

THE TROUBLE WITH TYPING (2010)

Tom Condon

“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.”

Chinese proverb

“Say not, ‘I have found the truth,’ but rather, ‘I have found a truth.’”

Kahil Gibran

“Wisdom never has made a bigot, but learning has.”

Josh Billings

“A quarter of a picture is worth 250 words.”

George Carlin

When people first learn the Enneagram, they often become intensely occupied with the system. New students buy books, go to workshops, and engage in a flurry of typing, working out the personality styles of their relatives, colleagues and friends. Suddenly, evidence of the Enneagram seems to be everywhere, the way someone notices Japanese cars after buying a new Honda.

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

Next comes the Sorcerer’s Apprentice phase, named for a Mickey Mouse cartoon, in which students get overwhelmed and confused by the Enneagram’s details while being carried away by a new power they can’t quite handle. Some students feel as if they are drowning in information, peering hard at something they can’t quite see. They can also grow “type happy,” seeing Enneagram styles as stereotypes or overusing the system by imposing their new knowledge on relatives, colleagues and friends.

The third phase of learning the Enneagram is True Mastery, which is an attitude as well as a mastering of the material. It comes as you integrate the knowledge and make it your own, really understanding the Enneagram while applying its insights with intelligence, respect and care.

There’s an old story about a man who has just found the Truth being followed by the Devil. Someone sees this procession and asks the Devil, “Why are you, of all

entities, following someone who has just found the Truth?” The Devil strokes his goatee, and replies, “He may have just found the Truth, but I’m going to help him organize it.”

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

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

The Enneagram doesn’t come with a manual that instructs people on how to use it properly, but perhaps it should. This article is an attempt to catalog the ways the Enneagram is most commonly distorted or misused. If you are new to the system, I want to leave you with some useful cautions; some may not make sense right away, but you might bookmark them for future reference. I can speak with confidence, as I’ve made a number of these mistakes myself; long-term students of the Enneagram will likely recognize at least one of the pitfalls described. In fact, if you have an intense response to something you read here, it would be highly fruitful to assume that it’s somehow true—like something has pushed your buttons or revealed a shadow—and work with it the way you would work with any such reaction. To the extent I’m able, I will also offer some constructive guidelines for using the Enneagram that point you toward the road to True Mastery.

Educated Bigotry

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

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

When you call a person by a number or a name that is related to a role— a “Three,” a “Performer” or an “Achiever”—you are talking about a thing rather than a person. It’s different to describe a Three as “someone who feels driven to perform and achieve.”

In a way, all generalizing about personality is akin to bigotry. Psychotherapists are paid to employ a professional form of bigotry each time they meet a new client—it's called diagnosis. A therapist has to assess the client both as a stand-alone individual and as an example of selected generalizations drawn from various schools of psychology. Fortunately, therapists are carefully trained to discern a person from a type. If a client says, "I'm a Christian," a therapist wonders what the statement means to the person. The therapist doesn't immediately think, "Christian, oh sure, I know what that is." "Christian" is instead taken as important information about the client's identity and map of the world.

Even if the client believes he's like everyone else, the therapist doesn't. Instead, she tries to understand why it's important for the client to see himself that way; how the belief is, paradoxically, an expression of his uniqueness. The therapist tries to see the client without comparing him to anyone else; she wants to know who the client is and who the client is trying to become. She compares the client to himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Forging a New Identity

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

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

It might not be all that natural. Over-identifying with the description of your personality style is the same thing as being caught in its trance; you are simply replacing an old self image with a new one.

One expression of this is when people suddenly start to find their neurosis interesting. Enneagram periodicals will sometimes carry articles by people describing their experience of their style. Some of these articles are useful, but others are quite peculiar, recounting the ins and outs of the author's personality trance in a way that sounds pleased, as if the writer is fascinated with the new world of "me." Such articles can outline warped relationships, immature behavior and delusional goals, often in a tone of bragging, juvenile glee. It's as if the writer feels endorsed or licensed by the Enneagram, not realizing that the system only describes his ego. The thoughts, feelings and behavior he writes about are what he's supposed to overcome.

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

Students can also use the Enneagram as an excuse for problem behavior that they have no intention of changing. Some will say things like, "Don't blame me for being paranoid, I'm a Six!" or, "Don't expect me to work in an office—I'm a

Four!” You may as well say, “Of course I’m limited—I’m Brazilian.” The result is a weird reversal of the point of the model.

A related distortion occurs when people use their styles to create a new set of interpersonal limits, reflected in statements like, “I’m an Eight, so I can’t work with Fours.” Or “I don’t make dinner plans with Sevens—they’re always late.”

I once got a phone call from a prospective student who demanded to know my Enneagram number. When I asked why, she said she had been told to continue learning the Enneagram only from someone with a different personality style than her original teacher’s. The idea was that Enneagram styles are so influential that two teachers with the same style would teach the Enneagram in exactly the same way. Addled with their own personality biases, their rendition of the material would be principally an expression of their egos. Actually, that just sounded like bad teaching.

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

I’ve heard people in Enneagram groups say things like, “Oh, he’s our resident Five, ha ha!” or “Look: she’s getting him more coffee—just like a Two!” Though this seems like a harmless habit, it may result in group members feeling destined to follow the script of their style rather than individuating, identifying with the image others have of them instead of becoming their own person.

While connecting to a group that knows the Enneagram may offer a sense of belonging or can fulfill other needs, it’s important to be mindful of what you are reinforcing in each other, however fondly. A group can help its members evolve beyond their Enneagram trances or inadvertently support their immaturities, sense of victimhood, and desire to hide.

The Enneagram invites misunderstanding. It seduces users by seeming static, by offering neatly bound categories that promise to contain and explain reality. It turns out the system points to something more profound and existential: the unnerving mystery behind everyday appearances, an invisible world to which we may feel unequal.

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

At the end of the film, you don’t know what to think. Each person could be lying, but all four are equally convincing in their retelling of the event. The story

ends on a haunting note of ambiguity, leaving you suspended in a void between seemingly valid subjective realities. You're forced to accept that there's no right answer, no absolute truth.

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

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

Your ego can react to the Enneagram's revelations by bureaucratically trying to hold onto its job, mutating to incorporate the new insights about itself while defending its basic position. Life is a series of openings and closings, and when we change or expand our model of the world, something in us won't let us go too far.

Part of what this means is that if you're going to work with the Enneagram in depth, it will take honesty each step of the way. The model itself won't keep you on track. No matter how powerfully the Enneagram impacts you, it's still possible to warp it into a new version of the same old thing.

The Trap of Traits

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

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

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

I have known many Twos, for instance, who tailgate while driving. If you think about it, that's logical within the Two script—somebody who avoids being alone and needs to stay connected to others drives too close to them in traffic.

Are all tailgaters therefore Twos? No; the external behavior isn't proof of anything. If you realize—through other means—that a person is a Two, then the

fact that he tailgates makes sense against the deep background of his personality style. The behavior may combine well with a dozen other things a person says and does, but in the end you'll need another strategy altogether for discovering someone's Enneagram style. To assume each tailgater in your rear view mirror is a Two would be more bigotry.

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

It's probably only a matter of time before Enneagram dating services spring up. Author Helen Palmer has already described her horror at seeing newspaper ads soliciting romance with particular styles: "Nine seeks Seven for fun and romance." Again, imagine an ad that says, "Handsome Bulgarian looking to make beautiful music with that special someone. Only Cubans need apply."

Some people practice face reading. The claim is that you can look at someone's outer features, either in person or from a photograph, and determine the person's Enneagram style. This would be a fine thing if it worked, but I've not met a practitioner of face reading who was accurate with any consistency. The technique ignores the influence of genetics, as well as how a person's immediate mood might influence his appearance the moment he was photographed.

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

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

A last typical question runs something like, "Don't Eights always fight with authority?" The answer is: nobody always does anything. The Enneagram is not describing a set of predestined limitations or rigidities. There is great variety in the way people express Enneagram styles just as there is within nationalities. I can meet Americans from other regions of the country and find them vastly different; yet we still share associations and underlying references that come with being American.

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

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

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

Gilded and Gold

I once had a cat who was prone to amnesia for the contents of her food dish. The dish could have been in plain sight and piled high with food, but Kitty-San would approach the nearest human and plaintively cry to be fed. Sometimes a well-meaning family member would try to remind Kitty of her food by pointing a finger at the dish. Kitty always stared intently at the person's finger, never at her food. If the Enneagram points to the location of our true nourishment, there are still a number of ways to mistake the finger for the food, to grow overawed or distracted by the system itself.

Broadly speaking there are two versions of the Enneagram: one is the Enneagram of Personality—the psychological system and its correlates—while the other might be called the Enneagram of Everything, which encompasses the Enneagram of Personality but places it in a broader philosophical and spiritual context. The Enneagram of Personality is a psychological description, a compact, detailed rendition of what's called ego psychology. The Enneagram of Everything (also called the Enneagram of Process) has a more theoretical quality. It presents the Enneagram as a purveyor of universal law, a "Symbol of All and Everything," a skeleton key that unlocks and explains fundamental cosmic principles. This law is thought to govern all human behavior and contexts as well as things like musical scales. The result is a sort of metaphysical Theory of Everything derived from Gnosticism, Neo-Platonic philosophy, the works of George Gurdjieff, J.G. Bennett, Oscar Ichazo, Claudio Naranjo, A.H. Almaas, as well as Theosophy and Transpersonal Psychology. It is also partly Christianized, incorporating the Seven Deadly Sins, for example, and in some cases advocating Christian love as the main way past personality dilemmas and defenses.

Using the Enneagram of Personality against the spiritual backdrop of the Enneagram of Everything is a meaningful way for some people to approach the system, and they get considerable value from the effort. The Enneagram's psychological insights are especially helpful in gauging how you get in your own way and thwart your spiritual goals, but the Enneagram of Everything has also spawned a range of very useful spiritual practices that can produce powerful reactions. The purpose of most of these practices is to help us waken from the trance-like dream of our lives and open to realms beyond our personality and worldview.

The Enneagram of Everything can give the Enneagram a theological cast, turning it into a kind of mini-religion, which brings up the usual challenges for the users of any religious doctrine. Every major religion offers mandates and guidance for becoming more compassionate, less ego-bound, ceasing to vilify others, seeing through our illusions and opening to what is beyond ourselves. Most followers fall short of manifesting these capacities, mistaking the finger for the food in several typical ways.

First, participants in spiritual systems sometimes confuse the form of the system for its experiential and behavioral goals. The former becomes a substitute for the latter. People can respond to a spiritual system as if it were real, a physical object, a Truth, a something to believe in, imbuing its doctrines, symbols and leaders with a spiritualized aura. They may stop using the system to grow and instead fall in love with its inspirational promise. Taking comfort in a group, mastering a system's tenets, and adhering to its rules can become more preoccupying than working towards one's direct, personal spiritual unfolding.

This is compounded by those who invent and sustain such systems, who often portray their spiritual body of knowledge as coming from On High and exclusively true. The inventor(s) may sincerely believe that their inspirations are divinely sourced, and that the conclusions they extract from their own experience apply to everyone else. To back this up, however, they tend to use unspecified language, offer information in large, abstract chunks and make unverifiable claims based on the authority of unattributed sources. They could claim to know what happened to you before you were born, or what will happen after you die. Or offer dictates that emphasize what you should believe in lieu of your own instincts. They might even proffer the double-bind that is built into the structure of cults: You don't really need this leader/system. All capacities are within you. To discover that all capacities are within, you really need this leader/system.

This edges close to idolatry in elevating the productions of the self to a God-like status—another reason spiritual systems don't always work as intended. Idolatry, commonly associated with "worshipping false idols," also occurs when someone spiritualizes their personal opinions, conflicts and shadows. This mimics a state of psychological defensiveness in which a person distorts his or her spirituality to manage untended wounds and quell personal anxieties. Although leaders and

followers do this in different ways, both might think they're being spiritual when they are actually reinforcing their personality defenses.

In other words, idolatry is ego, and it can take several forms. A person could, for example, believe that that his idea of God is the same as God, confusing a psychological part of himself with what is beyond the self. A One, for instance, reported having a vision in which God told her that her mission in life was to "help me perfect the world." Perhaps God spoke to her directly, but people who knew her as angry and self-righteous said her reported vision sounded more like her ego than like God. Perfecting the world is a double-edged project for a One.

Another way to be idolatrous is to believe that your personal values reflect the laws of the universe. Achievement-oriented Threes will sometimes claim that we are all here on earth solely to overcome challenges, to every day in every way become better and better. Ones will sometimes deify reason: a self-described atheist One did not believe in God because the idea was irrational. Reason, he explained, is the highest power in the universe. An Eight once said, "I worship God because he has power. If there were a power greater than God, I would worship that."

Along with arcane, esoteric packaging, some versions of the Enneagram of Everything come with a legend that dates the system back to ancient Babylon. It is only in the last few years that attempts have been made to trace the system's true historic origins. While studies indicate that something about it is old, the results are still somewhat inconclusive. Part of the Enneagram's mythos is that its nine-pointed circle is a universal symbol that stands for various cosmic laws. But symbols don't ripen and drop from trees; people make them up. The Enneagram's nine-point design does go back centuries, but there's little evidence that it formerly meant what it is said to mean now.

Idolatry also underpins fundamentalism, since making human qualities into divine ones usually leads to embracing absolutes. An Iranian friend of mine used to occasionally shake his head and say, "Fundamentalism. The same the world over." He meant that people who cling too tightly to their beliefs behave in similar ways, no matter what the regional content of their theology or ideology. Fundamentalists the world over are too identified with their causes, mistake symbols for facts, and believe in absolute principles that leave little room for ambiguity. They also project their psychological shadows and are intolerant of competing versions of reality.

Egos are similarly defended when we embrace theologies and ideologies in absolute terms, hoping this will secure our standing worldview. This can be seen in how people hold their religions, politics, philosophies, belief systems, or causes they embrace and with which they identify. While theologies and ideologies seem to be about objective external topics—religious, political or cultural matters—they are also inevitable expressions of our inner psychology, especially our defenses. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "People don't seem to realize that their opinion of the world is a confession of character."

Within our individual Enneagram styles we can practice a kind of personal fundamentalism. We over-identify with our egos' worldviews, blindly believe in the symbolism of our life stories, and avoid ambiguity by clinging to the absolutes of our styles. It is also possible to adopt the Enneagram of Everything this way, using the system to bolster a fixed idea of the world and acquiring a new set of rules and rigidities. Author and former priest Clarence Thomson says, "New rigidities are part of the history of religious orders. They start out proposing a new lifestyle based on some powerful experiences and/or a charismatic leader. The leader then tries to replicate the experience by giving instructions to his/her followers. When this doesn't work as well as desired, the leader multiplies the instructions."

A related tendency is seeing inherent spiritual wisdom in Enneagram teachers, as though their mastery of the material makes them personally evolved or spiritually enlightened. While it's fair to expect a high degree of congruity from a teacher, you should not be surprised when you encounter a teacher's inevitable blind spots. Enneagram teachers are prone to the same psychological distortions as everyone else. Simply mastering the system is not enough to change someone, unless they are otherwise motivated to grow beyond their limits. If a teacher, Enneagram or otherwise, seems to believe they are a guru, you'd be right to wonder what it means about their personal trance and unresolved childhood issues.

Ancient Egyptians saw great spiritual power in domestic cats, partly because of the cat-habit of staring at people with a clear, steady, enigmatic gaze. My cat sometimes looked this way, but she was probably thinking about tuna. Spiritual experiences are compelling, but they need to be integrated with the plainness of day-to-day existence. In a sense, there is no greater mystery than daily life, no better guide than your own inner promptings, especially when they are shaped and sustained by an honest, appropriate spiritual practice.

If you use the Enneagram for a spiritual or theological purpose, the usual questions apply: Does doing so make you more compassionate? Kinder? More self aware? Less dogmatic? Less self important? More directly connected to what is beyond yourself? More able to think for yourself? More personally free? More able to discover and follow your own inner truth?

If you are a member of a group: Does the group encourage you to make your own discoveries, or does it offer ready-made, plug-in answers? Does it deliver on its promises, or keep making new ones? Does the group have a shadow, a rival group with whom it feuds or competes? Does it ask you to believe things you can't verify with your senses? Does the group foster dependency? Does it imply that the leader is infallible? Does the leader speak in absolutes or vague abstractions? Can you leave the group when you want? Without opposition or retribution?

If you use the Enneagram as part of a spiritual practice, generally good goals to work towards might be: becoming wide awake and fully present; seeking

the spiritual in little things; recovering a deeper sense of your own integrity; becoming more up-to-date in your responses; making room in your life for the aesthetic, creative and soulful; cultivating an inner quiet; trying to better understand any people you hate or vilify; and surrendering to a broader sense of relatedness into which your defensive, wholly separate self-image dissolves.

Not Quite Getting It

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

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

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

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

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

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

Occasionally I've heard stories about people who believed for years that they had a particular Enneagram style and then realized it was an error. Often the person had accepted the diagnosis of a teacher or friend more experienced with the Enneagram.

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

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

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

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

Using The Enneagram Clearly

Discovering someone's Enneagram style is ultimately an act of inference, a kind of educated intuition. While there is no single right way to do it, there are some helpful pointers and guidelines.

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

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

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

Another way to winnow down the possibilities is to mentally cycle through the Enneagram as you try to diagnose someone's style: "Not a One, not a Two, not a Three, maybe a Four, maybe a Five, not a Six, not a Seven, not an Eight, maybe a Nine." Even if you're not entirely sure about the person's core style, you may find that others can be clearly ruled out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enneagram enthusiasts sometimes try to precisely identify the correct adjectives that best define each type. Behind the idea is an assumption that somewhere there's an "objective Enneagram" as real as tables and chairs.

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

There are definitely some incompetent renditions of the Enneagram but even its acknowledged experts will disagree about the personality styles of particular famous people—which means someone must be wrong. Enneagram experts are like blind people describing an elephant; each is clued into a different aspect of the same animal. Partly this means is that there is no complete certainty to be had outside of yourself. You eventually have to make the Enneagram your own and take the different versions of it in stride.

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

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

The Enneagram will meet you where you are, at your best depth, so to speak, but it will not tell you what you don't know about it. During the first 10 years I worked with the model I learned it anew four different times. Each time I thought that I fully understood the material, a trapdoor opened, and I was dropped into a new and unsuspected depth.

I've now worked with the Enneagram for 30 years; sometimes a new person's Enneagram style is instantly obvious to me. With others it takes time and patient attention before their style comes clear. Someone will manifest Nineness in a way I'm not used to, but it's eventually evident that Nine is their true style anyway. It's often wise not to make up your mind too soon—determining someone's personality style isn't a contest and grabbing prematurely at certainty will mostly steer you and others wrong.

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

As you might imagine, people who are good at identifying Enneagram styles practice a lot. They read biographies, watch interviews on television and look for

the Enneagram in movies, novels and real life. They also work to get out of their own way—to see past their personal likes and dislikes, avoiding snap judgments and interpretations in favor of paying attention to what is plainly emanating from others.

In Sherwood Anderson's novel *Winesburg, Ohio*, an old man is writing a book he calls "The Book of the Grotesque." The book has one central thesis: "That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. People made the truths themselves and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world there were the truths and they were all beautiful.

"The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carefulness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful.

"And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them."

The narrator says, "It was the truths that made people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque, and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."

The narrator says that the old man who had written the book about people turning into grotesques had thought so much about his theory that he himself was in danger of becoming a grotesque. "He didn't," the narrator says, "for the same reason that he never published the book. It was the Young Thing inside him that saved the old man."

If you use the Enneagram personally or professionally, it might be helpful to keep a Young Thing alive inside you. Partly this means staying open-minded, alert to what people reveal about themselves, trying to see the total person even as they inhabit a specific personality style. The Enneagram is always deeper than it seems to be; as a system it can be worked with for years and still yield secrets. It is both comprehensive and incomplete, alive in a way that doesn't lie flat on paper.

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