

# Let's Depathologize the Enneagram!

by Susan Rhodes, May 2009

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Since the moment I first read about the enneagram and its nine points, I was intrigued. Here was a system—finally!—that delineated individual differences among people by referencing their inner motivation, not just their outer behavior. As a cognitive psychologist, I'd always been interested in individual differences, but no system I studied in school had the explanatory power of the enneagram. Needless to say, I was hooked.

I was blessed to be able to locate myself pretty easily on the circle (as a 4w5), and I avidly read everything I could to understand more deeply what this position signified. Then I began attending enneagram conferences and trainings, all of which added to the depth and breadth of my understanding. I was able to see things about myself I'd never seen before. I was able to understand and accept other people in a new way. I was able to synthesize different teachings and begin to play with my own ideas about the enneagram and how it worked. I started talking with enneagram friends and writing articles to help me clarify my ideas.

I was amazed at the power and beauty of this symbol-based system. But I was also surprised by one thing: the negative orientation of the field. Although I've heard material on the enneagram presented in many different ways, the one thing most presentations seem to share (to one degree or another) is a negative view of ordinary human nature.

It's easy to see—just look at all the references to ego fixations, defense mechanisms, sins, vices, traps, patterns of avoidance, pattern of childhood wounding, and DSM-IV classifications. This pathological view of ordinary human nature is pervasive. Authors speak of the everyday “personality self” as asleep, unconscious, damaged, fixated, separated from “essence,” or unreal. Each enneagram type has its own special set of negative descriptors, as well. We've all seen them; they're ubiquitous.

It's also common to see the enneagram itself equated with the enneagram of personality; many people don't really bother to distinguish the two. They're so used to thinking of the enneagram as a way to describe neurosis that they equate the enneagram (which is a structure) with one of its applications.

Although we hear that there are 108 enneagrams, it's easy to forget this when reading books or articles about the

enneagram. This is because one particular enneagram—the enneagram of personality fixations—receives the lion's share of the attention. The result is that personality itself becomes equated with fixated personality.

## The MBTI & Enneagram: a Difference in Perspective

The idea that personality is intrinsically fixated strikes me as odd. I've always been interested in personality, but I've just thought of it as one way to look at human individuality. When I was in training as a research psychologist, my studies focused on the process of human cognition and perception. I was particularly interested in how cognition and perception were affected by individual differences. I looked at variables such as gender, age, personality, and culture. Personality was of particular interest.

The main vehicle I used for looking at personality was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). I didn't use it in formal research, just for self-study. I really found it helpful for sorting out some questions that had been puzzling me about my work life. I'd often found it hard to work at ordinary 9-to-5 office jobs—they just drove me up the wall! I became restless and unproductive; all I could think of was going home. When I read the description of my MBTI type (INFP), it was a big relief. I'd been pushing myself to do the kind of work for which I was completely unsuited.

There were many things I liked about the MBTI. One of the things I liked the most was its value-neutral tone. I tend to be self-critical, so I didn't need to hear more bad news when reading about my MBTI type. What I did need was insight, and that's exactly what I got. Discovering the MBTI was a liberating experience.

I was aware of other personality tests that tests are not so value-neutral, for example, the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory). The MMPI is specifically designed to detect pathological tendencies in people. While I suppose a test like this has its place, it's hard to get enthusiastic about it—such tests can be so easily misused. I know from personal experience, because it happened to my dad. He was required to take the MMPI at his workplace for no particularly good reason. The experience left a bad taste in his mouth.

I never liked the idea of looking at personality as way to measure pathology. I liked looking at personality as a way to explore individual differences. That's why the MBTI appealed to me so much.

When I encountered the enneagram, I tried to use the MBTI personality descriptions as a reference point for enneagram descriptions. But I found this almost impossible to do. It wasn't because the two systems had a different number of types or even a different way of determining the types. It was because the enneagram descriptions read more like "neurosis types" than personality types. They seemed to reflect such a pessimistic philosophy about human nature.<sup>1</sup>

However, it didn't take long for me to realize that it was possible to use the enneagram to look at individual differences in a value-neutral way. It would just require a readjustment in perspective.

I say "just," but it's actually quite a task to separate the core information in a system from the interpretive context in which it was created. I had to do this for my doctoral dissertation, and found it quite difficult.

But I felt that if I could do this with the enneagram, I would have a way to study differences in core motivation from a value-neutral perspective. So the result was definitely worth the effort!

## The Energy of the Enneagram

It's the ability to account for core motivation that makes the enneagram unique as a personality system. In fact, it makes the enneagram unique as a tool for any sort of in-depth inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

I see core motivation as an energy which is full of purpose, but independent of personality. This may seem like an odd idea, because most people are used to thinking of motivation as a function of personality.

But I don't see core motivation this way. I see it as an energy of intentionality that moves *through* the personality, rather than as an energy that emanates *from* the personality. Viewed from this transpersonal perspective, the enneagram is not an intellectual system, but an energetic resource. Each point of view shows us a differentiated form of this energy.

From this perspective, both the enneagram itself and all of the points of view are fundamentally positive in nature, where positive is defined as life-producing or enhancing.

And this is exactly how I experience the enneagram—as an source of dynamic energy. Once I began to experience the enneagram as an energetic system, I knew it was a lot more than an abstract theory or self-improvement program.

It was first and foremost an energetic phenomenon. I saw that the enneagram itself exists apart from any of its possible applications—that it's an active source of intelligent energy.

I think I came to this conclusion mostly as the result of participating in enneagram workshops or retreats;<sup>3</sup> the energy of the enneagram seems to be amplified in a group setting.

At an enneagram event, all sorts of interesting things happen, many of them in odd or unexpected ways. There are funny synchronicities and little "ah-ha!" moments. During panel discussions or group exercises, the energy in the room can be so intense that it's almost palpable. When someone on a panel experiences a genuine opening, it can open the hearts of everyone present. What I've experienced at moments like this is more than communion—it's Grace.

I don't categorize the energy of the points in terms of higher vs. lower, better or worse, fixated or unfixated. For me, there's no bright line separating good energy from bad energy. There's just energy, period.

I see the nature of this energy as motivational, but as I mentioned earlier, I don't see the motivation as personal. Although it affects all levels of the psyche—including the personality level—it's not actually a *function* of any one level, including the personality level. The personality-as-psyche certainly colors the way that this energy is expressed, but it can't actually generate the energy that flows through it—it can only focus or filter it. That's why, in the enneagram system, core motivation is where the juice is at.

The more I focus on the enneagram from a "core energy" perspective, the juicier I find it. I particularly like its positive orientation. It's a relief to think of the points of view as sources of energy instead of fixation. It's intriguing to look at the energy patterns and how they relate to one another. It's satisfying to take what I see and be able to apply it in very practical ways in my own life. Working with the enneagram in this way is delightfully stimulating!

I'm not the first to propose working with the enneagram in a more positive way. Paula Raines wrote a piece for *EM* (July/Aug. 2001) in which she argued for a more positive approach for characterizing the types: "During my nearly 14 years of teaching the enneagram, one of the most consistent critiques I have encountered is its negative focus" (p. 17). She suggested that our field could benefit from the contributions of the field of Positive Psychology, which focuses on human strengths instead of human weakness. Although her proposal elicited some reader support, it didn't seem to make a lasting impact on the field.

I'd like the present article to avoid a similar fate. That's why I'm trying to do more in this article than simply call for change. I'm trying to lay out a broader vision of the enneagram and to share my experience of the enneagram as a positive energy source.

## Linguistic Confusion

It's tempting to think of the negativity associated with the enneagram as a language problem. Cynthia Miller took this position in an article she wrote a couple of years ago for the *EM* in which she says that what the enneagram field lacks is a "precise language for describing exactly what the Enneagram is and how it really meshes with the human psyche" (p. 1, Jan. 2004).

I agree. But I think the negativity is not just a language problem—it's a content problem. I taught technical writing for 14 years, and in my experience, negative language almost always reflects negative thinking. This means that you can't just "patch up" the language and solve the problem. You have to look at the thinking that gives rise to the language.

With this in mind, I'd like to take a brief look at the basic paradigm that shapes the thinking within our field. I see at least four problems with this paradigm. One of them is its negative outlook, but there are three related problems that also require discussion: an insufficient breadth of vision, a divisive way of conceptualizing the human psyche, and an overall lack of conceptual coherence.

I'll get to each of these problems in a moment, but first I'd like to talk generally about the nature of paradigms and how the enneagram community came to inherit a paradigm that's in need of revision.

## An Inherited Paradigm

A paradigm is a body of operating assumptions that form a more-or-less coherent whole. It organizes the thinking around a given topic or in a given field. Paradigms embody very basic ideas—foundational ideas—that shape the thinking of practitioners in the field. They determine the standards by which new ideas are judged. As such, dominant paradigms are extremely influential.

Ill-conceived, unexamined or incoherent paradigms tend to block progress in a field while intelligently-conceived paradigms promote it. When someone puts forth an idea that the dominant paradigm of the field can't or won't account for, that idea is usually judged to be either ludicrous, heretical, or meaningless. That's why it's useful

for the people in the field to be consciously aware of the paradigm under which they're operating. Then they're in a position to facilitate the kind of paradigm that allows for the infusion of new, revitalizing ideas.

The paradigm of the enneagram community is a little peculiar. It's peculiar in that it's mainly rooted in the work of one person, Oscar Ichazo, as interpreted by one other person, Claudio Naranjo. Most of the leading teachers of the enneagram were originally students of Naranjo's. He taught his students, and they in turn taught their students. With each succeeding generation of enneagram teachers, the enneagram community grew in numbers.

However, the core teachings didn't change very much. People added to them, but the basic paradigm remained intact. I just finished indexing all the back issues of the *Enneagram Monthly*, and about the only articles I saw which have a radically different perspective were those focusing on Gurdjieff's process enneagram.<sup>4</sup>

As I mentioned above, I see four key problems with the current paradigm: it's too negative in orientation, too narrow in scope, too psychologically divisive, and insufficiently coherent. Let's take a brief look at each of these propositions.

**Proposition #1: The current paradigm is unnecessarily negative.** The negativity of the current paradigm is the most obvious of its problems, which is why I've made it the centerpiece of my discussion thus far. As I've already mentioned, the pessimism reflected in the current paradigm can be seen in the language used to describe the personality self—words like *false*, *unreal*, *fixated*, *compulsive* and *distorted*. I've also mentioned that this kind of negative language does not reflect poor language skills on the part of people who work with the enneagram. It reflects negative thinking.

Where does this negative thinking come from? Does it reflect a negative attitude on the part of individuals within the enneagram community? I doubt it. If we look at the language used in the MBTI community, we don't see this kind of negativity. And yet there's quite a bit of overlap between the communities; more than a few people who work with the MBTI also work with the enneagram.

I attribute the negativity of our field to the dominant paradigm that governs it, a paradigm which is completely different than that of the MBTI field. Enneagram workers pick up this idea that there's something wrong with the personality self because it's deeply embedded in the original

teachings on the personality enneagram.<sup>5</sup>

Why is the personality so terrible? Because it fails to meet some artificial standard of perfection? Because it's not the highest or purest aspect of the psyche?

By definition, "personality" is that part of the psyche that functions at a personal level. This is the level of the body, a body that exists on a plane where objects appear to be separate and discrete.

The body acts as a container for consciousness, a consciousness which is necessarily limited in scope. If it were not contained, we would become either crazy or one of the "ungrounded Holy." That's why spiritual work has to be approached with caution—because work done to expand consciousness on other levels of the psyche can potentially destabilize consciousness on *this* level.

But it's easy to take our psychological stability for granted and see ordinary consciousness simply as a form of limitation. Since most of us dislike limitation, we may be predisposed to dislike that part of us that's limited. We may think that it's the personality self that stands between us and psychological wholeness or spiritual enlightenment. But it's possible to see personality in a very different way—as the vehicle that gives us the very grounding we need in order to safely experience higher states of consciousness.

What's really holding us back? Is it our personality self or our dislike of limits? What if we were to stop struggling against the limits? How would that change the way we experience our personality type?

It's true that our type both limits and biases our perception. But is even *this* a bad thing? Artists working within a given artistic medium have to allow themselves to be subject to certain limits and biases. So do researchers who use the scientific method. Limitation equals containment, and containment can be good for incubating new ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Could it be that the container of "type" gives us an opportunity to have an in-depth experience of life from a particular perspective? While we may blame our sense of limitation on our type, that which limits us also concentrates our attention, thus enabling us to "specialize" in a particular way of seeing the world. By looking at type merely as limitation, we are we missing out on the opportunities it offers? Are we choosing to see the glass as half-empty when we could see it a half-full?

**Proposition #2: The current paradigm is too narrow in scope.** The narrowness of the current paradigm is reflected in the way that key ideas are conceptualized. It starts with the narrowing of the way we conceptualize the

enneagram itself, so that it becomes identified solely as a system for explaining personality. The idea of personality is in turn narrowed, so that it refers solely to a fixated pattern of ego defenses.

This kind of narrowed thinking is a typical characteristic of paradigms governing systems that were originally hidden or secret. For better or worse, secret teachings do not promote open systems. Even when the teachings are no longer secret, there can be a certain hesitancy on the part of people in the field to question key tenets or ideas. It's often unclear which ideas are foundational and which are not. So it's common for people to take the conservative route of considering all the original ideas as equally important—and equally unassailable.

Initially, this way of working can help stabilize a fledgling field. It helps everybody working in the field to more or less "stay on the same page," at least where the most important issues are concerned. But in the long run, it leads to rigidity: the system remains "stuck in the past," because it cannot adapt to changing needs and conditions. Thinking becomes insular. Definitions for terms become literal and fossilized.

Once this happens, it becomes extremely difficult for anyone to introduce new ideas into the field. Creative thinking is inhibited. So is communication with people in related fields (because there's little common ground for discussion).

The way out of this dilemma is for each of us to very carefully and thoughtfully consider which of the ideas in our current paradigm is foundational and which is not. Cultivating a spirit of open inquiry can help us to broaden our vision and deepen our understanding.

**Proposition #3: The current paradigm is psychologically divisive.** Not only does the current paradigm tend to foster negativity and narrow our vision, it actually discourages psychic integration. This is because of the way that it conceptualizes the relationship between higher and lower levels of psychic functioning.

The higher level of psychic functioning is home to the virtues, holy ideas, and essential self; the lower level is unfortunately stuck with the passions, fixations, and the personality self. Obviously, in this scheme, "higher is better."

I understand where the "higher is better" idea comes from, but I see it as divisive, dualistic, and outdated. Not only that—it's unfashionable! Hierarchy has been replaced

by holarchy, soul damnation by soul retrieval. Asceticism is out, bodywork is in. We no longer punish people for their sins, but try to heal them of their wounds.

I'm not being flip or ironic here. I'm just using humor to point out just how old-fashioned the "higher is better" idea really is.

I don't really believe that most individuals who work with the enneagram personally believe that "higher is better." I think that they've just never realized the full implications of the enneagram model that they're using. If you ask most enneagram workers what they value, they'll say integration and wholeness. But how can a model so divisive actually promote psychological integration?

**Proposition #4: The current paradigm is not very coherent.** What this means is that the current paradigm doesn't really "hang together" very well. There are too many theoretical loose ends. I think this is because the inherited teachings are incomplete, especially if we look at what's actually been written down.

I think this is why there are so many competing theories in the field regarding topics like the role of the instincts, the nature of the subtypes, the function of the centers, the role of the arrows, the composition of the Hornebian triads, the best way to determine enneagram type, the origins of enneagram type, and the origins of the enneagram itself.

I think that a certain amount of theoretical chaos is unavoidable at this point. It's simply the consequence of the field being relatively new. In some ways, we could say that, whatever its shortcomings, the current paradigm is perfect in a relative sense (much like our personality selves?).

Despite my critique, I still see the current paradigm as a "good enough" paradigm, even if it's not perfect. Despite its shortcomings, it provided a basic framework for working with the enneagram. It helped stabilize the field during its early years, which has enabled the field to grow and mature. In short, it's been good enough to get us where we are today.

Still, I doubt that it will remain "good enough" forever, especially if we don't examine it a little more closely to see what's actually there. In this article, I tried to point out problem areas and share my perspectives on the nature of the problems. Much more could be said about each of the four problems I discussed, especially the last two. However, my purpose in this short article isn't to present a watertight argument for my views. It's to raise questions and provoke discussion.

## Final Remarks

My comments in this article are pretty direct and to the point, so I want to say that it's not meant to be an attack on anyone's ideas or way of working. I have enormous respect for the work done to date in this field and for the trailblazers who made it happen. It's just that I think the time has come to take a look at where we've been and where we're going.

The enneagram field has gone from nonexistence to worldwide recognition in just 35 years. That's pretty amazing. But such rapid growth has exacted a toll, and I think we're just now beginning to see what it is: a growth in numbers without a corresponding growth in subtlety of understanding.

At this point, I see the field as now somewhat overextended and in need of deepening. Yes, a lot of us now know about the enneagram. But what exactly do we know? How studied is our understanding?

I'd really like to see this field both expand its horizons and deepen its foundations. I'd like to see it move beyond the narrow confines of a pathologically-oriented paradigm to one that's broad in scope, value-neutral, vertically integrated, and theoretically coherent.<sup>8</sup>

Let's do it—let's de-pathologize the enneagram! Let's look at what's really basic to the system and what's not. Let's open the field up and stop apologizing for the fact that we have a personality. Let's find ways to work creativity with the energies of our point of view. What does it matter that we have foibles and funny traits? Everybody else does, too! We're all in the same boat, aren't we? (Hoping for Enlightenment but often having to settle for re-runs of *Survivor*—yikes!)

Maybe I'm crazy, but I really see some advantages in learning to like myself as I am right now (instead of waiting around for the new improved version!). Does this sound appealing to anybody else?

*Susan Rhodes is a cognitive psychologist whose interests include narrative psychology, transpersonal psychology, systems theory, creativity theory, and scientific discourse. She lives in Seattle and writes books exploring the many faces of the enneagram from a depathologized perspective.*

*Web site: [www.enneagramdimensions.net](http://www.enneagramdimensions.net).*

## Endnotes

1 I'm aware of the argument put forth by Pat Wyman (see *EM*, Nov. '97), that the MBTI describes "normal" functioning while the enneagram describes fixated functioning. I can't say I agree. I think they describe exactly the same thing, except that the MBTI describes the personality in terms of behavior while the enneagram does so in terms of core motivation. I see Wyman's theory as a valiant attempt to reconcile a value-neutral system with one that lacks this neutrality.

2 Science advances by looking at effects and trying to determine their causes. The enneagram does just the opposite: it presents us with the nine root causes (motivations) and invites us to determine the effects of those causes. From a scientific perspective, the idea that there's a system with the ability to define a phenomenon in terms of its underlying cause or motivation is revolutionary. I don't know of any other system that has this ability. Working from root causes to effects is so different from the way that science works that something like the enneagram doesn't really fit into any current scientific paradigm. But that's a topic for a different paper!

3 I'm sure other people experience the same thing I do but I don't recall ever seen anyone associate the atmosphere at these events with the energy of the enneagram itself.

4 I should note, however, that *EM* authors vary a great deal in the degree to which they're actively enthusiastic about the dominant paradigm, especially its negative focus. Articles least likely to reflect a negative perspective were authored by people in fields that encourage either a value-neutral or positive approach, e.g., business management, consulting, executive coaching, graphology, medicine, architecture, systems theory, transpersonal psychology, and body work.

5 If I ever had any doubts about the negative view of the ego/personality self, my doubts were vanquished after I attended Claudio Naranjo's workshop at the Washington D.C. IEA conference in 2004, in which he asked all of us in the workshop to imagine that the ego self was sitting in the chair across from us. We were supposed to severely chastise the ego. The result was a lot of noise and negative emoting that disturbed everyone in the neighboring conference rooms. What purpose is served by this kind of "ego-bashing" exercise?

6 I talk more about the idea of limits as a container for artistic expression in my article "The Enneagram of Life Paths"; it can be found on my web site ([www.enneagramdimensions.net](http://www.enneagramdimensions.net)).

7 This scheme is of course derived from G.I. Gurdjieff's teachings about the energy centers, which makes it hard to criticize. Gurdjieff was a great thinker and teacher, as well as the original presenter of the enneagram (albeit for a different purpose than Ichazo). But Gurdjieff was working in a different era with a select group of people doing a particular kind of spiritual work—work that took place in the context of a teacher/disciple relationship. Gurdjieff was not attempting to present the personality enneagram to the public at large in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

I think it's Gurdjieff's outlook (or at least his outer demeanor) that may be the single most influential factor behind the negative outlook of the enneagram community, as he was known for his cutting remarks about the nature of ordinary human consciousness. When Ichazo became aware of Gurdjieff's work on the centers and enneagram, he seemed to have incorporated it into his enneagram theory, which was then passed along to Naranjo, and so on down the line.

But I think it's quite possible that these remarks may have been to produce an effect, rather than as statements of truth. Gurdjieff took his general approach from the Sufis, and Sufi lore is full of stories of teachers "tricking" their students in various ways, saying or doing whatever is necessary to advance them (see *Daughter of Fire* by Irina Tweedie, for a detailed account of the day-to-day interactions between a Sufi sheikh and his disciple). Also, as an Eight, Gurdjieff may have been particularly inclined to motivate his students in a forceful manner.

8 When I advocate depathologizing the enneagram, I'm not saying we shouldn't talk about things like defense mechanisms or use the enneagram to help with diagnosing psychological disorders. I'm just saying we shouldn't let pathology be what actually defines the enneagram itself. The enneagram is not at its core a system for looking at pathology—it's a system for looking at life and its processes.