

The Circle, Triangle & the Hexad Part I: Gender Polarity & the Enneagram

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Ever since I started working with the enneagram, I've been interested in looking at its patterns. Some of these patterns are well-known, others less so. In this series on enneagram patterns, I explore some of the many patterns of the enneagram.

In this two-part article, I explore some basic enneagram patterns that involve the three figures we see in the enneagram: the circle, the hexad, and the triangle. I particularly focus on the relationship between these three figures.

I start with a subject of interest to just about everybody—sex. Somebody in a recent issue of the *Enneagram Monthly* asked why we never talk about sex. So here goes.

That said, this probably won't be a terribly titillating talk (try to say that three times fast). But it does introduce what I hope are some interesting notions about how polarity—which shows up in every facet of life—is reflected in the figure of the enneagram.

Briefly, I see the right side of the enneagram as basically feminine and the left side as basically masculine (see Figure 1). More precisely, I like to map the male polarity onto the Head Center, the female polarity onto the Heart Center, and the neutral polarity onto the Body Center. I'm not the first to map these polarities onto the centers, although I may be the first to talk about it in print. The only reference I've seen to the topic is a remark by Katherine Chernick in the July '96 *Enneagram Monthly*, in which she briefly reports that Claudio Naranjo talks about the polarity of each center. Interestingly, according to her report, my mapping is identical to his. This is interesting (and encouraging) because I arrived at this position independently, based on my own observations. This offers support for the idea that this mapping is not arbitrary.

Assigning polarities to each center is an interesting exercise, but it's most interesting as a jumping off point for a more far-reaching discussion. In this article, I talk not only about why these assignments seem plausible, but why knowing something about these polarities is useful to anyone studying the enneagram.

Sex and the Enneagram

As a research psychologist, I've always been interested in male-female differences in motivation and behavior. And as someone with metaphysical interests, I'm aware that literally everything in the material universe can be characterized in terms of sex—that is, masculine and feminine polarities.

When I started studying the enneagram, it hadn't taken long for me to notice that the Heart Center seemed pretty feminine while the Head center seemed pretty masculine. The Instinctual or Body Center was a little less clear until I reminded myself that—as Gurdjieff pointed out—for every

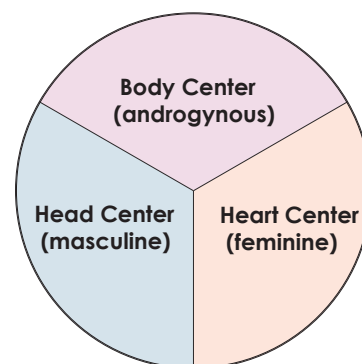


Figure 1

duality, there's a point of resolution or synthesis.

The obvious point of synthesis when you have male and female is a child. So I thought of the Instinctual Center as the natural outcome of the union of male and female. This made sense, since its center point, Point 9, is traditionally associated with both love and union. So we can start by thinking about each of the centers as representing one of the three aspects of mother, father, or child (see Figure 1). By extension, it's possible to look at the inner triangle in much the same way. When we do this, each point that defines the triangle is seen as having the same polarity as its center (see Figure 2).

When I did this, it wasn't just a theoretical exercise. Given what I already know, it was easy to see how Point 6 could be the protective father, Point 3 the socializing mother, and Point 9 the receptive child. What I felt I was seeing here was the archetypal family unit, and roles played were those that are most necessary for the maintenance of that unit.

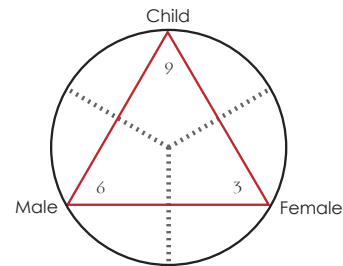


Figure 2

But these weren't the only roles that people can play. There are six other points on the enneagram. These six other points can be looked at from one of two perspectives: (a) as points comprising a figure known as the hexad—a mathematically mysterious figure—or (b) as wing points for each of the points on the inner triangle.

The Triangle, the Hexad, and the Circle

When we look at the enneagram, one thing we notice right away is how different in appearance the triangle is from the hexad (see Figure 3).

The *triangle* is a completely symmetrical, closed figure that is commonly used as in construction because of its known strength and stability. It's among the most universal of symbols, as well. The *hexad*, on the other hand, is a rather peculiar-looking figure. It is oddly shaped, open-ended, and only partially symmetrical. It is full of sharp angles and odd reverses in direction. It balances precariously on two tips and looks like a dubious prospect for use as a building block. Its very geometry suggests movement, rather than stability, specialization rather than universality. Most of us who have studied the enneagram also know that it is associated with the relationship between the numbers 1 and 7, in that $1/7$, which is equivalent to $.142857$.

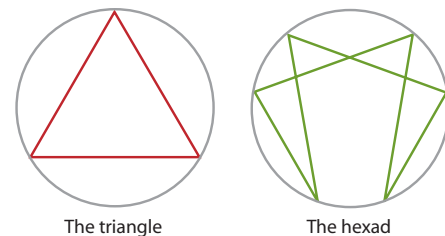


Figure 3

However diverse these two figures, they both fit perfectly into a third figure: the *circle*. The circle is the wholeness that is able to contain (and thus reconcile) these seemingly diverse elements. The circle are a visible representation of how to balance change and continuity, chaos and order.

Polarity in the Hexad: The Anatomy of a Kiss

If we look for a while at the hexad, we see something rather interesting. The hexad looks an awful lot like two figures kissing! This is a powerful image that implies polarity and brings to mind the

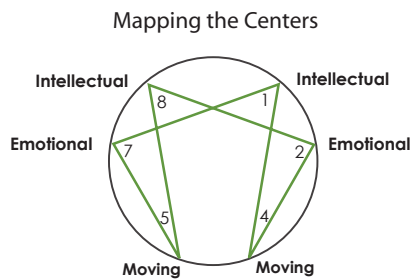


Figure 4

idea that one side of the enneagram is a different polarity from the other.

This idea isn't really new. It is alluded to indirectly by process-enneagram theorist Anthony Blake, whose point assignments (p. 273) I've duplicated here (see Figure 4). Blake assigns Points 1 and 8 to the Intellectual Center, Points 2 and 7 to the Emotional Center, and Points 4 and 5 to the Moving Center.

There are two things to note about Blake's approach: (a) it divides the enneagram vertically in two and (b) it assigns roles to the hexad points that corresponds to one of the three centers. It's not a great leap to make the analogy from the Intellectual Center to "male/father," the Emotional Center to "female mother," and the Moving Center to "androgynous/child/union."

In Figure 5, I've made that analogy. I've converted the hexad labels to male-female-child. In addition, I've placed these points within the larger context of a bilateral enneagram, where the blue section on the left is masculine and the pink section on the right is feminine.

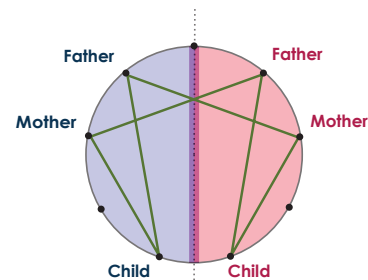


Figure 5

So the bottom line here is that the points of hexad are influenced by two levels of polarity: (a) the polarity of the *point itself* (whether it's most associated with the role of father, mother, or child) and (b) the polarity of its *half* (left masculine, right feminine).

The following table and Figure 6 shows how this works. On the figure, the hexad labels now show both the role of the individual point and (in parentheses), the polarity of the location.

Point	Larger Polarity	Point Polarity
1	FEMALE	Male (Father)
2	FEMALE	Female (Mother)
4	FEMALE	Androgynous (Child)
8	MALE	Male (Father)
7	MALE	Female (Mother)
5	MALE	Androgynous (Child)

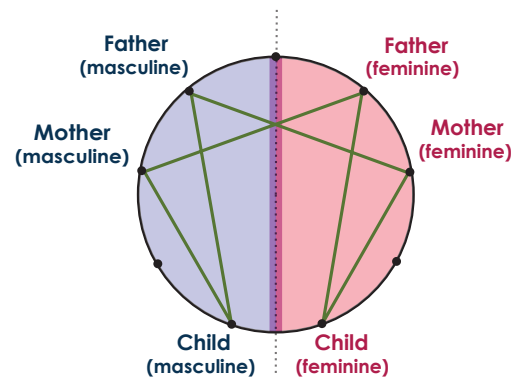


Figure 6

From my observations, it appears that the polarity operating at the point has the most direct influence on preferences and actions. But this influence is exaggerated or inhibited according to its position on the enneagram—that is, whether the polarity of the point is the same or different than the polarity of its half. The polarity of the half is like the influence of the larger environment.

Three Hexad Types

Based on these considerations, we can say that the hexad types fall into three groups: pure polarity types, mixed polarity types, and weak polarity types.

PURE POLARITY TYPES. In pure polarity types, the polarity of the type is the same as the polarity of the side of the enneagram that it's on. There are two of these: Type 8 and 2 (see Figure 7).

Point 8 is Father at the level of the individual point and situation on the male half of the enneagram, so it's quintessentially masculine in nature—powerful, assertive, and protective. Eights tend to play out this male role without hesitation because of the absence of mitigating feminine restraints.

Point 2 is its complement on the other side. As the Mother figure on the female half, Point 2 is quintessentially feminine in nature—emotional, intimate, and nurturing. Twos can be so thoroughly feminine in nature that they have a hard time not seeing the world through a feminine lens. It's easy for identify with the archetypal role of mother and help-mate.

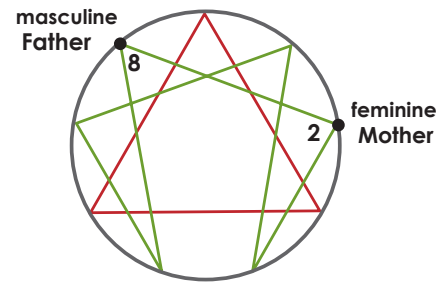


Figure 7

MIXED POLARITY TYPES. Types 1 and 7 are also parental in nature, but as “mixed polarity types,” they have both male and female attributes, and so their parenting style is less purely masculine or feminine (see Figure 8)..

Ones, like Eights, tend to identify with Father. They want to act to protect and reform. But unlike Eights, they're more inhibited in their ability to act because of their position on the feminine side of the enneagram. This means that Ones can't help but be aware of the larger social context. Therefore, they have to reconcile personal inclinations with social norms and values. Otherwise, they feel guilty. The desire to act and the need to justify compete with one another, often creating a great deal of internal pressure. This is why it's important for Ones to find a socially-acceptable outlet for action.

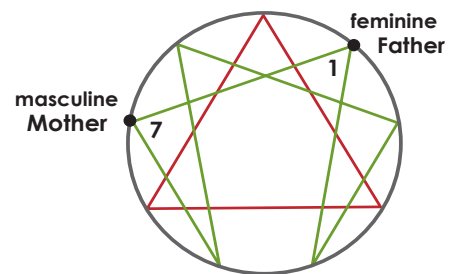


Figure 8

Sevens are in the opposite situation. The point itself is feminine in nature, but it's situated on the masculine side of the enneagram. So this is a femininity with a distinctly “cool” flavor to it. The result is point energy that facilitates efforts to create an affable social environment (feminine) that makes few personal demands upon participants (masculine). Because the feminine “desire” energy of the point is situated in a masculine (expansive) context, there's nothing to limit it. While this combination tends to produce enthusiasm, it can also make it hard to know when “enough is enough.”

WEAK POLARITY TYPES. Points 4 and 5 are what I call weak polarity or “child” types (see Figure 9). By this, I don't mean to imply that Fours and Fives are less mature or evolved than other types, only that they tend to be more androgynous and less strongly-identified with the social role associated with their gender. As a result, they have a greater tendency to look within themselves when seeking union. When they do look for a partner, they may do so in unusual or unexpected ways.

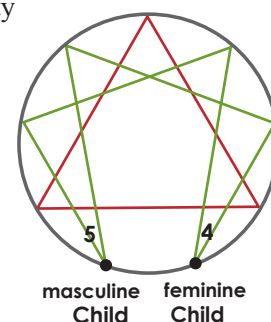


Figure 9

Technically, Fours and Fives are actually are “mixed” types like Ones and Sevens. But here the mixing occurs on *two* levels, not just one:

(a) the level of the point and (b) the level of the half (see Figure 10).

The mixing on the level of the point is due to the fact that we are referring to a child, and a child—whether male or female—has a tangibly androgynous quality until they reach puberty.

The mixing on the level of the “half” is even less obvious, because each of these points is technically on just one side of the enneagram, not both. However, both Points 4 and 5 occupy and unique position on the enneagram. Both are right next door to the mysterious gap at the bottom of the enneagram—a place where the energies of each half of the enneagram are not clearly separated.

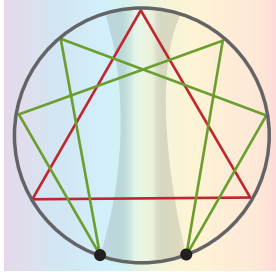


Figure 10

Judith Searle calls this area the void and a place of death and rebirth, which is the source of both the ultimate horror and the ultimate meaning (*Enneagram Monthly*, Sept. ‘97, p. 21). Anthony Blake likens Point 4 to Mars, Point 5 to Jupiter, and the area between them to the asteroid belt—a place of chaos (p. 256 of *The Intelligent Enneagram*). He also speaks of this area as a place of alchemical mixing and blending (pp. 72-73), which makes sense if it’s the site an energy vortex created by the swirling action of two opposite polarities (see Figure 10).

The net effect of this swirling is to create a zone of instability where the nature of the polarity is not well-defined. People sensitive to its effects can find it easy to lose their personal boundaries, especially in stressful situations.

As a 4w5, I’m acutely aware of the effects of this zone of instability, although I find it hard to talk about. But I believe it’s the reason that both Types 4 and 5 need more solitude. Both types can get overwhelmed in the face of outer stimulation because they are already dealing with a great deal of inner stimulation. Having time alone is helpful for digesting and integrating the mixed polarity energy of the gap.

Three Structural Levels of the Enneagram

If we look at the structure of the points from a hierarchical point of view (see Figure 11), we can see three distinct levels of functioning. At the first level is the circle (the Allness); at the second is the inner triangle; and at the third is the hexad. In the graphic below, I elevated Point 9 slightly, because it plays a unique role: it gives rise to two pairs of points: (a) Points 3 and 6 and (b) Points 8 and 1 (see below for a brief discussion).

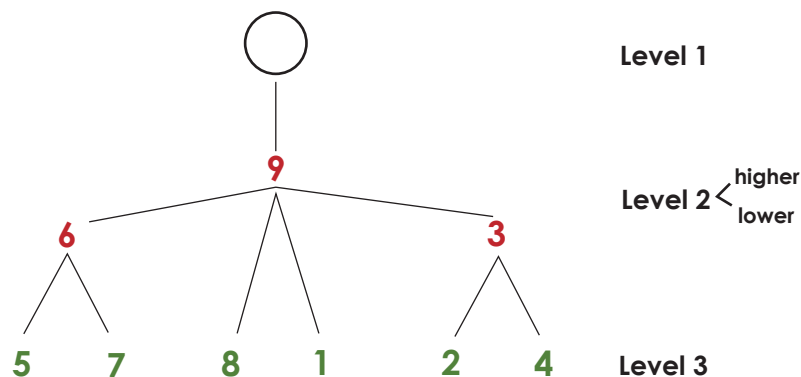


Figure 11

LEVEL 1 is just the circle itself (see Figure 12). It represents the psyche as a unified whole, which is why it is the container for the nine points of the enneagram. It is that which encloses everything within it. At the same time it's more than just the sum of its parts. We could conceive of the enneagram as the Ultimate Reality, God, or the Higher Self. The enneagram is the Oneness that reconciles all the polarities at all the levels contained within it.

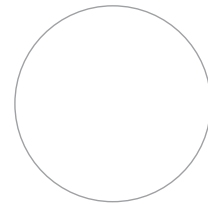


Figure 12

LEVEL 2 is the level represented by the inner triangle comprised of Points 3, 6, and 9 (see Figure 13). It represents the triune nature of reality. From a top-down perspective, Point 9 is the point of origin for both Point 3 (the feminine) and Point 6 (the masculine), although from a bottom-up perspective, it can be said to be the result (child) of their union. The flow runs in both directions, which creates an interest paradox.

Point 9 is the most subtle and the hardest to grasp, because it is the underlying energy potential that links the trinity to the oneness. It can be said to play a unique, dual role: it is the origin point for both Points 3 and 6 (in the inner triangle) and Points 1 and 8 (in the Body Center). So I find it the most mysterious point on the enneagram.

The two points to which it gives rise—feminine Points 3 and masculine Point 6—represent the first division of oneness into polarity consciousness. So we would expect them to be less obscure than Point 9, but more obscure than the hexad points at Level 3.

When I say obscure, I mean it literally. I mean “obscure” as a way to describe the greater hiddenness or subtlety of the energy field at Level 2 as compared to the energy field at Level 3.

If we look at Points 3, 6, and 9 in their role as midpoints (in the Heart, Head, and Body Center, respectively), this concept is easier to describe, because we are already familiar with the idea that the energy associated with each center seems to be literally absent at Points 3, 6, and 9. My point here is that maybe the energy is not really missing—maybe it's just hidden. Maybe it's got a different quality that we're used to.

Interestingly, from my perspective, it's the very lack of activity at Point 3, 6, and 9 that makes all the activity in the hexad possible: only if there is an unmoving center can there be stable movement around that center. The lack of movement at the center should not be taken to imply a lack of energy—there's plenty of energy there, but it exists more as an energy potential or resource than an energy expenditure. This does not mean that individuals of Type 3, 6, or 9 aren't energetic, simply that they work with energy in a different way than the hexad types. Specifically, they tend to be more adaptive, responsive, and generalist in orientation, while the hexad types tend to be more identifiable, expressive, and specialist in orientation. So, to sum up, I'm assuming for purposes of this discussion that we have two types of enneagram points:

Level 2: the relatively unmanifest/hidden/subtle/potentiating points of the *inner triangle* (3, 6, 9)

Level 3: the relatively manifest/visible/obvious/differentiated points of the *hexad* (1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8)

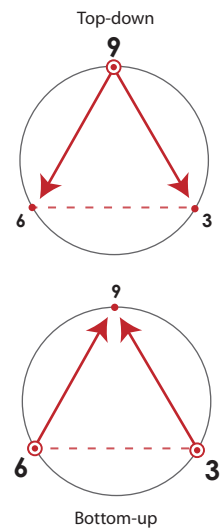


Figure 13

LEVEL 3 includes the six points *not* included in the inner triangle. We can conceptualize these six points either as the unitary figure of the hexad or as the wing pairs of the three energy centers. Each view gives us a slightly different way of conceptualizing the six points under discussion. Figure 14 embodies both views.

However we look at these six Level 3 points, it's clear that they are quite different than their inner triangle counterparts at Level 2 (Points 3, 6, and 9). They are the points on the outer edges of each energy center (the wings) that surround the inner triangle point in the middle.

Although all three points are part of the same energy center, only the wing points seem to clearly manifest the traits associated with the center—the middle point itself does not. But as mentioned in the previous section, I suspect that this difference is due less to a difference in energy *quality* and more due to a difference in energy *level*.

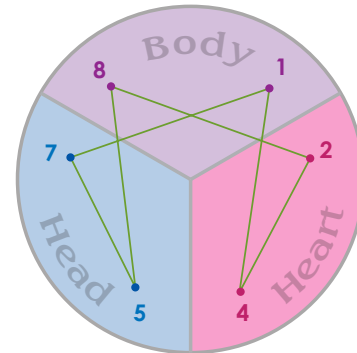


Figure 14

We can make this idea more concrete if we look at the management of a corporation. Corporations have basically two types of managers: “line” managers and staff specialists. The former are the generalists that have a variety of skills that enable them to run the business while the latter have specialized expertise in a particular area, such as accounting, tax law, graphic design, or computer programming. What’s interesting is that the expertise of an effective line manager, while considerable, is typically less visible than the expertise of the specialist. In many ways, it can be said to resemble an energy potential, in that an effective line manager is one who has the ability to quickly respond to a wide variety of needs and situations. It’s this ability to respond that enables line managers to be effective in many roles (and to potentially ascend higher in the company) than specialists. While the specialists may have more visible skills and more impressive-looking formal credentials, it’s the effective (but often less-visible) line manager who knows how to use the specialists’ expertise to best advantage.

Applying the same model to the enneagram, we can see why it’s possible to make a case for the idea that it’s the difference in *level* [of manifestation] that makes the wing points look so different than their inner triangle counterparts—that emergent (Level 2) emotion/thought/instinct just doesn’t look the same as fully-manifest (Level 3) emotion/thought/instinct.

Summary

There are many ways to talk about the patterns formed by the nine points of the enneagram. But the place to start is with the three basic geometric forms that make up the enneagram: the circle, the triangle, and the hexad. In this article, I present one way to look at these forms and their relationship with each another. I then use this approach as a jumping-off place for exploring the idea that the enneagram can be divided bilaterally into a masculine and feminine half, and that this polarity exists not only at the level of the enneagram itself, but at the level of each enneagram point. I end by looking at the nature of the enneagram centers, suggesting that differences between the inner triangle points and wing points may be less than we think.

NOTE: Part II of this essay explores more deeply the nature of the three center points that make up the inner triangle.