



## THE LIMITATION OF CATEGORIZING PEOPLE



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One of the Enneagram's problems is that it is very good. It is one of the few systems that concerns itself with normal and high-functioning behavior rather than pathology, and it condenses a great deal of psychological wisdom into a compact system that is relatively easy to understand. If you can type yourself and the people who are important in your life, a lot of information is immediately made available about the way that you and other people are likely to relate. There is therefore, a natural tendency to want to put each other in one of nine boxes, so that each can figure out what the other is thinking and predict the ways in which they are likely to behave. We want each other in a box, because it lessens the tension of having to live with the mystery of the unknown, and because in the West we have an addiction to reducing information to fixed categories so that we can try

to make cause-and-effect predictions.

The Enneagram, however, is not a fixed system. It is a model of interconnecting lines that indicate a dynamic movement in which each of us has the potential of all nine positions, although we identify most strongly with the issues of our own type. The structure of a nine-pointed star with interconnecting lines also suggests that each type possesses a versatility of movement between all nine positions. The nine correlate well with current psychological diagnostic categories and the interconnecting lines indicate specific relationships between the different types that are only now beginning to be examined in the current psychological literature.

The interconnecting lines also predict the way in which type is likely to alter its usual behavior when placed either under stress or in secure life situations; so that each position is actually a composite of three major aspects—a dominant aspect, which identifies a type's worldview, and two additional aspects that describe behavior in security or under stress.

Besides the fact that we can radically alter behavior when in stress or when we feel secure, each of us develops a baseline of adjustment in the degree to which we identify with our defining issues. There are days when we become so involved with the preoccupations that drive us that we cannot focus on anything else. When attention is glued to a particular set of defining preoccupations, we are definitely in a box. We are not free. When we cannot witness our own recurring patterns, when we lose dispassionate observation of our behavior, then we are controlled by our own habit of mind without freedom of choice.

Yet, we do not always act as mechanical creatures. We often shift our attention to see the situation in a different light. In terms of the Enneagram model, we are moving forward in the evolutionary spectrum when we can free ourselves from limiting habits, while expanding awareness beyond the preoccupations of type.

Typing can set up an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy. We may learn to type people and then begin to treat them as caricatures of a list of type traits, which very effectively reinforces

type. We are all molded by the way that others treat us and tend to identify what others project upon us. All too often we begin to see ourselves in the way that we are seen by others and embody the expected characteristics.

This is why the Enneagram's predictive accuracy can pose a serious problem. It is relatively easy to type once you know what you are looking for, especially if you can understand the logic of different vantage points. The system is so good that I have seen people able to pretend that they were psychic because they could type quickly and accurately and could consequently come up with an enormous amount of detailed personal information about someone whom they had barely met. With a good system and a wrong attitude about typing, we forget that the purpose of self-observation is to learn to set personality aside in order to get on with the real work of embodying higher consciousness. A small-minded approach to typing insults the value and purpose of a system that upholds type as an invaluable stepping-stone to higher human capacities.

The good news is that typing isn't a real world predictor. It does not work, for example, for an employer to draw up a list of "do-hires" and "don't-hires" for a particular job. "Do hire a Four (the Tragic Romantic) for a job in an art gallery" makes no sense if the Four has no eye for painting even if they do have a profoundly artistic temperament. By the same token, labeling will not serve the matchmaker who wants a formula that says a Three's ideal mate is a Seven, or that Twos and Fours are incompatible lovers but make good friends. The Two and the Four may have developed a fragrant chemistry that does not fit the number formula, and that is more than what they, or the matchmaker, can possibly understand. Neither will it work to put together an "ideal work team" based on the fact that Fives make good strategists, Threes are terrific salespeople, and Eights are great in a business turnaround. Labeling and boxing does not work in the real world because people are far more versatile and complex than a list of character traits.

Why then, be so concerned about type? If an accurate set of labels won't eliminate the risk involved in hiring employees or choosing a mate, why bother to uncover type at all? The reason to undertake type investigation is to build a working relationship with yourself. You can count on your experience of your "similar" to guide you. You can discover the conditions that make you thrive rather than continue automatic patterns of behavior that trump freedom of choice. The most important reason to study type isn't so you can spot other people's flaws. Rather, self-observation is the key to relieving your own human suffering.

A second reason to study type is so you can understand other people as they are to themselves, rather than as they seem to be through the lens of type perspective. An astute understanding of others can help work teams be efficient, infuse romance with magic, and help families heal and reunite. Although we cannot designate certain types for particular categories of employment and expect them to perform in stereotypic ways, we can learn to see a project from a work associate's point of view.

In the same fashion, we cannot pick out partners from a list of desirable character traits and expect that they will not also show the less than desirable features of the type. We cannot even assume that either partner will not paradoxically react by becoming stressed out and confused. What we can assume is that by paying close attention to the ways in which each type opens to love we can appreciate the integrity of that point of view and alter our attitude accordingly.

*See Palmer, The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988. pp. 4-9, 12-15.*