

The Instincts: Taking a Broader View

By Mario Sikora

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The instincts are a topic of great interest in the Enneagram community, but they often seem to be misunderstood. Much of this misunderstanding comes from a tendency of Enneagram authors to be constrained by a spiritual or psychological paradigm while ignoring the implications of biology on human nature. A greater appreciation of evolutionary biology and cognitive science will expand our understanding of the instincts, and this article is an attempt to move the conversation in that direction.

This article will make three main points:

1. There is a broader perspective on the instincts that extends beyond the physical, and that the instincts apply to both our genes and our ideas.
2. There is a natural progression of emphasis in the instincts over the course of a lifetime, a progression from “me” to “we.”
3. There is a predictable ordering of the instincts in each person.

Some background is in order, however, before going into these points.

In an episode of the TV series “Cosmos,” Carl Sagan discusses the information-containment capacity of genes, the brain, and culture. He makes the point that the genome is the original and fundamental medium of data, passing the recipe for development of an organism’s structure and behavior from one generation to another. The demands for more and more data became greater as life evolved and became more complex. This led to the evolution of the central nervous system and the brain, the most complex version of which exists between our ears. Information that could not be stored in the genome could be stored in the brain and nervous system.

Eventually, the ability of humans to communicate led to sharing of useful information; our ancestors were then able to tell each other where they could find water and food, exchange techniques for hunting prey and escaping predators, etc. Eventually, the individual brain was not up to the task of storing all of the possible data

that could be shared. Another medium for data containment became necessary—culture. Sagan makes a convincing argument that the artifacts of culture—libraries, the arts, political systems, etc.—are, in a sense, an extension of the genome.

The capacity for symbolic thinking began taking shape approximately 37,000 years ago. In time, this ability led to the development of art and other “non-essential” knowledge, but for the most part the storing and passing of information was related to simple survival in the harsh environments our ancestors faced.

In addition to the capacity for storage, there must be a mechanism for acting on the data. *Our instincts relate to the means by which this data is acted upon.*

Instincts are non-conscious responses to environmental stimuli. Generally, they are considered to be heritable and non-alterable. That is, they are passed through the genes and, in most organisms, they cannot be resisted. They get passed along from generation to generation because they serve two fundamental purposes¹: increasing the chances of survival and replication.²

Humans are slightly different from other organisms: The development of our pre-frontal cortex gives us our ability to reason and over-ride instinctive impulses. Thus, it can be scientifically argued that humans do not have instincts in the same way that other creatures do. Humans are also different in the sense that their ability to share information through culture is far more sophisticated than any other creature.

While we do behave in non-conscious, heritable ways that increase chances of survival and replication, the ability to override impulses and share information culturally broadens the scope of our instinctual behavior.³

It is this broader scope that must be looked at to see the breadth of the instincts, how they influence our behaviors and values, and how they interact with our personality type.

Traditionally, the three instincts are called “self-preservation,” “social,” and “sexual” or “one-to-one.” These names, and the descriptions of the instincts found in much of the literature, focus on

only a portion of what is going on in each of these domains. In order to encompass a broader perspective on the instinct domains, I have found it necessary to change the traditional names of the instincts when I teach them to my clients.

The Three Domains

It is common to think about the instincts as three monolithic drives in the Enneagram world. This view misses the mark; there are not three instincts, there are many instincts that cluster into three general groups or domains.² Each of these domains comprises a variety of specific drives that increase chances of survival, replication, or both. They do not merely increase chances of survival and replication of genes, however; they also increase the chances of survival and replication of *units of cultural data*, what Richard Dawkins referred to as “memes.”⁴ Memes are any pieces of non-physical data that passes from one mind to another—an idea, a tune, a belief, etc. Jingles or catch-phrases are examples of simple, virus-like memes; religions or political systems are examples of more complex memes.

Where the traditional view of the instincts is generally focused on the survival and replication of the individual, the gene, or the species, the view espoused here expands to include survival and reproduction of memes as well. In other words, we use the same instinctive patterns to maintain and pass along our ideas and artifacts as we do to maintain and pass along our genetic selves.

Thus the traditional names, especially “self-preservation” and “sexual” are inadequate because they do not include memetic survival and reproduction. (The more-politically correct “one-to-one” likewise only captures only a sliver of what occurs in this domain. This term has the added disadvantage of confusing people, making many think this instinct is dominant in them because they prefer “one-to-one” encounters to encounters with a group. The truth is, *everyone* prefers one-to-one encounters.)

We must also recognize the fact that our expression of the instincts evolves over the course of our lifetime, and this evolution occurs in a biologically logical pattern, moving from a literal and self-focused version to a more metaphorical and other-focused version. With normal development over the course of a life our concerns move from “me” to “we.”

Let’s look at each instinct domain.

The Preserving Instinct (aka “self-preservation”)

“You’ll appreciate this someday, once you’re old and your memories have faded.”

Tanya Sikora, to her frequently under-appreciative husband.

My wife, a Preserving Seven, is an almost-obsessive photographer of our three young sons. Every milestone of their development is captured in both still photographs and video. No, this is an understatement—an image from almost every day of their lives has been captured and stored. The photos are lovingly placed in photo albums (purchased in bulk), the videos are clearly labeled and dated; all are kept safe in boxes in the basement. This behavior has nothing to do with “self”-preservation, but has everything to do with “preservation.”

Yes, the instincts found in this domain serve to preserve the individual. People in whom this instinct is dominant⁵ are focused on their physical comfort and well-being and on matters concerning resources. This focus increases the likelihood of survival of the individual, and thereby increases the likelihood of survival and replication of the gene (in other words, if you live longer, you are more likely to reproduce). Humans live well beyond traditional reproduction stages, however, and this is where the “other” or “we” focus of the preservation instinct comes into play: the instinct applies to the preservation of other things: offspring, traditions, artifacts, etc.

People with a dominant Preservation instinct tend to be protectors of the things that can be passed from one generation to another—pictures, heirlooms, religious or family rituals, etc. They not only focus on their own physical well-being, but on the well-being of those they care about, prodding them to exercise, eat right, save their money, etc. They prefer durable and practical resources to ephemeral resources, wanting to “get their money’s worth” by purchasing things that will last and can be passed down to future generations.

This instinct domain assists in the preservation and protection of memes and preservation types tend to be conservative in the broadest sense of the word: resisting change and holding onto the memes that have stood the test of time.

The Navigating Instinct (aka “Social”)

“For decades, the reigning view had been that hunting prowess and the ability to vanquish

competitors was the key to our ancestors' evolutionary success..... Instead, they rel[ied] on their wits and, especially, their social skills to survive.”

Sharon Begley⁷

We've tended to view our ancestors' ability to survive and thrive on their ability to be the hunter who preyed on others, using their superior intelligence to trap and kill creatures that were far more powerful than them. This dominance is a late development, however, and our earlier ancestors were more likely to be the *dinner* than the *diner* at the carnivore buffet. For example, *Australopithecus afarensis*, an early relative to us humans commonly known as “Lucy,” was a comparatively small creature who climbed up trees to escape predators and survived on fruits and nuts rather than burgers.

Our ancestors were prey animals, and prey animals tend to be social animals because cooperation and alignment enhances their chances of survival. The social behaviors that allowed our earliest ancestors to survive—namely collaboration, empathy, and cooperation—became the origin of human nature.

(Those who don't understand evolution in general and Darwin's phrase “survival of the fittest” in particular have a difficult time understanding how evolution can account for cooperation, self-sacrifice, altruism, etc. This is a non-problem; “fittest” refers to appropriateness or “fitness” for a given set of environmental demands. Natural selection, in a species dependent on cooperation for survival, would favor these qualities in individuals and their genes would be more likely to be passed along, making that quality take root in future generations of the species. The finer aspects of human nature are just as embedded in our genes as the coarser aspects.)

Thus, an instinct domain developed that was just as critical as fundamental to survival as preservation and reproduction: a domain for instincts for relating to the group. “Social” is a technically appropriate term for the focus of this instinct domain, but it tends to be confusing in general usage. We tend to think that people in whom this instinct is dominant are outgoing and gregarious, liking to be around and interact with other people. This is only partially correct: this domain is really about the workings of the group and our ability to successfully *navigate* them; to create alignment with those who can protect us and

behave in ways that will make us acceptable to others. It is about figuring out where we fit into the hierarchy; monitoring the behavior of others and establishing norms and mores; and presenting ourselves in “socially acceptable” ways.

I referred to it as “orienting to the group” in an earlier article² but I believe that “navigating” is a more accurate label for this instinct domain since it is all about making one's way through the world, especially in relationship to others.

As far as memes are concerned, the focus of the Navigating type is on evaluating and positioning units of culture. Which memes deserve to be passed along? How can they be presented in the best possible light? This is the world of *criticism* (passing judgment and weeding out ineffective ideas) and *marketing* (presenting the memes so they will survive the test of societal acceptance).

The Transmitting Instinct (aka “sexual” or “one-to-one”)

“I have to tell everyone about, ‘bout, ‘bout myself.”

1 Giant Leap, “Braided Hair”

This line is recited over a scratching turntable on the album “1 Giant Leap,” an exploration of world music, just before Speech and Neneh Cherry break into a swooping rap about identity and destiny as uplifting and sacred as anything to be found in church, and it's funky to boot. I quote it here because the line, and the song, represents much of what's at the heart of this instinct domain: the drive to spread a part of oneself beyond oneself.

Among the definitions of “transmit” are “to send or convey from one person or place to another” and “to convey by or as if by inheritance or heredity,” and this domain comprises instincts that result in the reproduction or replication of our genes and our memes.

Again, the standard language is inadequate. Biologically speaking, “sex” is a very specific form or reproduction. The word “sexual” refers to things related to the sex act or to the two sexes. While “sex” is at the heart of some of the instincts in this domain, it is only one means to a broader end—replication. Other instincts in the domain focus on “one-to-one,” intimacy issues. They push us closer to other individuals, seeking deep connection (which makes it easier to “transmit”). Both terms capture part of the domain, but not the

whole, and they completely miss the element of memetic reproduction.

This domain also includes behaviors related to attracting attention to ourselves. It is our drive to dress up, put on jewelry, and preen for others; it is the drive to draw attention to ourselves; it is the drive to step up on a soapbox and make our voice heard.

This is also the domain that includes our instincts related to issues of legacy: what do we leave behind? What will people remember about us? How will we have helped to shape the future? It would also seem that the genesis of creativity lies in this domain—the act of generating something “new”⁷ and project it out into the world is very much an act of replication and transmission.

Ennea-type and Instinct

There are many ways to describe the intersection of Ennea-type and instinct. In last month’s *Enneagram Monthly* Susan Rhodes identified a comprehensive list archetypal images for each of the 27 subtype variations (nine types multiplied by three instincts). Others use single words or short phrases to describe each variation.

These methods can be very rich and instructive, but they can also be difficult to remember because they typically require memorization of 27 different labels. The descriptors I use tie the instinct and Ennea-type in a simpler way.

First, we have to understand the relationship between instinct and Ennea-type: Simply put, *the instinct is what drives our desires; our Ennea-type is how we go about satisfying those desires*. This is why I use the term “strategy” in referring to what is the core of type: Ennea-type is not what we are “like;” it is how we go about things. Ennea-type is not so much rooted in “motivation” as it is in “approach.” Motivation is more tied to the instincts.

The chart in Figure One gives a simple descriptor for each of the 27 subtype variations that combines instinct and strategy. The terms used here are not as evocative, perhaps, as some of the other descriptors of the subtypes, but they are simple and logical and they have great inferential power. In other words, one can infer a great deal from the descriptors once one understands the concepts of the strategies and the instincts.

Figure One: The 27 Subtypes

	Preserving Instinct	Navigating Instinct	Transmitting Instinct
Type One: Striving to be Perfect	Perfect Preservation	Perfect Navigation	Perfect Transmission
Type Two: Striving to be Connected	Connected Preservation	Connected Navigation	Connected Transmission
Type Three: Striving to be Outstanding	Outstanding Preservation	Outstanding Navigation	Outstanding Transmission
Type Four: Striving to be Unique	Unique Preservation	Unique Navigation	Unique Transmission
Type Five: Striving to be Detached	Detached Preservation	Detached Navigation	Detached Transmission
Type Six: Striving to be Secure	Secure Preservation	Secure Navigation	Secure Transmission
Type Seven: Striving to be Excited	Excited Preservation	Excited Navigation	Excited Transmission
Type Eight: Striving to be Powerful	Powerful Preservation	Powerful Navigation	Powerful Transmission
Type Nine: Striving to be Peaceful	Peaceful Preservation	Peaceful Navigation	Peaceful Transmission

Ordering of the Instincts (aka “Stacking”)

Finally, a few words about the ordering of the instincts, which is commonly referred to as “stacking.” I avoid the term “stacking” because the relationship of the instincts to each other is not as simple as “one instinct is dominant, one is secondary, and the third has less influence on us.” Instead, one instinct is so dominant in us that it informs almost everything that we do; it is the water we swim in, and we are so immersed in it that we tend not to even notice it as we happily go about our day. (At times of stress, however, our attention becomes more focused there as we look for something to grasp to make us feel more grounded, and when an instinctive need is being impeded it will cause psychological dissonance. Most of the time, however, we act out our instincts unconsciously and on autopilot.)

A second instinct tends to be an area of some inner conflict; it drives us in certain ways, but it also causes us a degree of angst (in a sense, the secondary instinct is “adolescent territory,” we are drawn there but feel insecure and resistant at the same time). The third instinct tends to be underdeveloped; we tend to overlook the important lessons found in this domain, but we also typically don’t have much angst there.

This may seem like a controversial statement in some corners of the Enneagram world, but there is a predictable ordering of the instincts.

People with a dominant Preserving instinct tend to have a secondary Navigating instinct. They may appear socially comfortable and have a desire to be part of the group, but inside they are uncomfortable and they often doubt their ability to successfully satisfy social demands. They show concern for others but often don’t feel like they understand the rules and feel like they don’t fit in. Their Transmitting instinct is the least developed; they typically demonstrate little interest in drawing attention to themselves, standing out, or showcasing their abilities.

People with a dominant Navigating instinct tend to have a secondary Transmitting instinct. They want to be noticed but tend to be leery of anything that seems to be too flashy or self-promotional; they often display ambivalence about broadcasting their views—letting loose in some circumstances and holding back in others; and they want to get close to people but resist efforts of others to get too close too fast. Their Preserving instinct is the least developed; they typically

demonstrate insufficient interest in their health and comfort and often have less respect for tradition than others might.

People with a dominant Transmitting instinct tend to have a secondary Preserving instinct. They tend to be good at accumulating resources, but they can be impulsive in their spending of those resources; they focus on their health but push themselves hard and neglect it; they respect tradition but may upend it. Their Navigating instinct is the least developed; they tend to focus on broadcasting their views and often lack the inner radar necessary for picking up social cues from others.

Figure Two shows the ordering of the instincts.

There is still much to learn about the instincts, and many of those revelations will come from a deeper understanding of biology and neuroscience. I encourage the reader to view the instincts from this broader perspective and watch the interplay of type and instinct in his or her own life.

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Notes:

¹To speak of “purpose” in relation to evolution or instinct is somewhat misleading. Evolution is not conscious or directed (and it is certainly not “intelligent”); it is *adaptive* and *responsive* to environmental conditions that are complex and unpredictable. Instincts have no “purpose” in the sense of an end to be attained; they produce a result that leads to their continuation. Language is limited, however, and “purpose” will have to suffice.

²See the article “The Notes and the Melody, Part III” on my website at <http://www.mariosikora.com/articles.html> for more on how the instincts enhance survival and reproduction.

³ I must credit my associate, Mark Bodnarczuk, for forcing me, in the face of much resistance, to see the instincts from this broader perspective.

⁴See Dawkins’ “The Selfish Gene” and Susan Blackmore’s “The Meme Machine” for more on this idea. The term “meme” has also been

appropriated by the Spiral Dynamics movement, but the concept is not the same.

⁵It should go without saying that we all have all of the instincts; we are focused here on preponderance rather than exclusivity.

⁶Begley, Sharon, "Beyond Stones and Bones," *Newsweek*, March 19, 2007, p. 56.

⁷It would be difficult to find any act of creation that is not a reflection of its creator.

Figure Two: The Ordering of the Instincts

