

## Triadic key to Platonic meditations

*"In every world a triad shines forth, of which a monad is the principle."*

Chaldean Oracles, TT fr.75

This short paper is designed to be an introduction to the concept of triads in Platonic philosophy as a technique for learning: I hope that this will form the basis of an interesting evening's discussion – it is, of course, very far from an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but leaves space for participants to explore this usually neglected area.

The philosophy of Plato and his continuing tradition rests on an affirmation that reality – however that term is understood – **is a systematic unity**, one which embraces the extended multiplicity we see around us. It is essentially a top-down system so that the First Principle of this 'All' is held to be the cause of all: as Plato's Seventh Letter poetically puts it, it is "the cause of beautiful things."

This fundamental affirmation underpins every aspect of the tradition's philosophy – metaphysical, ethical, psychological, and so on: for this reason, advances made by the seeker after wisdom in one area enhances his or her understanding of other areas. The seeming difficult complexity facing us as we contemplate the great sweep of philosophy is thus, perhaps, less daunting than might otherwise be imagined. One of the great keys to the serious cultivation of Platonic wisdom is *triadic thinking*: once one begins to look at texts of both Plato and the Platonists of late antiquity ("Neoplatonists") it becomes clear that triads abound.

We can look at a few examples in a moment, but a brief explanation might be offered in relatively simple terms: if the whole of reality is understood as springing from a primal unity, then its unfolding can be seen as shaped by the nature of the law of cause – which is to say that everything we perceive in any way is the effect of a cause, and each of those prior causes is an effect of a yet higher cause, and this chain of causes and effects can be traced back to the First Principle, or the causeless cause. And in this chain of causes and effects we can claim our first triad: in any link in that chain there must be three things – a cause, a power exercised by that cause, and an effect. Taking a step back from the picture here, we can see that without this universal pattern reality would be disordered and unintelligent.

The Platonic teachings rely on this underlying pattern to understand every aspect of philosophic reality, and the secret of unpacking these teachings is the realisation that the triads understood in one area help the would-be philosopher to understand those in all other areas. To grasp the nature of, for example, the relation between Being, Life and Intellect (the three great eternal orders), is to gain an insight into the relation between Soul, Nature and Body (the three great orders of the temporal realm); to grasp the relation of intuition, reason and opinion (the three gnostic powers of the soul) is to gain an insight into the relation between intellect, soul and body (or the place of the soul between its own cause and its own effect).

Some of these triads address specific elements of reality, others are more general thought guides. Of the latter an important one is:

## Abiding, proceeding, returning

“Everything caused, abides in, proceeds from, and returns, or is converted to, its cause.” (Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 35)

The view that things are arranged in conformity to this triad can be seen in the way in which Being established itself as a stable and abiding basis for reality, while Life is a dynamic procession showing forth the hidden nature that lies in Being, and Intellect is a reflexive gaze back towards its own nature – the being that gives rise to the knower.

Or it can be seen in the Platonic tradition’s three intellectual Gods, Kronos, Rhea and Zeus: for Kronos rules over an unproceeding and contemplative thought (hence he swallows down his offspring, who would otherwise bring things into a more expansive activity); Rhea (her name means ‘flowing’) on the other hand, rules over that intellectual life which demands to proceed into expression – in the myth it is Rhea who conspires, firstly to ensure that Kronos’ children are saved from the ever-static nature of the father, and secondly to empower the mighty Zeus to establish the Olympian Gods; Zeus it is who rules over the creative form of Intellect, and hence is seen as the Demiurgic producer of the manifest Cosmos.

We might also see the abiding-proceeding-returning pattern in terms of ontology, insofar as the Platonic philosophy considers that every being possesses an **essence**, **power** and **activity**. Thus Proclus in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* begins his analysis of the soul by saying “Since therefore, we find that the soul is triple from the beginning, possessing essence, power and activity . . .” For the **essence** of something is its stable core, its **power** is what projects its nature into the rest of the cosmos, and its **activity** is what allows its nature to be reflected in everything around it.

\* \* \*

In Plato’s exploration of the human soul the idea that it can be understood as tripartite is presented in both the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. In the former the soul is seen as analogous to a state in which the inhabitants are arranged in three classes – the governors, the auxiliaries and the producers of goods – just as the soul has a reasoning part (*logos*), an ordering part (*thumos*) and a desiring part (*epithumos*). In the *Phaedrus* the soul is described as like the “kindred power of a wing chariot” being guided by a charioteer and drawn by two horses.

We might even go back to the *Timeaus*’ exposition of the creation of the soul mixed from *essence*, *sameness* and *difference* which, one can argue, is the reason why it eventually emerges as a tripartite actor in the cosmos. Here is an extract from that exposition and we might notice that already in the background is another triplicity - for each of these three (essence, sameness and difference) is actually mixed from “that which is indivisible” (or eternal intellect) and that which is “divisible about bodies” so that the soul essence is a third form of essence, soul sameness is a third form of sameness and soul difference is a third form of difference

“From an essence impartible, and always subsisting according to sameness of being, and from a nature divisible about bodies, he mingled from both a third form of essence, having a middle subsistence between the two. And again, between that

which is impartible and that which is divisible about bodies, he placed the nature of *same* and *different*. And taking these, now they are three, he mingled them all into one idea. But as the nature of *different* could not without difficulty be mingled in *same*, he harmonized them together by employing force in their conjunction. But after he had mingled these two with essence, and had produced one from the three, he again divided this whole into becoming parts; at the same time mingling each part from *same*, *different*, and *essence*.” (*Timaeus* 35a-b)

\* \* \*

Another triad that jumps out to the alert reader of the *Phaedrus* comes when Socrates begins to explore the relation of the human soul to that which is divine. He says “But that which is divine is beautiful, wise, and good, and whatever can be asserted of a similar kind.” (246e) Can we see the abiding, proceeding and returning here if we reverse the order of divine characteristics to read good, wise and beautiful?

\* \* \*

Plotinus, famously presents the basic three hypostases (or natures) of reality as the One, Intellect and Soul.

Both Olympiodorus and Proclus examine Socrates’ syllogistic reasoning in Plato’s *Frist Alcibiades* where he attempts to demonstrate that for the soul **the just** is synonymous with **the good** by use of a middle term **the beautiful**. Proclus suggests that the good resides in the **One** and the Gods, the beautiful resides in eternal **intellect**, and the just is the concern of **soul** as it seeks to unfold its divine nature.

We can, perhaps, understand from this that the soul is conjoined to the Gods through its reception of eternal intellect – that it seeks its return to the abiding Good from the generous procession of the divinely beautiful forms of intellect.

\* \* \*

We might finally consider the last words of the *Phaedo* in which Plato pays tribute to his teacher, Socrates:

“This, Echecrates, was the end of our associate; a man, as it appears to me, the **best** of those whom we were acquainted with at that time, and, besides this, the most **prudent** and **just**.” (*Phaedo* 118a)

### Further exploration of the Good, Wise and Beautiful

If we have time, we may want to explore a particular triad, which is then divided into three sub-triads in Proclus’ *Theology of Plato*.

“To us however discussing what pertains to every divine nature, what we assert will be known from those commonly received truths adduced in the *Phaedrus*, and which we have before mentioned. Socrates therefore says that every thing divine is beautiful, wise, and good and he indicates that this triad pervades to all the progressions of the Gods.” Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, I, 21

“But in the *Philebus*, Plato delivers to us the three most principal elements of *the good*, *viz.* the **desirable**, the **sufficient**, and the **perfect**. . . For it is ineffable, and prior to all knowledge extends to all beings. For all things desire *the good*, and are converted to it. . . But the sufficient is full of boniform power, proceeds to all things, and extends to all beings the gifts of the Gods. For we conceive such a sufficiency as this to be a power pervading and protending to the last of things, extending the unenvying and exuberant will of the Gods, and not abiding in itself, but unically comprehending the super-plenitude, the never-failing, the infinite, and that which is generative of good in the divine hyparxis. . . But the third thing, the perfect, is convertive of the whole of things, and circularly collects them to their causes; and this is accomplished by divine, intellectual, psychical and physical perfection.” I, 22.

“After this, wisdom is allotted the second order, being the intelligence of the Gods, or rather the hyparxis of their intelligence. . . the genus of wisdom is triadic. Hence it is **full** of being and truth, is **generative** of intellectual truth, and is **perfective** of intellectual natures that are in energy, and itself possesses a stable power. We must admit therefore, that these things pertain to the wisdom of the Gods. For this wisdom is full indeed of divine goodness, generates divine truth, and perfects all things posterior to itself.” I, 23

“In the next place let us consider the beautiful, what it is, and how it primarily subsists in the Gods. It is said therefore to be boniform beauty, and intelligible beauty, to be more ancient than intellectual beauty, and to be beauty itself, and the cause of beauty to all beings; and all such like epithets. . . Plato also delivers three indications of this beauty, in the *Symposium* indeed, denominating it the delicate; for the perfect and that which is most blessed, accedes to the beautiful through the participation of goodness. . . . One of the indications therefore of the beautiful, is a thing of this kind, *viz.* the delicate. But we may assume another indication of it from the *Phaedrus*, *viz.* the splendid. For Plato attributing this to the beautiful says: "It was then that we were permitted to see splendid beauty shining upon us etc." . . . And at last he says: "But now beauty alone has this allotment to be most splendid and most lovely." These two things therefore are to be assumed as indications of beauty. Another indication of beauty is this, that it is the object of love, which now also Plato appears to me to have called most lovely.” I, 24

“In short, there are these three things which replenish divine natures, and which are the sources of plenitude to all the superior genera of beings, *viz.* goodness, wisdom and beauty. And again, there are three things which collect together the natures that are filled, being secondary indeed to the former, but pervading to all the divine orders, and these are **faith**, **truth** and **love**. But all things are saved through these, and are conjoined to their primary causes; some things indeed, through the amatory mania, others through divine philosophy, and others through theurgic power, which is more excellent than all human wisdom, and which comprehends prophetic good, the purifying powers of perfective good, and in short, all such things as are the effects of divine possession.” I, 25