

Instinctual Drives in Inner Work from the Temple of Edfu, Egypt

Published by [John Luckovich](#) on June 19, 2018

We have a private Facebook discussion page for those currently taking our advanced webinar course on the Instinctual Drives and the Enneagram where folks have been sharing about their experience with the Enneagram and where they first learned of it.

These discussions inspired me to share one of the major events that provoked the insights and ignited the burning questions that eventually led to the development of much of the current material we've been exploring in these webinars and in-person classes.

First, I have been involved in the Gurdjieff Work for many years. The Enneagram symbol was brought to the West by G.I. Gurdjieff, who used it as a description of how fundamental laws come together in a process rather than as a typology. In the Gurdjieff Work, the emphasis is on how to work to be present in the conditions of ordinary life. Based on many years of working with the Enneagram of Personality Types, it was apparent to me that much of what works against our efforts to be present was our identification with the Instinctual Drives, but all that entailed, nor what the stakes were, wasn't quite clear to me.

I have a consuming passion for Ancient Egypt. So in the midst of trying to find a way to understand the instincts with a view to how to "work to be present in the conditions of ordinary life", I came upon a 2000-year-old mural carved into the outer wall of the Temple to Horus in Edfu, Egypt. Its symbolism spoke directly to my heart.



The image was of a cluster of Nine Egyptian Gods on the left facing Three other, larger, Egyptian Gods on the right. The Egyptians didn't think of their gods as beings or personalities, as modern people are prone to imagine gods. The Egyptian word for their gods was Neteru, which means "principles", as in, personifications of principles of consciousness and nature. Seeing this was a major event because it simultaneously represented the significance of the Instinctual Drives in this Gurdjieffian approach to inner work and it spoke to how the Instincts related to the Enneagram.

I think this image is a representation of a kind of "proto-enneagram", prior to or apart from the geometric symbol, and one which speaks directly to the role and place of the Instincts with the Essential qualities of the Enneagram. And yes, I do think there is evidence that what we know today as the Enneagram of Personality has roots as far back as ancient Egypt.

On the right of this image we have a very clear representation of the Law of Three in the relationship between Horus, Set, and Isis. The Law of Three, represented in every trinity in different traditions, is one of the fundamental aspects of the Enneagram and it cannot be understood without it.

The falcon-headed Horus (a falcon head because the Falcon or Hawk was seen as "descending from the sun", with the sun being a symbol of the Absolute Divine) is the son of the god-king Osiris and goddess-queen Isis. Osiris is betrayed and murdered by his brother Set, and Horus avenges his father.

Set is the little guy being stood upon in one of his animal forms; in this case, a Hippo. Set is generally understood to be a "god of evil," but that's far too simplistic and it ignores how, especially in the early Dynastic Period, the Pharaoh was identified with BOTH Horus and Set, and with their unity and reconciliation.

Set represents the impulse toward the material world. He represents the Instinctual Drives and where the Instinctual Drives direct our attention. In Egypt, the Temples were dedicated to the Neteru, but everywhere else was the realm of Set. This is not because everywhere else was bad or evil, but because it was the world of daily functioning, the place that is the domain of our instincts.

Horus, on the other hand, represents the Divine in the world of time and space, the prototype of the Christ principles, the Personal Essence.

The two have an epic battle. In our Inner Work and daily experience, this battle represents the inner tug-of-war we experience between our desire to grow, to be good, to be spiritual or conscious, as represented by Horus; and our desire to indulge, to end suffering, to get what we want when we want because we want it, as represented by Set. He represents our Instinctual drives.

In battle, Horus and Set blind each other and get locked up. It's a duality — a yes and no, a good and bad, like and dislike — and they cancel each other out. If we become identified with trying to be good, to be awake and conscious, trying to be spiritual, we can become blind to how we actually live, our true motivations, our human neediness and vulnerability. Likewise, if we become identified with Set, what does our life become except an unsatisfying quest to get what we want? We fall "asleep," to use the language of spiritual traditions. In either option, identifying with one denies the other. When we're identified with Horus, we're ignoring our humanity and blind to many of our basic motivations and needs, and when we're identified with Set, we fail to fulfill the potential of our consciousness.

The story goes to absurd lengths with many different interpretations, but the bottom line is that Horus and Set have to find their “right relationship” with one another. This is done through the intervention of the Goddess Isis, who, in the image, stands behind them.

The crown of Isis is a throne, which represents her quality as the “holding matrix”: the actively receptive quality of consciousness that is taken in presence. Isis is present to both the Horus and the Set in us. When we’re present with both, not rejecting one or clinging to the other, Horus and Set take their ‘rightful place’ with each other.

You can see in the image that Horus has his watchful eye right at Set’s throat; Set is under his control but not slain. You’ve probably seen more modern interpretations of this in the image of Christ riding a Donkey into the Holy City (Donkey being another animal associated with Set) and even St. George and the Dragon.



So when these three forces are in their rightful place, the Nine Essential energies open up and are available, represented by these standing Neteru on the left.

I’m not sure if all these Nine Neteru, called an Ennead, relate to the Personality Types as we know them. Egypt had many Enneads, and this is just one expression of an Ennead. However, I believe that the very ancient and primary Ennead of Heliopolis (Pesedjet of Innu) very much corresponds to the Enneagram we know today.

Anyway, this image blew my mind — I directly saw how powerful and ancient this work was. The Temple to Horus in Edfu is fairly “modern”, completed around 237 BC, but it claims to have been taken from much, much older documents that were fragmenting at the time that the Temple was constructed. And it also was constructed atop an older temple, as was very common in Egypt, which adds to the Mystery of how far back this wisdom came.

For me, this image was a statement on what it means to reconcile our animal nature and our spiritual nature, to hold both, to not prefer one or reject the other. To be really, truly human means to fully embrace and integrate both sides of our wholeness. This is the basis of trying to understand the instinctual drives and what they mean for our consciousness, as impartially as possible.

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