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Is the Enneagram Compatible with the Catholic Faith?

Within the past several years, the Enneagram of Personality's popularity has increased significantly in terms of public attention. As a result, social media contains many "memes" primarily focusing on stereotypes of "9 personality types." Like all stereotyping, this focus is often damaging from a psychological standpoint. Additionally, some have appropriated the material into a form of New Age Spirituality. Use of the Enneagram in this way has led to much suspicion and criticism of the Enneagram. In 2000, the US Bishops' Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices drafted *A Brief Report on the Origins of the Enneagram* (US bishop' Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices). In this paper, I intend to address several points within the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices (from here forth, SDPP) document in terms of the Enneagram's origin, roots in spirituality, and connections with modern psychology. I concur with the SDPP thesis that "aspects of the intersection between Enneagram doctrine and Catholic belief warrant particular scrutiny" (US bishop' Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices) however, I wish to contribute to that scrutiny in a more positive light.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ISSUES

In a search for official intersection between the Enneagram and the Catholic faith, I came across only one official Catholic document: *Jesus Christ – The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"* promulgated in 2003 by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In paragraph 1.4, the Enneagram is simply

referenced as an example of New Age Gnosticism “which when used as a means of spiritual growth introduces an ambiguity in the doctrine and the life of the Christian faith” (Pontifical Council for Culture and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue). *Jesus Christ – Bearer of the Water of Life* along with the unpublished SDPP report are both quoted in two further articles which I would like to acknowledge: a 2015 National Catholic Register article entitled “*My Spiritual Director Uses the Enneagram. What’s Wrong with That?*” (Burke) and a 2012 Catholic World Report article entitled “*A Dangerous Practice: Catholic interest in the Enneagram Persists.*” (Abbott) Burke turns response to the Spiritual Direction question in the title over to Fr Mitch Pacwa SJ whose criticism of the Enneagram focuses on “occultic roots, its gnostic theology, and its lack of scientific support.” (Burke) Burke then follows up with questions on qualifications and credentials of Enneagram teachers before concluding with: “In addition to finding out if the enneagram is psychologically true, its proponents must also teach solid, Biblically based doctrines about sin, redemption, grace and free will” (Burke).

The Abbott article starts with a summary criticism from Archbishop Thomas Wenski:

The Enneagram redefines sin, among other fundamental concepts, by simply associating faults with personality types, which is particularly tempting in a cultural climate of irresponsibility and narcissism. It encourages an unhealthy self-absorption about one’s own “type,” so that the type is at fault rather than the person. This gives rise to a deterministic mindset at odds with Christian freedom. (Abbott)

The article continues with response from Religious who promote the Enneagram including Sister Suzanne Zuercher and Father William Meninger, O.C.S.O.. Father Meninger points out

The Enneagram teaches self-knowledge. The Oracle at Delphi said, ‘Know thyself.’ Self-knowledge is the virtue of humility. Humility is the primary virtue. Self-knowledge is important to the spiritual journey. [The Enneagram] is only a tool. (Abbott)

Sister Zuercher points out that the Enneagram is “an oral tradition” and people should “go to workshops at a reputable retreat center, not just read” (Abbott). Both Father Meninger and Sister Zuercher name Father Mitch Pacwa SJ, previously mentioned in the Burke article, as the “leader of the opposition to the Enneagram.”

Father Pacwa decided the Enneagram was a dangerous fraud. “Fitting someone into one mold or another seemed like fun,” he wrote. “...however, after incorrectly typing some friends, I eventually dropped the Enneagram from my repertoire of spiritual direction tools.” (Abbott)

Based on these criticisms, the items which need to be addressed are psychological accuracy and the Enneagram’s handling of “sin” in conjunction with the Catholic teachings of redemption, grace, and free will.

DISCLOSURE

Before addressing these items, I should disclose I was first introduced to the Enneagram material in 1990 by a Dominican Friar interested in the material from an anthropological perspective.

Additionally, in the mid-1990s, I had Spiritual Direction under Father William Meninger. While he was aware of my background with the Enneagram, it was not something we discussed due to discord at the time within the Church regarding it. I now realize that “discord” was Father Pacwa’s 1992 book *Catholics and the New Age*. I currently study the Enneagram under Russ Hudson who has studied under Madame de Salzman (1889-1990, pupil and named successor of Georges I. Gurdjieff (ca 1870-1949)) and A. Hameed Ali (aka A.H. Almaas, 1944-present).

Finally, I will quickly address Burke's questions on credentials and qualifications. The International Enneagram Association has accredited teachers, professionals, schools, and training programs since 2009 and holds a code of ethics. I currently have 329 accredited training hours and intend to pursue teaching certification.

THE ENNEAGRAM AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Unlike most personality typing structures, the Enneagram does not focus on behaviors or external traits; rather, it is looking at the unconscious and subconscious motivations underlying defense mechanisms, reactive behaviors, and traits. (Kam) Defense mechanisms are primarily unconscious, they cloud reality through the activation of the central nervous system making them hard to “distinguish from ordinary behaviors, thoughts, and feelings” (Vaillant 11-12). Post Freud psychology has worked to broaden the understanding of defenses to “appreciate that defenses modulate and distort external relationship and internalized representations of people as well as drives and emotions” (13). Due to the focus on motivation and defenses, much of the Enneagram material has been transmitted by oral tradition. As Sister Zuercher pointed out, the Enneagram is best learned within a community (Abbott). It is very common for individuals to “mis-type” especially if a focus has been made on valued or shamed traits or behaviors. This is simply a function of the ego, “the capacity of the integrated mind to accommodate and assimilate the world,” (Vaillant 3) itself. Psychologist George E. Vaillant, whose unique *Study of Adult Development* in healthy individuals looked at the developmental maturation of the ego, writes in his Introduction to *The Wisdom of the Ego*:

Our minds distort inner and outer reality so that an observer might accuse us of denial, self-deception, even dishonesty. But such mental defenses creatively rearrange the sources of our conflict so that they become manageable and we may survive. The mind's

defenses—like the body’s immune mechanisms—protect us by providing a variety of illusions to filter pain and to allow self-soothing. (Vaillant 1)

Vaillant continues to state that this deceit is not only “healthy” but is required in terms of surviving childhood and providing a means to reach the “virtues of maturity.” (Vaillant) It is easy to deceive oneself and, in a fixated and habitual manner, head only in the direction of one’s deception. Hence, the Enneagram is best used in conjunction with an “inner work” community, spiritual direction, or therapy compassionately seeking to understand the vulnerabilities these defenses are protecting against. An additional advantage to learning the Enneagram in community is that in understanding the defense types, we learn not only about the irrational behaviors in ourselves but also about the motivation behind the irritating behaviors we see in others. This can help us become more compassionate and less judgmental.

It is only within integration with modern psychology and vocabulary in terms of “Personality Type” that the Enneagram has come to the forefront of public attention. As Father Pacwa pointed out, people tend to find “fitting someone into one mold or another” to be “fun” (Abbott). In the case of the Enneagram, this can be very dangerous. Addressing one’s psychological defense mechanisms needs to be done with humility and compassion. As Vaillant states, “Nobody is comfortable being mentally undressed” (Vaillant 24).

The Enneagram is not for everyone and should never be used to “type” or “label” another person. In the forward to AH Almaas’ 2021 book, “*Keys to the Enneagram*,” Russ Hudson points out:

The Enneagram, in its original sense, was never meant to be a “filing system” for human beings. We can indeed see that there is something true and helpful about recognizing the patterns of type, but it is important to remember that these type patterns *do not reflect our*

true identity. It would be more accurate to say that awareness of the type patterns can potentially awaken us to the more profound realizations of who or what we are beyond all of these patterns. But this cannot happen simply by intellectually studying the types or by endlessly telling ourselves and others stories about being our type. (Emphasis as in text)

(Almass x-xi)

THE ENNEAGRAM ITSELF

The Enneagram is broken up into many “triads.” One of the predominate triads includes: Instinctive, Feeling, and Thinking. These triads look at motivation under defense mechanisms. In concern with anxiety, *fear* and a desire for *security* tends to be under the defense mechanism (Thinking Triad). In concern of self-image, *shame* and a desire for *attention* tends to be under the defense mechanism (Feeling Triad). In a frustration or a “resistance to reality,” *rage* and a desire for *autonomy* tends to underlie the defense mechanism (Instinctual Triad) (Riso and Hudson 51-59). Within each triad, there are three kinds of psychological “ego boundaries,” one’s energy with regard to the motivation can be projected outward, introjected inward, or be a pendulum of both. (51-59) A second triad, based on the work of psychologist Karen Horney, looks at how we try to get our needs met while dealing with inner conflict: either by being Assertive, being Dutiful / Compliant, or Withdrawing. (60-63) Another triad involves coping styles or “Harmonic Patterns,” “*how we cope with conflict and difficulty: how we respond when we do not get what we want.*” (64-68) These include “reframing disappointment in some positive way,” putting aside “subjective needs and feeling” to try to “solve a problem *logically*,” or reacting emotionally to the disappointment. (64-68) (emphasis in quotes as in text)

Every human being has relationships with the human issues addressed in the triads. No individual uses the same method in every situation, but by being objectively present to what is

present, we can become aware of when we are employing these defense methods, as well as which defenses are most prominent and troublesome in our relationships. The Enneagram focus on triads rather than dualistic judgment can allow space to discern what quality is missing and needs to be brought into proper balance in a situation through awareness. The Enneagram is simply a tool to assist in this awareness by giving a map and vocabulary for our journey in life.

THE ENNEAGRAM AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

In terms of accuracy of the Enneagram from the perspective of modern science, in *Integrating Divine Attachment Theory and the Enneagram* Christopher Kam addresses the lag in scientific support by pointing out that the Enneagram is addressing “unconscious images that people have of themselves, others, and the divine with a more spiritual and contemplative bend than the scientific approach” (Kam 348). He notes that while scientific support of the Enneagram is lagging that of attachment theory,

some support for its validity is gradually being established (Bland 2010; Daniels and Price 2000; Fitzsimons and Killen 2013; Newgent 2001; Scott 2011)” Furthermore, “it has shown at least some concurrent validity with other more established models of contemporary psychology such as the Big Five Model (Stevens 2011) and in one study it has shown even more predictive utility than the Big Five Model (Sutton et al. 2013)” (Kam)

I will focus on two studies I have personally attended talks on.

Neurologist Dr Jerome Lubbe has been studying the intersectionality between Functional Neurology and the Enneagram. In his book, *The Brain-Based Enneagram: You are not A number*, he shifts the common dialogue about the Enneagram from personality regarding type and behaviors to emphasizes that each person is an individual with an identity. Jerome uses his

neurological research on the brainstem, limbic attachments and the development of the right and left-brain hemispheres to explain how each individual has a unique relationship with all 9 types of the Enneagram in terms of values, nature, and capacity. Additionally, he highlights the defense mechanism element by pointing out when a person is reacting in defense, the human brain does not know the difference between a “real bear” or a “perceived bear.” When a person is “overwhelmed, fatigued,” stressed, the brain often unconsciously panics and triggers the heart and body even if “there are no bears.” In this stressed and reactive nature, we tend to have a “Pilot” and a “Co-Pilot” which take over subconsciously or unconsciously. (Lubbe)

Dr Dan Siegel, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and the founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, has been studying “Patterns of Developmental Pathways” developed in the subcortical networks of the limbic and brain stem area of the brain around 6-15 months of age due to an infant’s awareness that it is no longer in the space of “unity” of the womb. “We leave wholeness simply by being born.” Because of temperament, we form habits involving defense mechanisms. Looking at drives of Sadness/Connection (Feeling Triad), Fear/Protection (Thinking Triad), and Anger/Correction (Instinctual Triad) combined with where one’s attention and energy is focused, he is seeing a 90% model consistency with classical Enneagram teachings in a sample of 50,000. Dr Siegel’s findings acknowledge that a person is not a “type” due to neuroplasticity. Through neuroplasticity, additional pathways can be accessed and integrated to provide greater well-being. This requires a compassionate and healthy community. “Real community is not about certainty but about living into possibilities and probabilities.” (Siegel)

THE ENNEAGRAM AND CATHOLIC BELIEF

Catholic criticism of the Enneagram has often pointed out “association with esoteric and non-Christian belief systems” (US bishop' Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices) or Gnosticism (Pontifical Council for Culture and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) (Burke) (Abbott). The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Gnosticism as “the thought and practice especially of various cults of late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries distinguished by the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through gnosis” (Merriam-Webster) where gnosis is direct or mystical knowing. While often the first step taken after learning about the Enneagram of Personality is to find out one’s personality type or “number,” this was not the focus of earlier Enneagram teachings which started with learning to become present in the fullest sense. In the oral traditions of the Enneagram, the first step is to become present to our bodily sensation and instinctual drives which humans hold in common with animals. From bodily presence one can receive Grace and become aware of Divine Presence which calls us to a deeper compassion of the heart and a quality of “Shema.” An openness of the mind to hear, to listen to, and obey ones’ Creator while interacting in and with creation. In this way, the Enneagram is distinctively not Gnostic. Instead, the Enneagram teaches a concept of three “centers of intelligence — the instinctual intelligence of the body, the emotional intelligence of the heart, and the cognitive intelligence of the head” — which are all good and necessary for our “maturation and development” (Almass xiii). However, modern Western Culture has tended to favor the intelligence of the mind with a disregard to there being intelligence in the body and heart. The Enneagram teaches that we live in, with and through the presence of God only within our uniquely created bodies. It encourages individuals to be less

subjective, reactive, and defensive in order to become present to God's Presence around and among us.

The Enneagram is not a Spirituality in and of itself; rather, it is a road map of nine journeys a soul (Rohr and Hudson) can take towards psychological integration within spirituality and community in accordance with divine Grace or away from this causing disintegration into deeper isolation and despair. Furthermore, while one of these nine journeys will be more significant in terms of life transformation, each individual has a relationship with all nine types. The journey to becoming a mature human being in the fullest sense involves exploring these relationships in order to become aware of our egoic distortions and defense mechanisms with compassion.

In "*The Wisdom of the Enneagram*," Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson acknowledge the ability of the Enneagram to "step aside from all doctrinal" differences of religion as being a strength of the Enneagram.

The Enneagram can therefore be enormously valuable in today's world to show white and black, male and female, Catholic and Protestant, Arab and Jew, straight and gay, rich and poor that if they search beneath the surface of differences that separate them, they will find an entirely new level of common humanity. (Riso and Hudson)

The SDPP document is correct in stating that no clear or solid historical evidence exists in terms of the Enneagram's origins. Elements of the Enneagram come out of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the oral tradition I have been taught, The Law of Three, represented by the triangle, arises out of the Egyptian concept of the Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. Specifically, the unification of primitive, instinctual animal like behavior (represented by Set)

with the higher divine qualities (represented by Horus) occurs through a transformation of the heart which results in a Pharaoh (man) who unifies upper and lower Egypt, Figures 1. This transformation is accomplished through being present and breathing into the heart. Figure 2.

(Bell and Hudson) There are elements of this archetypal myth throughout the three Abrahamic faiths. In the Catholic Faith in particular, man enslaved to instinctual and worldly desire (sin) can



Figure 1 Set, Pharaoh, Horus – Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt

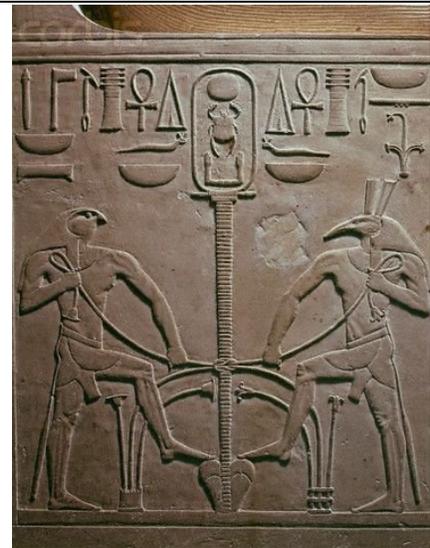
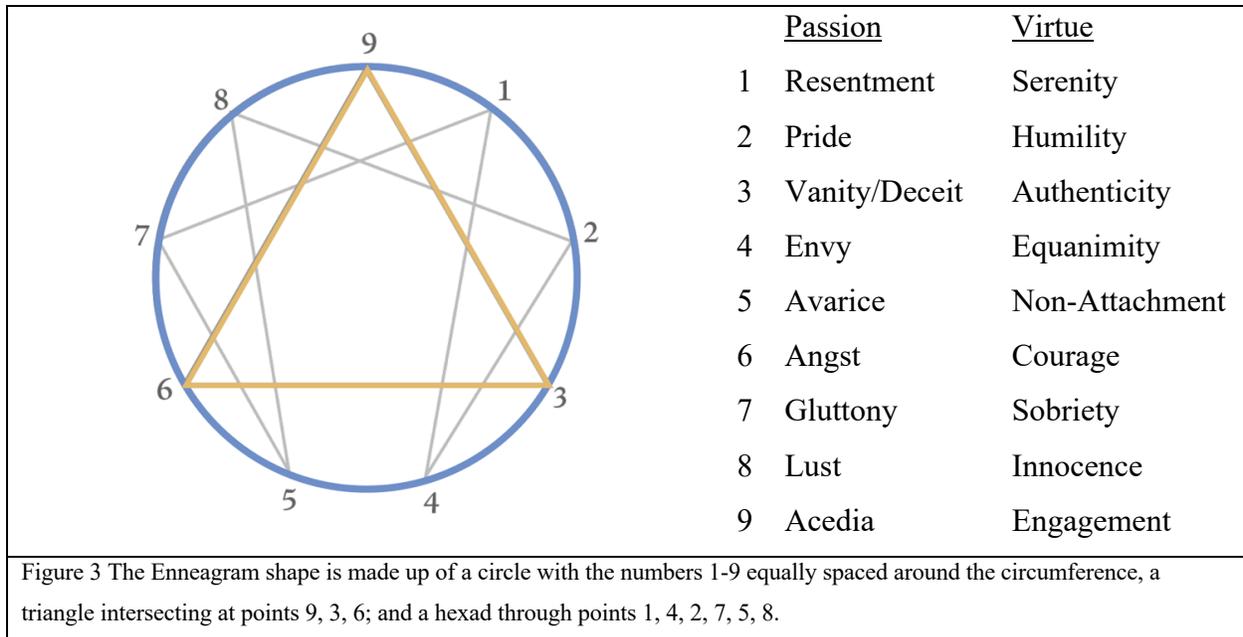


Figure 2 Horus, trachea to heart, Set.

undergo a transformation of the heart through, with, and in relationship with the divinity of Jesus Christ and enter into unification with the mystical Body of Christ. In other words, we are enslaved by our sinful concepts surrounding our attachments to our defense mechanisms and our instinctual drives. The path to freedom requires a desire to be open and present to God’s grace which allows a transformation of the heart. This transformation of the heart gives the freedom to choose on a conscious level thus ending our enslavement.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski is correct, the treatment of the concept of “Sin” is different than most modern Catholics understand sin because the Enneagram is focusing on unconscious

motivations. Figure 3 is a diagram of the Enneagram with a list of the 9 “Passions” as well as the corresponding “Virtues” based on the Riso-Hudson model (Riso and Hudson).



A simple explanation of how the Enneagram treats “sin” can be modeled with point 2. When we address others needs and derive identity from addressing those needs, the action of serving others can result in Pride and it can also result in a “false” Humility when attempting to hide that Pride. The Enneagram would point out, the true sin is in not realizing the “need to be needed,” in not recognizing our own need in “relationship” and being unaware of defense mechanisms in our relationships when our personal unconscious “need” is threatened. True Humility recognizes and admits one’s own “neediness.” As Fr William stated, “Self-knowledge is the virtue of humility” (Abbott).

The Enneagram is looking at defense mechanisms which inhibit our relationships with others and God. What is limiting our ability to love self, neighbor, and God? Thus, what is limiting us be who God created us to be? It is not that “Pride” is bad and thus “sinful” or “Humility” is “virtuous” and thus good; rather, it is realizing those are just words. What really

matters is a quality of the heart and how this plays out in our relationships. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church,

Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”

Sin is an offense against God... and turns our hearts away from [God’s love.] Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods,” knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.” In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus... (CCC 1849-1850)

Thus, it is in our proud self-exaltation in believing we know “good and evil” that we exult our “sin.” Or as Richard Rohr puts it: “every gift that we get excessively fixated on paradoxically becomes our sin. Our gift and our sin are two sides of the same coin” (Rohr and Ebert 27).

Most Catholics are somewhat familiar with the Seven Deadly or “Capital Sins” which were distinguished according to the Catechism by St John Cassian and St. Gregory the Great to be: “pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth or acedia” (CCC 1866). The Enneagram places these at seven of the points and adds “angst” and “vanity or deceit.” Very few realize these concepts originated with Evagrius Ponticus in the 4th century because Evagrius was posthumously condemned as an “Origenist” during the Council of Constantinople II in 553. Most of Evagrius’ original writings in Greek were destroyed. It wasn’t until early in the 20th century that Syriac and Armenian versions of his writings were rediscovered (Harmless 312).

In *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy*, Augustine Casiday looks directly at Evagrius' work in order to determine whether his teaching was heretical or orthodox. Casiday points out that "no primary sources" on the Origen Heresy mention Evagrius and that there is only "trivial" evidence that Evagrius was an "Origenist" (Casiday 59, 66-67). It is noted that Evagrius would have been aware of Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Stoicism but that does not mean his Christology was heretical.

Despite habits of reading Evagrius' teachings about salvation and the fulfilment of creation through the lens of a controversial metaphysics, we ought not to take it for granted that Evagrius' esoteric teachings were pantheistic. To the contrary, attention to the Great Letter reveals that Evagrius' eschatology is robustly Trinitarian— and prompts questions about what the ultimate fate of distinguishing features (e.g., names, bodies, minds) might be. (Casiday 245)

A short introduction to Evagrius as one of the Desert Fathers can be found in William Harmless S.J.'s book *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Evagrius, the son of country Bishop, was born c345 in Iborra in the province of Pontus (modern day, northern Turkey). Evagrius was ordained lector by Basil of Caesarea and served as St Gregory of Nazianzus' archdeacon in Constantinople. He assisted St Gregory in the Trinitarian debate at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Harmless points out that "a famous letter probing subtle aspects of Trinitarian doctrine, a letter long attributed to Basil, as in fact composed by Evagrius" (Harmless 313). In a dream, Evagrius was compelled to leave Constantinople to prevent scandal due to a love affair with a married woman. He went to Jerusalem and later Egypt where he started studying the vices which distract us from prayer and contemplation of God (312-313).

There are strong connections between Evagrius and the Enneagram. In his introduction to *The 153 Chapters on Prayer*, Evagrius writes:

Well then we have divided this treatise on prayer into one hundred and fifty-three chapters and now send on you this dish that is flavored by the Gospels in the hope that you might discover in it the relish of a symbolic number than contains the form of both a triangle and a hexagon. For these figures represent the devout knowledge of the Trinity and the circumscription of this ordered cosmos respectively. (Ponticus 54)

Additionally, the means by which the Enneagram addresses “sin” is closely tied to Evagrius’ teachings. First of all, Evagrius called them evil “thoughts” or *logismoi*, “not sins. Sin implies consent and responsibility” (Harmless 322). In *Pratitkos 6*, Evagrius writes:

There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony, then, avarice, sadness, *acedia*, vainglory, and last of all, pride. It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions. (Emphasis as in text) (Ponticus 16-17)

Finally, as Harmless summarized, Evagrius treats the ascetic life in a positive manner in terms of acquiring virtue as being a freedom from the dominance of the passions.

In a key chapter in the *Praktikos*, Evagrius says that as one progressed, different parts of the soul give birth to different virtues. From the rational part emerge (1) prudence, (2) understanding, and (3) wisdom; from the irascible part, (4) courage and (5) patience; from the concupiscible part, (6) continence, (7) charity, and (8) temperance. Finally, there is the virtue of justice, which “is located in the whole of the soul”; it “produces a certain harmony and symphony among the various parts of the soul.” As one progresses, three

parts of the soul begin to work right, to reintegrate, working the way God originally made them to work. (Harmless 347)

While these virtues do not map directly to the modern Enneagram of Personality, the core concepts are present. This “reintegration” which allows us to be more fully who God made us to be, is what the Enneagram is focused upon.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, modern scientific support of the Enneagram has been lagging due to the contemplative and spiritual nature of Enneagram in addressing psychological defense mechanism. However, studies are showing consilience within establish models of contemporary psychology and modern neurology (Kam) (Lubbe) (Seigel). Additionally, while exact origins of the Enneagram are unknown, there are strong connections to the Catholic faith. Original oral teachings of the Enneagram did not, and still do not focus on labeling a particular point as a type but are more interested in becoming aware of how elements of our thoughts (rational part), emotions (irascible), and instincts (concupiscible) pull us away from Virtue, humble self-knowledge, relationship with God, and relationship with neighbor. Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church’s definition of sin (CCC 1849-1850), the Enneagram provides a Spiritual Director a means of moving a conversation regarding sin away from mental concepts, shame, and guilt and into a healthier transformation of the heart and reconciliation with self, others, and God. Based on known challenges of using the Enneagram in a positive and healthy way, it is important that teachings of the Enneagram be rooted not only in an understanding of the tool itself but also in the psychology the tool addresses, and the doctrine of the Catholic Church with regards to Spiritual Theology.

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