THE POSITIVE ENNEAGRAM: A NEW APPROACH TO THE NINE PERSONALITY TYPES

By Susan Rhodes

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Reviewed by Dave Hall with Katy Taylor

The title of Susan Rhodes's book clearly announces both the focus and the scope of her project. The author is taking aim at what she perceives to be a pervasively negative approach to the Enneagram, and she promises to offer a new approach that will reclaim the Enneagram's positive potential. She takes issue, in particular, with approaches that she believes "pathologize" our Enneagram types, treating them merely as neurotic distortions or fixations and overlooking their vast potential for healthy expression. In a brief overview of how she believes this negative view of the Enneagram came about, Rhodes traces a line of influence from Sigmund Freud to Oscar Ichazo to Claudio Naranjo, arguing that a Freudian zeitgeist preoccupied with personality fixations imbued Ichazo's work with its prejudices, which were then passed on to Naranjo and, through him, to the rest of the field. "Because everyone who learned the Enneagram received more or less the same teaching," the author concludes, "this view of the types as distorted versions of the self became widespread" (pp. 2 and 15-16).

We do not wish to quarrel with the author's perception that too much of the literature on the Enneagram underemphasizes the healthier manifestations of the types. This is largely a matter of subjective preference. For example, when we read Claudio Naranjo's *Character and Neurosis*, which is the only other Enneagram book to which Rhodes specifically refers in her own book, we find the author's unvarnished portraits of the more painful and distorted aspects of our personalities to be bracingly candid—though we are also glad it is not the only book on the subject.

We would like to suggest, however, that the body of writings and teachings in the Enneagram world is considerably more diverse and multifaceted than Rhodes allows for. First, it is not completely accurate to say that everyone who studied the Enneagram received the same teaching. For example, the early work of Don Riso was done largely independently of Naranjo's influence, and there are substantive differences in approach and interpretation between the different lineages that grew out of these two writers' works and teachings. As students of both Don Riso and Russ Hudson, who began working together not long after Riso's first work was published, we are undoubtedly especially prone to notice when this lineage seems to be overlooked in Rhodes's characterizations of the Enneagram literature. In this review, when we draw on the Riso-Hudson corpus

for counter-examples, we do not mean to imply that these are the only possible counter-examples out there. They are just the ones we can draw upon the most readily and knowledgeably.

A second point is that even among the circle of Naranjo's students, there was considerable variety in how the teachings were received and transmitted. Helen Palmer and A. H. Almaas, two prominent members of this early Enneagram circle, went in very different directions in their subsequent writings. Particularly relevant to the current discussion is Almaas's *Facets of Unity: The Enneagram of Holy Ideas*, which explores at length some of the central issues that Rhodes raises in offering her own approach. We would go so far as to suggest that certain core features of Rhodes's approach to the question of ego vs. Essence are already mapped out, in considerable detail, in Almaas's treatment of the Enneagram. Again, we are not implying that Almaas is the sole relevant source here. It is just that, as with the Riso-Hudson corpus, his is a body of work we know in some depth.

A third point is that Rhodes may be over-generalizing the influence of Freudian thinking on the genesis of the modern personality Enneagram. Riso and Hudson's *Personality Types*, for one example, draws substantially on the object-relations theories of W. R. D. Fairbairn, who proposed an interpersonal and relational model that departed in significant ways from the Freudian model of individual energetic drives and stage-dependent fixations.

Because Rhodes starts from a premise that we believe overlooks much of the diversity in the existing literature, she often seems to take a circuitous course in her arguments, working in a kind of orbit around unacknowledged interpretations and discoveries, and winding up at the end proposing a novel approach that has actually already been worked out by other writers. A passage from the Introduction serves as an illustrative example. In it, Rhodes is arguing against a view of type that she believes hearkens back to "the Freudian notion that adult neuroses are the result of getting stuck (fixated) at an early stage of childhood development due to some sort of trauma" (p. 2). She begins the passage with a paraphrase of the view against which she wants to argue:

> This idea is often expressed in more spiritualized language as the hypothesis that ego obscures Essence. The argument goes as follows:
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> We are born in Essence—in a state of Oneness with the essential self. But we inevitably lose this Oneness as the result of wounds received in infancy and early childhood. The result is the development of a false (ego) self whose nature is determined by the kind of wound we experienced. The Enneagram is said to show us the nine kinds of false selves that develop as a result, each of which is associated with a cognitive fixation, an emotional passion or sin, and a psychological defense mechanism designed to bolster the false ego (p. 3).

In the course of her book, Rhodes argues in particular against two elements of the above description: a) the assumption that our Enneagram type is not inborn, but rather is caused by early childhood traumas; and b) the portrayal of ego and Essence as either/or states. Rhodes offers competing interpretations as part of her "new approach" to the Enneagram. It is not clear here exactly with whom the author is arguing. The language and tone of the paragraph seem to imply that this is a standard teaching on ego and Essence and on how our type is formed, but it bears little resemblance to the teachings that have formed our understanding of the Enneagram. Regarding the first issue—whether type is inborn or is caused by early childhood experiences—our studies have led us to believe that this is contested terrain, with various writers and teachers coming down on both sides of the question. On the side of construing our type as inborn, as does Rhodes, examples include Riso and Hudson, Almaas, and, it would seem from a recent article in this journal, David Daniels. (See Betsy Maxon and David Daniels, "Personality Differentiation of Identical Twins Reared Together," in the 2008 *Enneagram Journal.*)

As for the second issue, the portrayal of ego and Essence as either/or states, we would cite both Almaas and Riso-Hudson as prominent counter-examples. In *Facets of Unity*, Almaas explores in great depth the relationship between our ego-structured personalities and our essential natures. He does not describe ego merely as a "false self" that takes over when we "lose" Oneness or Essence. He acknowledges, on the contrary, that our development of ego selves is an inevitable, natural, and even helpful process in our overall psychological and spiritual growth. We would not survive for long if we did not develop strong, intact egos. He also understands that the overall process involves, at some point in our lives, learning to experience ourselves with more direct and simple awareness, inquiring into and working through the ego structures and dynamics that naturally developed in our formative years. The goal is not to somehow discard a "false self" in order to regain Essence, but to gradually metabolize the ego structures that both support our development and obscure the essence of what we are developing. In a similar vein, Riso and Hudson have worked out a complex and dynamic model, called the Levels of Development, which describes in detail how the relationship between our ego structures and our essential natures changes and modulates along a continuum, as we go from open contact with Presence into more and more contracted states of ego-reactivity (see *The Wisdom of the Enneagram,* pp. 75-87).

We feel it is important to provide these detailed counter-examples, because the above passage in Rhodes's book serves as the rhetorical premise for her ensuing argument, and readers who accept this premise without reservation might find themselves beguiled by the author's next rhetorical move:

> This notion has a certain romantic appeal, and is the basis for a "back to Eden" mentality which has been the hallmark of romantics for at least two centuries. The language of the argument varies, but the

> basic theme is always the same: that each of us used to be in touch with something wonderful with which we have lost contact (usually because of gaining knowledge, rationality, or individuality) and which can be restored only if we can somehow return to this idyllic state (p. 3).

This passage's tone certainly has its own appeal. We might find ourselves enjoying the general atmosphere of intellectual jousting. Naïve opponents are being unhorsed. Iconic dragons are being slain. But if we notice that this second paragraph is largely a tendentious caricature of the first paragraph, which itself bears only a tenuous relationship to the actual body of teachings on the subject, the appeal may begin to wane. The effect starts to seem less like jousting and more like watching someone shadow-boxing in front of a mirror. The author is throwing some vigorous punches, but it's not clear where they are supposed to land.

The next paragraph is essentially a *reductio ad absurdum*, equating the desire to restore the "idyllic state" of essence with a wish to regress:

> There's only one problem—it doesn't work. Returning to an earlier stage in development doesn't restore people to paradise, it just restores them to a state of dependency. This is assuming that we could actually pull this off, which is doubtful (p.3).

This is one of many places in the book where we wish the author had cited specific sources for the position against which she is arguing. In our reading of the Enneagram literature, we have never encountered a recommendation to return to an earlier stage of development in order to regain our Essence. We're not claiming to be certain it isn't out there somewhere—nor do we claim to be exhaustive scholars of the Enneagram literature—it is just that we would appreciate being pointed in the right direction so we could evaluate the matter for ourselves.

If we turn back to sources we do know on the subject, we find a radically different picture. Almaas, to continue the example we have been using, does not recommend some kind of regression to an infantile state, before we were "corrupted" by experience. Rather, he describes a transformative process of inner development, in which as *knowledgeable, rational,* and fully *individuated* adults, we learn to inquire into our experience with a mindful, holding awareness that enables us to grow (forwards *not* backwards) into the essential selves that we never truly lost. Or, as Riso and Hudson most emphatically put it:

> The purpose of the Enneagram is not to help us get rid of our personality. . . . In fact, exactly the opposite is true. When we get in touch with our Essence, [our personality] becomes more transparent and flexible, something that helps us live rather than something that takes over our lives (*Wisdom*, pp. 29-30).

So it is with rather mixed feelings that we read Rhodes' concluding paragraph:

> I base my enneagram work on a different premise: the idea that we don't have to divest ourselves of personality, individuality, or ego in order to experience Essence. Individuality does not block Essence; it coexists with Essence. We have both an eternal (essential) self that does not change and an ever-evolving and highly idiosyncratic self which does change. These two selves are not really separate; they're just different aspects of the same self (p. 3).

We find ourselves very much in accord with the ideas expressed here. At the same time, we are puzzled by the author's presentation of these ideas as novel and as representing a decisive departure from existing teachings.

It's a shame that Rhodes spends so much time in this book framing her ideas in the form of combative arguments, because when she concentrates instead on her own process of inquiry, she often reveals an energetic and inventive mind. For example, I (Dave) enjoyed the chapter entitled "Nine Points in a Process," based on the Enneagram teachings that Gurdjieff presented to his students in the early part of the 20th century. (See P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* for an Enneagram lesson as remembered by one of Gurdjieff's most famous students from that time.) In her treatment of the "process Enneagram," Rhodes uses the homely example of inventing and constructing a newer and better wheelchair to show how the capacities and motivations of each type around the circumference of the Enneagram combine in a meaningful sequence to bring a project to completion.

I found real wisdom in Rhodes' teaching that, in order to come full circle with such a project, we need to "assimilate" our external accomplishment at the end, "transforming it into something *inside*—something that becomes part of *who we are*" (p. 161). This assimilation is represented by the move to Point Nine, and is a necessary step in a spiraling process whereby we prepare ourselves to give birth to the next idea or project.

Rhodes caps off this discussion with a useful discussion of the process of *transformation*. She argues "[which] always involves both *transcendence* (the ability to move beyond the physical plane) and *immanence* (the ability to anchor spiritual energy in the physical plane)" (p. 164). This is an important understanding, and it is felicitously expressed, but I found myself brought up short by her ensuing comment that "Most enneagram work emphasizes transcendence—specifically the transcendence of our enneagram type" (p. 164). This statement initially gave me pause because, in the absence of any reference to specific teachings, I found myself mostly thinking of the many stark counter-examples spread throughout the literature. But soon a more fundamental question also began to arise in my mind: Isn't it the whole point of this book to re-define our Enneagram type as a transcendent, purely "positive" energy? And doesn't this entail cutting our type off from its roots in the messy material and

physical plane? This is a question to which we will return and will try to answer at the end of this review.

Turning for now to another of the book's strong sections, I (Katy) admired the chapter on "Subtype Descriptions." I found such descriptions as the "Shaker-plain," "no-frills" Self-Preservation Ones on which you can rely as honest, upright, good friends, or the "social visionary," idea-networking, Social Sevens that tend to be "idealistically unconventional" to be spot-on. In fact, Rhodes's Sexual Nine description is one of the best portraits I have ever read of my Sexual Nine sister, whose "healing presence" is often felt and appreciated, but who can also lose herself in an energetic experience with others or nature, and can have trouble "emerging" as her own separate self.

It's apparent that Rhodes has a lively feel for the way our instincts interact with our type and has studied how they manifest in real life, as she writes about the instinctual variants of each type, not only with clarity but with a familiarity that invites the reader into their world. Imbued as I am by the Riso-Hudson teachings, I was pleasantly surprised by her comment that "the term 'sexual' actually describes [the sexual instinct] better than 'one-to-one' because it's more dynamic and elemental" (p. 108). The Riso-Hudson teachings on the instincts similarly stress the elemental, indeed animal roots of our instinctual energies, viewing the desire for one-to-one intimacy as a heart quality which can be expressed in three different instinctual forms.

There are other places in the discussion where I think Rhodes herself conflates type and instinct issues, as for example in her equating of the counterphobic Six with the Sexual Six, and of the phobic Six with the Self-Preservation and Social Six variants, but this is not unique to Rhodes and, in fact, can be found in Naranjo's original teachings. Likewise, her references to the "intensity" and "intimacy" of the sexual types seems, to me, to mix type and heart qualities into the instinct discussion in a potentially confusing way. I also can't help mentioning that, among her mostly very original and evocative names for the 27 "subtypes," she includes two (the Sexual One "Crusader" and the Self-Preservation Nine "Comfort-Seeker") that can already be found in *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* (though there the "Crusader" is the name for the Social One). Despite these reservations, however, I will refer back to Rhodes's descriptions in this chapter when I am in need of deeper understanding and clarity around the instinctual variants of the nine types.

We wish we could similarly endorse the chapter on "Subtype Arenas," but this we found to be one of the most puzzling sections of the entire book. Introducing this chapter, Rhodes makes an arresting pronouncement: "The term *subtype arena* is my invention. I created it in order to discuss the subtypes independently of type. There's no existing term for this purpose, so it was necessary to invent one" (p. 88).

It seems to us that a very suitable term already exists: the instincts. After all, virtually every Enneagram teacher acknowledges the instinctual basis of the "subtypes" (the Palmer-Daniels term) or the "instinctual variants" (the Riso-Hudson term). We found ourselves asking: Why does Rhodes feel it necessary to invent a whole new terminology here? We came up with two possible explanations:

First, it may be partly a matter of being deeply wedded to the terminology that calls the combination of our dominant instinct and our Enneagram type a "subtype." In the Riso-Hudson tradition, as Rhodes correctly points out, we refer to this combination as the "instinctual variant" (p. 86). We use this term because we see the instincts as *interacting with* type but fundamentally *independent* of type. In other words, by not referring to the instincts as "subtypes" in the first place, you preserve the ability to discuss them on their own, as autonomous realms of human energy. By committing herself to the terminology of "subtypes," which reduces the instincts to a sub-set of our Enneagram type, the author now has to take the terminology even one step further in order to get back to the original understanding she wants to emphasize: that these are autonomous domains of human motivation and behavior, not subsidiary aspects of our Enneagram type.

The second reason, we suspect, is more pertinent to the author's overall project of rehabilitating the Enneagram as a "positive" model: she wants to get the word "instinct" out of the teachings entirely. This becomes clear on page 87, where Rhodes argues that:

> The idea that the subtypes are instinctual in nature. . .[is] a pretty reductionist view of human nature. If we accept its premises, we're almost inevitably forced to accept the idea that actions which appear to be altruistic, innovative, or ethical are actually motivated by primitive impulses arising out of a turbulent and unredeemed id whose drives are unavoidably atavistic (selfish) in nature. . . . Thus, I do not view the three subtype arenas as instinctual in nature. I view them simply as three diverse arenas for human action.

While we have to give the author credit at this point for a truly novel approach to the subject, we are puzzled on a couple of counts. First, if the energies and motivations under discussion do not come from the instinctual realm, from where do they come? The author does not address this question directly. Second, why does she paint instinctual behavior in such dark and ominous hues?

The keys to answering this second question would seem to lie in Rhodes's reference to our "turbulent and unredeemed id" and in her assertion that the theory of instinct-based subtypes is "psychoanalytic in origin" (p. 87). In other words, she seems to be at pains to refute a neo-Freudian interpretation of instinctual behavior that would reduce all of our "higher" actions to "lower" impulses. If such an interpretation does indeed exist in the Enneagram world, we

would want to steer clear of it, too. But doesn't it make more sense to turn to the vast non-Freudian literature on the instincts than to banish the instinctual realm entirely? From the works of Charles Darwin to John Bowlby to Jaak Panksepp to the recent writings of Jack Killen and David Daniels—just to name a few prominent examples—there is a long tradition of exploring and appreciating the deep, body-based, animal wisdom of our instinctual energies.

For example, when we notice that our provisioning of the household with food and fuel for the coming winter bears a distinct resemblance to the actions of the squirrel gathering nuts in our backyard, must we feel diminished by the comparison? Does it mean that our foresighted behavior is "unavoidably atavistic (selfish) in nature?" Or can we feel a deep and thrilling kinship, not only with the squirrel in our yard but also with the long, long line of our ancestors reaching back toward the earliest forms of sentient life? This is the deep, body-based wisdom of the Self-Preservation Instinct.

When we unhesitatingly risk our own lives to protect our children from danger and harm, is this actually just rarefied self-interest, a blind reflex arising from our "selfish genes?" Or is there a compassionate wisdom at work here that is both rooted in primordial biological imperatives and capable of conscious, reflective, and self-aware human expression? This is the Social Instinct operating in a healthy human being.

Or, to use an example with which the author herself might have significant experience, when we finally bring a long and arduous creative endeavor to successful completion, may we not feel, in our state of exhausted satisfaction, something of what the salmon feels after expending its last ounce of energy to fertilize the waiting bed of eggs? For without the powerful instinctual drive to seek and create something beyond ourselves, rooted in the Sexual/Attraction Instinct, how would we ever bestir ourselves to undertake, much less bring to consummation, the protracted labors involved in writing and publishing a book on the Enneagram?

Rhodes's dismissal of an instinctual basis for these three arenas of motivation and behavior is all the more puzzling because, at one point in this same discussion, she describes the instincts as "primal energies designed to support life on the physical plane (by giving us the bodily intelligence we need to survive in a physical vehicle)" (p. 87). We could hardly improve on this formulation, but where it would lead us to embrace the role of the instincts in our spiritual growth, it somehow leads Rhodes, in the final analysis, to delete them from her spiritual equation.

Rhodes's language in the previous quotation brings us back to her own definition of transformation as including not only *transcendence* but also *immanence*, ("the ability to anchor spiritual energy on the physical plane") (p. 164). It also brings us to our biggest over-arching question in reading this book: What do we make of Rhodes's fundamental project here—the redefining of the Enneagram as "positive?"

The author has been developing and elaborating her vision of a "positive Enneagram" for several years now in her capacity as staff writer for the *Enneagram Monthly*. A passage from a recent article proves especially helpful, because in it Rhodes takes her case to its logical endpoint:

> Seeing the types as 100% positive involves more than simply "accentuating the positive" or "softening the negative." It means completely overturning the idea that type is any sort of fixation, vice, or ego defense—that it is the result of any sort of negative tendency or event in our lives. It means completely redefining the very idea of type as positive—as something we can totally embrace" (*The Enneagram Monthly*, September, 2009, p. 21).

The author's language in this passage helps us to get at the heart of what we find so puzzling, and so disturbing, in her project. To treat our Enneagram type as a simple, inert thing that can be labeled as either "positive" or "negative" is to risk reifying a complex and dynamic system to the point where it becomes effectively unrecognizable. Our type is not an electron or a proton, with a simple and unchanging valence of positive or negative. When we use the word "type," we are referring to a dynamic system and set of energies, probably inborn, that gives us certain identifiable and type-specific tendencies: for example, to be especially sensitive to certain Essential Qualities of Being, to feel motivation around certain basic fears and desires, to select certain things to attend to in our environment, and to develop more easily certain capacities and capabilities than others. If we are wise, we do indeed "totally embrace" all this, because it is the truth of who we are.

In fact, we want to embrace all this even if we experience these tendencies with some distortion. For example, as a Six, I (Dave) might feel unable in a given moment to fully access my type's Essential Qualities of Awakeness and Guidance. I might be reacting more than I realize to a basic fear of being without a reliable orientation. I might be selecting potential danger signals out of my environment to the exclusion of more supportive signals I am overlooking. Thus, I may be developing my capacity to be vigilant at the expense of my capacity to trust. But if this is the truth of who I am in the moment, I do not want to reject it because I have decided it is "negative."

To reject the truth of my experience in this way would be to enslave myself to a crippling dualism: everything I enjoy about myself and my type I call "positive" and embrace, while everything I find challenging and painful in my experience of my type I call "negative" and reject. Indeed, the author takes it a step further: none of the painful stuff even exists—or if it does, it has nothing to do with our type structure. Isn't this, finally, to come down squarely on the side of transcendence and to reject entirely the complementary capacity she calls immanence?

We are happy to note, in this regard, that the author herself does not consistently follow the logic of these over-arching pronouncements when she discusses the types or the "subtypes" individually. For example, perusing her description of my own instinctual variant, the Six with a dominant Social Instinct, I notice her comment that "since Sixes tend to have difficulties feeling safe in the world, anything that promotes a feeling of safety is attractive" (p. 131). In her own language, the author is taking note of the Six Passion, which we call "Faithlessness," that makes it hard for me to feel a basic and ongoing sense of trust and safety in my world. From my own experience, I know how my attraction to anything that seemed to provide external support has often kept me in relationships and situations for far longer than was good for me. And I wonder: If I had not been willing to embrace this painful knowledge about myself, to use my Enneagram understanding to identify and work with the deep personality structures that kept these feelings and behaviors operating, would I have ever been able to create enough healthy space around them to discover the supportive ground of my own essential nature? My fear is that, without being able to explore my type as a complex and dynamic system, replete with competing energies pulling me in both healthy and unhealthy directions, I would have remained far more stuck in repetitive and unrewarding ways of living.

If we had to sum up our overall assessment of this book, we would say that we found this book to be at its best and most enjoyable whenever Rhodes ignores her own theoretical prescriptions and proscriptions and gives free rein to her deep passion for the material and to her lively and inventive intellect. We recommend you read this ambitious and multi-faceted book, then, not for its over-arching theory of a "positive Enneagram," but rather for the gems of insight scattered throughout, and for the palpable spirit of joyous enthusiasm she brings to her process of exploration. We wish that the author had made it easier for us to keep these engaging qualities more consistently in sight as we read her book, but we felt it only just to address the book on its own terms and to respond to the form in which the author herself frames and presents her material.