would guess that the efforts we make on the psychological level can be equated with what Wilber calls translative work—the kind that happens on the horizontal dimension. The efforts we make to integrate the personality with the Higher (and perhaps the Lower) Self can be equated to work on a vertical dimension.

Both kinds of integration—horizontal and vertical—are important, although a certain degree of psychological integration seems to be necessary before transformational work can begin. However, even when work is progressing nicely along both dimensions, there's another piece of work that needs our attention, and that's the integration of the dimensions themselves.



The best way to explain this is with a graphic. In the figure on the left, the red circle in the middle of the cross represents the zone of integration for the vertical and horizontal axes. However much we work on each axis independently, we can't become totally integrated unless we're eventually able to integrate the axes themselves. This has to be an actual experience, not just a mental concept. By definition, it's a multidimensional experience, which makes it a little hard to talk about.

But I think it's this “tying together” of the two dimensions that Koestler is getting at with his concept of the “holon.” When he says we are both a part and a whole, he doesn't mean we are sometimes one and sometimes the other, but that we are literally both at the same exact moment. This can be depicted graphically as being exactly in the middle of the cross. Sitting in the middle of the crossroads is the place we can be that will allow us to experience two dimensions simultaneously.

In the end, what really matters is the experiences we have and the way we integrate them. This is what producing real change. The concepts in systems theory are useful enough, but only really come to life once we've experienced them in our own lives. But finding ways to have such experiences isn't all that easy. Koestler alludes to inner experiences he had during

the Spanish Civil War, but these occurred during the time he was on death row awaiting execution as an anti-Fascist spy.⁹ His situation was one that few people would seek out, regardless of its spiritual potential!

Part of the problem with creating the right conditions for transformation is that we live in a culture that has traditionally discouraged people from seeking out such experiences—for centuries, we were told us they were off-limits and later (after the Age of Enlightenment), that they didn't exist! As a result, we've sort of lost track of whatever techniques were once used for transforming the self. This is starting to change, but the change is slow in coming. Centuries of cultural conditioning don't vanish overnight. Despite the recent revolution in physics—which has the potential trigger a revolution in consciousness—most of us still live in Flatland. We sense the need to shift to a new paradigm, but lack a clear understanding of how to make it happen.

This is why, despite several decades of talk about systems theory, paradigm shifts, the New Age, etc., the reductionist paradigms originally disparaged by Koestler 60 years ago still prevail. It's a real "chicken and the egg" kind of problem: so long as we think linearly, we generate social norms based on linear thinking, and so long as we rely on linear social norms to frame our life experiences, we're going to try to fit all of our experiences into that framework, whether they really belong there or not. When the fit is poor—that is, when we have experiences that transcend this framework—these experiences are often explained away as the product of drugs, shock, a mental disease, or an overactive imagination.

What we need are tools that can help us experience ourselves in a new, non-linear way. Some of them are coming to us from other cultures (for example, Zen meditation, Buddhist mindfulness practices, or Sufi dreamwork) while others originate closer to home (Christian contemplative prayer, holotropic breath work, and shamanic journeying).

The enneagram is another powerful transformational tool that we can use to open Aldous Huxley's "doors of perception." The enneagram literally appeared on the scene only a couple of decades ago.¹⁰ Given its explanatory power, it's amazing that it has never surfaced before now. But because it's so new (at least to the general public), we're just now beginning to explore its many dimensions. In the next section, I both describe the system in brief and explore ways that we can work with it from a systems perspective to transform ourselves and our world.

The Enneagram and Systems Theory

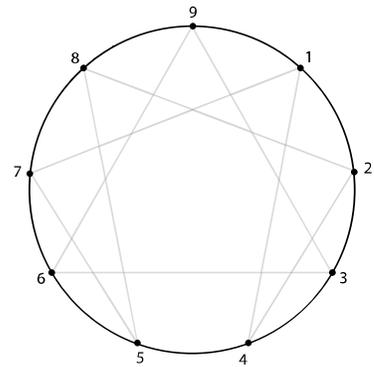
As a tool for growth, the enneagram is unique in two ways. One, it provides a way to determine the core motivation that is the driving force in our life. Two, it is an actual geometric figure, not just an idea. In addition, the system is easy to understand and communicate to other people. It's for this reason that I'm so interested in exploring its various dimensions.

⁹ Many of the ideas he developed after that time may be an attempt to explain the experiences he had. See Chapter 33 of his autobiography, *The Invisible Writing*, for an account.

¹⁰ While it was taught by Gurdjieff earlier than that, it only began to make its way into popular culture in the 1980s, after being adapted by Oscar Ichazo to map individual differences.

From a systems perspective, the enneagram is particularly interesting because it so exemplifies the principles of systems theory. For example, it's particularly helpful for talking about "part-whole relationships," because its geometry graphically depicts these relationships.

The enneagram consists of a circle containing nine points, all of which are equidistant (see figure). Each point represents a unique quality of being that has a purposeful thrust. All the points are linked together by virtue of being part of the larger circle. The points are also connected by inner lines. These inner lines reveal special relationships between the points.



We can think of the circle as a way to represent any entity in its role as a whole and each of the nine points as any entity playing one of nine archetypal roles as a part of the larger whole. But if we confine the scope of our study to human beings, the enneagram is especially useful for helping us understand

- **different types of people** (the nine points = nine personality or motivation types)
- **different elements in the psyche** (the nine points = the nine types of inner motivation)

Using the enneagram to look at individual differences in motivation is an extremely powerful way to better understand ourselves and our relationships with other people. The inner lines provide additional information that can be used to further refine that understanding.

Mapping the Enneagram to Systems Principles

In this section, I go into more detail on the relationship between systems theory and the enneagram by looking at how the enneagram can help us better understand the four main principles I talked about earlier. The principles are that (a) life is intelligent, (b) everything is connected, (c) openness facilitates flow, and (d) creative tension facilitates growth.¹¹

Life is Intelligent

The idea that life is inherently intelligent means that nothing that happens in life can ever really be dumb, stupid, or meaningless. Everything matters. Everything has a role to play in the larger scheme of things. This is true regardless of whether we possess the faculties necessary to perceive this truth.

Although this intelligence is at its core unitary, in order to come into manifestation, it must become differentiated. In the enneagram system, we see this differentiated intelligence expressed in the form of nine unique points of view, each energized by a thrust or purpose that we call a core motivation. Pinpointing our enneagram type makes it possible to discover the nature of the intelligence that motivates us. This in turn makes it possible to see our gifts and fulfill our potential in life.

Seeing each enneagram point as a source of intelligent purpose appears incompatible with the view of each enneagram point as a source of emotional blockage or cognitive fixation, a view

¹¹ The last principle, that all of the above applies to the human psyche, doesn't really need a lot of extra discussion, since the enneagram is already assumed to apply to the human psyche.

reflected in many popular books on the enneagram. However, these two perspectives can be reconciled, although this will take a little explaining.

We have to start by realizing that each of the enneagram point is like an electrical transformer. It's purpose is to step-down and differentiate high-frequency, undifferentiated energy so that it can actually come into manifestation on the denser planes. It comes into manifestation through us, and we have physical bodies that can't channel vast amounts of cosmic energy. So the limitations imposed by the point actually protect us from being inundated with energy that could literally "blow our circuits."

The enneagram points also differentiate the energy they transform. We could think of them as prisms that refract white light in a certain way, so that each energy point vibrates at a different frequency and produces a different kind of light energy. It's this difference in frequency that creates the diversity in the points of view.

When we incarnate in a body, we embody the light energy of one of these points of view. This energy provides us with life force, but it also limits and biases us in certain ways. It especially influences the way we filter incoming information about the world, which is why we refer to the nine points as points of view.

However, it's not the lack of a 360 degree view that really creates problems for us, but rather the way we react to it. Often we react to limitation by fighting against it. This is because we don't understand it and think it serves no purpose. We just want it gone.

Our aversion to limitation creates disturbance in the psyche. We feel this disturbance most directly at the level of the personality, which becomes emotionally turbulent. We try to tamp down the emotions by imposing "martial law" from the mental level, and this becomes our mental fixation. As long as we fight our natural limitations, we keep getting thrown back and forth between these two poles. In systems parlance, we create and maintain a closed system. This causes our already limited perspective to become even more limited (and, ultimately, to break down).

In order to reverse this process, we have to open up the system. Then we can see which of our limitations are natural and which are self-imposed. Systems theory can be helpful here, because by reminding us that life is intelligent, it helps us see that limitation as such is not our enemy. Limitation actually has a purpose. It creates specialized venues for our endeavors. On the level of the individual, it draws a person to particular kinds of life experiences, where they can learn particular lessons. On the level of the larger culture, it ensures a society full of individuals who have a diverse range of interests and abilities. This kind of diversity is needed for a culture to flourish.

If life is intelligent, then we can stop second-guessing it. We can afford to relax and learn to make friends with the natural limitations of our world. We can actively engage with the energies of our enneagram point of view. As we do this, the sense of limitation lessens, and we may be able sense the vast potential that exists in even the most limited situation.

On a practical level, seeing the enneagram points of view as sources of intelligence has a number of advantages. First, it enables us to develop a generally positive orientation to our work. Second, it enables us to look beyond the personality level when studying the nature of the points. Third, it's inspiring, because it adds an element of awe and wonder to our study.

Everything is Connected

The idea that everything is connected is at once obvious and at the same time hard to grasp. While we experience a sense of connectedness in many areas of daily life, it's equally easy to experience a sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Also, the idea that everything is connected runs counter to the tradition of rugged individualism that permeates our culture.

This is one reason why it's valuable to work with a tool like the enneagram. Its very form reveals the interconnectedness of life. The way it's put together reveals the diversity in oneness and the oneness behind diversity.

On a horizontal level, we can look at the position of the points on the outer circle, and where they are in relationship to the points on either side (their *wings*). We can also look at the relationship between the points connected by inner lines, and how the energy flowing along these lines affects the points at either end. And we can look at both the explicit figures included in the enneagram (the circle, the triangle, and the hexad), as well as the patterns formed by less explicit groupings (e.g., the Three Centers, the Hornevian Triads, the Harmonic Triads).

On a vertical level, we can look at how all of the above patterns differ depending on the level of the psyche we're considering or on the level of evolution of a given individual or society. This is what Don Riso focused on when he posited nine levels of development for each point of view.¹² One great strength of the enneagram lies in its ability to show specific relationships between the individual points of view. The enneagram shows us not only the characteristics of a given point of view, but how the energy of that point of view is related to every other point of view on the circle. Because this understanding is incredibly helpful for improving relationships with other people, this aspect of the enneagram is probably more well-known than any other, and has been extensively written about.¹³

The ability of the enneagram to show us the relationships between diverse elements in our own psyche is not so well explored, at least not in writing. However, it's definitely a part of many enneagram workshops and retreats. This is especially true of workshops that use the panel approach, in which people from each point of view to share their perspective with the larger group. Watching a panel allows the participants to simultaneously experience the panel as "different from me" and "the same as me" (different in their perspective, but the same in their need to be seen and appreciated in their own right).¹⁴

Openness Facilitates Flow

Open systems are living systems. They're able to maintain their integrity over along time because they allow for a free flow of energy and information. Openness and flow don't imply indiscriminate energy exchange; there's definitely selectivity in this exchange process. But an

¹² Don Riso and Russ Hudson have published the most material on enneagram patterns so far; see Chapter 5 in their *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* (1999) and Chapter 7 in *Understanding the Enneagram* (2000). The latter book also describes Riso's levels of development. There's also some interesting material on enneagram patterns in the first book ever published on the enneagram, *The Enneagram* (1984), by Maria Beesing, Robert Nogosek, and Patrick O'Leary.

¹³ See especially *The Enneagram in Love and Work* (1995), by Helen Palmer.

¹⁴ I find that the panel experience helps me come into that zone of vertical and horizontal integration that I spoke of earlier, so I see it as a way of working that has tremendous transformative potential.

open system is one in which exchange can take place in an appropriate way. By “appropriate,” I mean a way that enables the system to stay open enough to let in new energy and ideas but not so open that it becomes unable to function.

Being open doesn't mean being passive. It requires active attention. It's the active attentive that enables open systems to maintain their integrity in the midst of chaos. There's a constant monitoring (albeit on a subtle level) that enables the system to stay in touch with what's going on, both within it and around it. This permits early detection of anomalies (developments that might have a big impact on the system) and flexible responses to changing situations.

The enneagram is a great example of an open system. In fact, from a certain perspective, you could say that it's THE example of an open system, because it models the way an open system works. This is especially evident in the process enneagram used by traditional Gurdjieff groups, because the process enneagram focuses the dynamic interaction between intention and action in any process, particularly an evolutionary process. The intention is expressed as the path along the inner lines of the hexad (1 - 4 - 2 - 8 - 5 - 7), while the action is expressed as a procession around the outer circle (1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9). When we put the two together, we have a model of how the energy flows in a self-sustaining system.

But the enneagram that we use as a means of describing peoples' motivation is also an open system, not just a set of ideas. It's incredibly dynamic and alive. And it has the power to transform us when we come to it with curiosity and openness.

This is why we have to be careful not to use it just as an ingenious systems for classifying different types of pathology. When we think too much about our problems and limitations, we close down. When we use the enneagram to do this, we close down, plus we cut ourselves off from its transformative potential. It's sort of like looking at the sun and mostly noticing its sunspots—sure, they're there, but this way of looking sort of misses the point, doesn't it?

Gurdjieff tells us that the enneagram can teach us directly. It can only do this if it's a dynamic energy source—a living system. But this is only going to happen if we approach it in the right spirit. As an open system, the enneagram is very flexible. So it will tend to reflect back to us exactly the same energy that we bring to it. If we see ourselves in terms of our limitations, then the things we learn about our point of view may actually make us feel more trapped, not more free. If we have fewer preconceptions, then we can allow the system to show us whatever we really need to know.

Creative Tension Leads to Evolution

As a culture, we go to great lengths to avoid or diminish feelings of tension, conflict, and chaos. We seek peace and happiness, and find it hard to see the benefit in unbalanced states.

However, systems theorists tend to see things a little differently. From a systems perspective, living systems are dynamic, and they need a certain amount of unpredictability and craziness to prosper. I'm going to spend some extra time talking about this, because it really needs some explaining.

Looking at the relationship of chaos and creativity, Margaret Wheatley notes that living systems are able to evolve because of their ability to creatively respond to unexpected change. The way it works is that new information enters a system via a disturbance or fluctuation in the normal patterns of events. This disturbance creates disequilibrium and even disintegration.

But when a system is open, it can usually reconfigure itself at a higher level of complexity than before. It's for this reason that Wheatley calls such fluctuations "a prime source of creativity" and says that "open systems...don't seek equilibrium. Quite the opposite. To stay viable, open systems maintain a state of non-equilibrium, keeping the system off-balance so that it can change and grow."¹⁵

The idea of actually seeking to maintain a state of non-equilibrium is probably one of the hardest parts of systems theory to swallow, because it seems so counter-intuitive. If every system (or every individual) purposely tried to promote a state of imbalance, wouldn't the result be a mess? Wouldn't the system eventually go spinning out of control? When push comes to shove, isn't "living on the edge" a risky business?

The answer is "yes" to these questions only if we live in a universe that's essentially unintelligent, disconnected, and senseless. If we live in a universe that's intelligent, interconnected, and purposeful, then "living on the edge" may be a very different proposition. A lot depends upon our ability to internalize these ideas, not just talk about them. If we really *experience* the world as an open system, then we can trust it enough to let it teach us. It's the trust that makes receptivity possible, and it's receptivity that allows us to live on the edge without falling over it!

We see this kind of trust in little children. Their bright spirits reach out into life, fearlessly plunging ahead, regardless of outer circumstances. As we grow up, that brightness often fades. But we can regain that brightness if we can regain our basic faith in life.

This is where the enneagram can be helpful. As children, we trust in innocence. Once innocence is lost, we need insight in order to trust. The enneagram provides that insight by showing us a living example of how an open system works. Not only is the enneagram an open system, but we could say that it's the *prototype* of a living system. It shows us the ways that such a system works. When we study it, we're gaining the insight we need to move in the direction of trust.

In addition, because the enneagram is literally a living entity, when we focus on it, we're sitting in the aura of an energy field—an energy field with the power to undo past conditioning and to accelerate our growth. The acceleration process isn't all sweetness and light, because it tends to stir things up that have remained undisturbed for a long time. It can interfere with patterns of rigidity and bring to light areas of darkness. Anything that keeps us from living in the moment is exposed for our consideration.¹⁶

This kind of experience can be quite disconcerting, but according to systems theory, it's exactly the kind of experience we need to break out of static patterns and stale life situations. In practical terms, it can create the kind of tension (disturbance) that makes us abandon patterns that no longer serve us. The old system falls apart so that it can re-assemble itself on a higher level of functioning. Systems theorist Ilya Prigogine calls this experience of loss *dissipation*, and considers it necessary and healthy for growth.^{17,18}

¹⁵ This material is from chapters 1 and 5 in *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (1992), and this book is the most interesting one I've read on the topic.

¹⁶ It's at this point that openness is critical, because in its absence, what is revealed to us usually elicits too much emotional reactivity to be useful.

¹⁷ See Wheatley, pp. 19-20, for more.

What happens after we dissipation can be very interesting. When we really drop old patterns, the space we move into is full of uncertainty. To us, it can seem like chaos. But it's possible to view it as simply an undefined space. Since the old stuff has gone and nothing new has yet arrived to take its place, anything can happen! We're unencumbered, sitting in a space of infinite possibility. It's a very creative place to be, if only we can figure out how to create something out of nothing.

At this point in the journey, working with the enneagram can provide a compass to help us find our way. In addition to revealing our core motivation—which is a lot—it also shows us what flows out of that core: the emotional qualities, mental processes, behavioral tendencies and ethical priorities. So it can tell us a lot about the inner resources we have to work with.¹⁹

The only catch is that these resources exactly don't come with an instruction book, so the only way we learn how to use them is through playful experimentation. We have to try things out, to work with the energies of the point the way that an artist works within a medium. We see which color combinations works and which ones don't. We bump against the limits of the medium, finding out what we can and can't do. Sometimes we create something we don't like and have to destroy creation and start over again. If we're lucky, we learn to laugh about our mistakes, and the laughter heals the pain. Then we pick ourselves up off the floor and try again.

Seeing our enneagram point as a creative resource doesn't mean idealizing it. Discovering its limits is as important as realizing its potentials, because its these limits that define the space within which we work. Even so, we often struggle with and against the limits, just as an artist struggles with the materials he uses to create an original work. It's this struggle to reconcile the limits with the potentials that produces the creative tension that we need for genuine transformation.

Reasons to Work with the Enneagram from a Systems Perspective

I find the systems perspective an extremely useful model for looking at the world. As I've tried to show above, I see particular advantages for using a systems approach for working with the enneagram. First, systems theory offers a very broad framework for any kind of transformational work, including work with the enneagram. Second, the systems perspective is particularly well-suited to the enneagram system, because the enneagram is such a great example of everything that systems theory stands for: intelligence, interconnectedness, openness, and dynamism. Third, the systems perspective offers an alternative to a model that focuses primarily on the limitations and pathologies associated with personality dynamics. Fourth, because systems theory is a cutting-edge scientific philosophy, applying its insights to the enneagram links our explorations to innovative work in systems-oriented fields such as

¹⁸ One thing to note is that the way this kind of dissipation works depends a lot on the openness of the person or system in question. All systems are subject to change. But open systems tend to experience a much more graceful transition from old to new than closed systems.

¹⁹ Everyone is subject to the influence of their enneagram point, regardless of whether they know about the enneagram. But once we become aware of our core motivation, we're able to engage with the energy of the point in a much more conscious, intelligent fashion. We can become active partners instead of passive receivers.

quantum theory²⁰, field theory²¹, chaos theory²², integrative medicine²³, evolutionary theory²⁴, evolutionary cosmology²⁵, deep ecology²⁶, and management science²⁷.

The enneagram is a wonderful tool for self-discovery. But it currently lacks the kind of theoretical framework it needs to be a tool for the twenty-first century. I see systems theory as offering that kind of framework. I hope I've presented enough material on the topic to convince others to investigate this question for themselves.

²⁰ See, e.g., *The Tao of Physics* (1975) by Fritjof Capra, and *Mysticism and the New Physics* (1993), by Michael Talbot.

²¹ See the works of Rupert Sheldrake (e.g., *A New Science of Life*, 1995) and *The Living Energy Universe* (1999), by Gary Schwartz and Linda Russek; *The Field* (2003), by Lynne McTaggart.

²² See Ilya Prigogine's *Order out of Chaos* (1984).

²³ See Paul Pearsall's *The Heart's Code* (1999) and Dan Siegel's *The Developing Mind* (1999).

²⁴ See *Beyond Reductionism: New Perspectives in the Life Sciences* (1969), ed. by Arthur Koestler and J.R. Smithies. These are the proceedings of a 1968 conference organized by Arthur Koestler which drew together many luminaries, including Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, F.A. Hayek, Victor Frankel, and Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (the founder of the systems theory approach).

²⁵ See the works of Ken Wilber (e.g., *A Brief History of Everything*, 2000); *The Reflexive Universe* (1976), by Arthur M. Young; and *The Whispering Pond: A Personal Guide to the Emerging Vision of Science* (1996), by Ervin Laszlo.

²⁶ See *The Web of Life* (1996), by Fritjof Capra.

²⁷ See Margaret Wheatley's, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992).