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Nor is it any wonder that we all know the experience of the “train” of our type having left the station with us aboard for the ride, even after years of Enneagram work. The particular emotional system corresponding to our triad is both primal and primed for response. When some facet of a new experience suggests an association with previous emotionally charged experience, attention automatically begins scanning selectively for evidence that “fits,” and tells us that we need to DO SOMETHING. This is all exactly as the systems evolved to ensure.

The good news is that neurobiology provides abundant insight into the processes of growth that take place as we begin to work seriously with our type, and it gives us good reason to pursue this hard work. In learning to bring these powerful, rapid, primal emotional signals to conscious awareness, and in following other than our habitual paths of reaction, we actually create new neural circuits that, with practice and repeated use, establish in our biological wiring an expanded, more varied, and more nuanced repertoire of emotional and behavioral response. The neurobiological term for this process is “neuroplasticity,” and there is now abundant evidence that our brains remain “plastic” and eminently teachable until we die (Siegel, 1999).

I find it extremely satisfying that there is plausible science beneath virtually everything we learn in working with the Enneagram. The convergence of two entirely separate paths of inquiry into the nature of human experience, one based in science and the other in experiential holistic inquiry, lends considerable credibility to both. I also find greater clarity in a view of the Enneagram informed by neuroscience. The adult human account of emotional experience – which is the primary source for most of what we know about the undercurrents of emotion beneath our type structure – is always tangled with more or less relevant neocortical overlay. Looking at the Enneagram triads through the relatively clearer lens of neurobiological science and animal models helps me parse the emotional energy and mental habits that constitute type.

Perhaps most important, I am able to feel more compassion – for myself as well as others – when I think of type in this way. For example, an account of the body types as being rooted most deeply in emotional reaction to a sense of restraint or thwarting of the pursuit of needs and desires rings more clearly to my life experience than the much more complicated (and to be honest, often confusing) phenomenon we call “anger” in Enneagram circles. Similarly it has helped me to understand the emotional dimensions of the other two triads, and to hold more compassion for them. The heart triad becomes clearer when I see it as grounded in the innate system for monitoring our primal human need for connection and mirroring. Similarly, the head triad makes more sense when viewed as grounded in a burst of emotion that says “ATTENTION...SOMETHING DOES NOT MAKE SENSE.”





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