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Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements

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Appendix C: Triadism in the history of 19th and early 20th century psychology

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APPENDIX C.

TRIADISM IN THE HISTORY OF 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY PSYCHOLOGY

A brief introductory comment: in the sense of natural philosophy the Four Elements theory defines not only the constituents but also the quality of the physical sphere. Since constituents and quality must always be changing through becoming mixed together (*krasis*)—with both immediate and long-term effects—it is not surprising that, from the proper perspective, certain large chronological formations seem to emerge: that is, certain elements seem to predominate at certain times. But the chronological value of the theory is almost a side-effect of that ongoing flux of constituents and quality which provides an initial basis for an objective (scientific) investigation of the world.

At the other pole, in psychology, which barely surfaces in conceptual form in Plato and Aristotle, a functional triadism can be discerned. It is not explicit in the same sense as Empedokles' quadripartite world structure but it functions implicitly as inner pattern of the least physical of the four elements: fire/*nous*. However, this triadism was never given any canonical formulation; indeed, the separate versions of Plato and Aristotle were never reconciled, for the following age took no interest in the matter. Nevertheless, the principle that the *nous* had three functions, or consisted of three functions (thinking, feeling and willing), with a sequential aspect (important for relative chronology) serves as the formal link between four elements science and periodicity. This link is, in fact, virtually explicit in Plato and Aristotle (see Chapter I, *The Three Faculties of the Ego*, paragraph 11) but at the same time easily overlooked or undervalued.

While the circumstances so far discussed might be sufficient to orient the reader about the nature of this book, the idea of a three-tiered ego is both unfamiliar enough at the present time and yet significant enough to justify my giving a brief account of its emergence as a psychological concept in modern times. I mention first that certain

philosophers and psychologists of the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries pondered the nature and functions of the ego, thus renewing, after a couple of generations, the quest after the foundation of human existence which had been pursued by Kant, Fichte and Hegel. But if the latter had made the ego the cornerstone of grand philosophical systems, their diadochian successors were more concerned with the concept of the "I" in terms of self-experience—virtually self-preoccupation—and it is not difficult to see how this kind of self-analysis could lead, on the one hand, to existentialism and, on the other, to psychoanalysis. For, whereas the philosophers of German idealism had still assumed a real spiritual world as the ultimate locus of the ego with its inner structure, the triumph of materialistic science in the intervening decades of the 19th century left the later thinkers stranded without a credible spiritual world to support them (see again Introduction, note 5). Thus, they had no alternative but to dissect their own ego consciousness as a closed-off phenomenon. What is of extreme interest is the way they did this, as I hope to show next.

It does not lie in my competence to write a history of the conception that cognition, sensibility (sensory life) and intentioniality are the three interlocking faculties by which human consciousness orients and propels itself in the world. If I knew of such a history, I should certainly have consulted it. Here I can offer—obviously from a layman' sperspective—only a few basic observations to supplement the considerations brought forward in the text.

In a recent study E. T. Brann[1] has shown that the difficult concept of the imagination and its role in philosophy drove the creators of the "grand modern systems": Kant, J. G. Fichte and Hegel to an inwardizing analysis of the cognizing faculties. Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, did that in a thought structure based on cognition, sensibility and the ineluctible self: "an active subject....possessing a prudent reason—in fact, the will". Neither Kant nor Brann recognizes these terms as being more than a tool (almost a convention) of philosophical reasoning nor did they pause over the fact that the concepts form a trio. Nevertheless, this framework—extraordinarily complex in its ramifications and bafflingly abstract to the non-specialist—in some way testifies to a bias towards triadic organization in western thought. In the same era J. G. Fichte produced another powerful system; his definition of the ego and non-ego as a way of giving Kantian thought a real focus has become the very ground of modern existence.[2] Equally important was Hegel's system of triadic processes in dialectical reasoning. With these systems the state at which Classical Greece entrusted philosophy to the world had been re-gained on a new and much more comprehensive basis which could serve as a springboard to a completely new era. My own intimation (above) that, instead of advance, there was a hiatus at this point is specifically confirmed by Brann (107) who speaks of a "philosophic eclipse" in the middle of the 19th century (in terms of her interest in imagination).

Although the impetus of the grand systems as such was lost or dissipated during the "eclipse", certain parts of them proved to be very fruitful in modern life.[3] It seems possible to speak of a clarification of Kant's three modalities as they would exist in a Fichtean ego, but an ego now very much thrown back on itself, as I suggested above.[4] These three Kantian modalities (cognition, sensibility, and will) reappear in a "mini-

system" describing the stages of world-views: namely, the so-called "Structure of a World View" (see Appendix B) by Wilhelm Dilthey, who must have actually observed the system in his own "lived experience" (as *Erlebnis* is translated by Brann), since he was not given to depending on what he (sc. his ego) could not actually experience. In fact, it is well known that Dilthey, professor of philosophy at Berlin, desired to supplement the Kantian system by producing a structural system in mental life based on "lived experience".[5] His triadic threefold system ((see Chapter I, *Recapitulation and Interpretation of Dilthey's "Structure of a World View"*, paragraph 3) as such seems not to have gained adherents in its entirety, but in general Dilthey was influential among the coterie of thinkers who produced important movements in the early 20th century, especially phenomenology and existentialism. Brann (110) stated that he was read and respected by both Husserl and Heidigger. And whether or not it is owing specifically to Dilthey, it is remarkable that so many intellectuals of his time reasoned in a triadic framework of the ego—even if they referred to it as "soul" or did not specifically use the words thinking, feeling and willing. For example, Edmund Husserl, who like Fichte had an almost obsessive preoccupation with the "I", wrote of "the human ego who experiences (feels?), thinks and acts naturally in the world."[6] A critic of George Simmel (an almost exact contemporary of Husserl) summarizes:

> Experience, however, is not all of a piece. We experience in different modes. It is one thing to know an object, another to appreciate it as beautiful, and still another to revere it as an object of worship. In Simmel's view the contents experienced in each of these three cases may be the same although they are not the same in experience.[7]

The similarity to Dilthey's system cannot be overlooked. Again, Rudolf Steiner, coming from a quite different direction, Goethe's world view, nevertheless in 1917 defined these same three functions (thinking, feeling and willing) in such a way that their orderly progression in human life could be made the basis of his practical suggestions in various fields of human endeavor.[8] Even Sigmund Freud worked within a framework of three levels of consciousness represented by the terms ego, superego and id.[9] Did Freud intend to distance himself from philosophical stereotypes by turning the terms on their head or was he a creature of his era? It does not seem far-fetched to see the ego in this case as the thinking agent, the superego—often compared to conscience—as the ultimate instance of the will as it decides what is permissible behavior,[10] and the id as unmitigated, emotional response to the world. In art historical reasoning also, feeling, thinking and willing appear (Riegl).[11]

What strikes me about all this is that it confronts us with a transmutation of a Greek insight, however one may imagine this to have occurred (it is worth remarking that Dilthey must have been quite familiar with the works of Plato). Thus, in the very era in which the history of Greek art was being organized in modern terms (1880–1930) there was a philosophic mode of inquiry into ego-consciousness that was similar to, if not in fact ultimately derived from, ancient Greek philosophy and hence humanistic in its core. However, such a study as the present one could not have rested on a secure archeological foundation in the fifty years mentioned above. But enough factual

knowledge about Greek art has accumulated since then that it may not be out of place now.

My attempt to study Greek art holistically thus builds upon the categories established by the last humanistic generation before the fragmentation of the later 20th century obscured its heritage, namely, content and structural functionality of human consciousness. In this study the Four Elements theory provides the content of each large era of Greek art, which was actually working on a different aspect of the same root idea, thus illustrating Simmel's insight that the same content can be experienced quite differently at different times. Simultaneously Dilthey's concept of triadic processes, working in effect cyclically but more in Hegel's sense than in the specific ideation of the Greeks, explains how human consciousness shifts unceasingly from one aspect of content to another.

There is one more basic problem in dealing with the art of the Greeks: the difference in their conception of time from ours. I am not speaking of the fact that they articulated years, for example, by Olympiads nor of the reverse counting in B.C. dates. There is a more profound difference grounded in the perception of most ancient peoples (the Hebrews excepted) that time is a matter of recurring cycles. Even the Judaeo-Christian tradition, with its view of cumulative events leading to the last judgment,[12] shared with the endless-cycles peoples the concept of a divine origin of the cosmos.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Bible-based conception of cosmic time as beginning in 4004 B.C. was swept away by the work of various scientists who inferred a chain of physico-chemical events stretching back indefinitely with no secure theory of organic inception, particularly of consciousness. The impersonality of this view of time facilitated a totally detached observation of natural phenomena, which then spread from the physical to the social sciences and beyond—to all aspects of conscious life. My intention in Chapters III-V is to step out of this customary, impersonal frame of reference and to participate as directly as possible in the (necessarily) quite different time-experience recoverable from Greek philosophy and art. I have attempted to do this through a consideration of the quality of historical consciousness preceding the shift from a cyclical time frame into a straight-line time frame (for an explanation see Chapter III, *The Cyclical Quality of Greek Art*, paragraphs 5–9).