

July 2000

Chapter 1: Toward defining the ego

J.L. Benson

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgs

Benson, J.L., "Chapter 1: Toward defining the ego" (2000). *Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements*. 5.
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgs/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Greek Sculpture and the Four Elements by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

I.

TOWARD DEFINING THE EGO GREEK AND MODERN VIEWPOINTS

THE THREE FACULTIES OF THE EGO

Though taken over directly from the Latin language, the term *ego*¹ has particular overtones for the modern ear that cannot have been present in ancient usage. The mere fact that, as a personal pronoun, it was normally omitted leads to the thought that, throughout Graeco-Roman antiquity, consciousness of self as something separate from nature (however conceived) was not an experience of people of that time. A feeling of such separation did not become intellectually acute, apparently, much before Kant and particularly J. G. Fichte, whose formulation of *ego* and *non-ego* continues to be a factor in modern philosophy. Nevertheless, some kind of consciousness of self did exist in ancient times because the pronoun existed and could be used for emphasis and self assertion (see note 1).

The concept of a distinct operative entity: “a consciously thinking subject”² was (and is) emphasized in *modern* languages by the convention of saying “I” with every verb in the first person and it is surely this which eventually demanded recognition in philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. So at least I explain the adoption of the ancient pronoun as an abstraction capable of adjectival and nominal variations: *egohood*, *egoity*, *egomania*, *egotism*, *egotistical*, to mention some. As the prototypical symbol of man’s ability to reason and hence exist self-consciously and creatively in a sphere unattainable by animals, it refers to the highest member of the four member schema that Aristotle used. He designated this member as *nous*³, usually translated as mind, reason, intellect, giving the adjective *noetic*. To this limited extent the system of Aristotle is still current. But modern philosophy, with perhaps rare exceptions, has no perception of a macrocosmic intelligence—or at least would relegate it to speculation or religious faith—whereas such a force was taken as a matter of course to be the active principle of the universe by ancient philosophers from Anaxagoras to Zeno and Plotinos.

One might conclude from this congeries of circumstances that human self-consciousness has increased so dramatically in modern times as to blind it—in the sense that glaring lights blind the eyes—to any such correlative higher consciousness that was still almost automatically evident to earlier thinkers. Such thinkers could be described as more balanced than we—at least not isolated and alienated like many modern thinkers, especially existentialists—and this is perhaps generally the emotional reaction we have to ancient thought and art. Yet at the same time we find these latter, by our standards, strangely incurious about the possibility of fully experiencing and exploiting the physicality of self and world.

In particular the later 20th century seems to have lost consciousness of the fact that the conception of a microcosmic ego—best known in its Platonic form—was based on—or, as it were, consisted of—three soul faculties. These are distinguishable if not easily definable and they seem at least analogous to what 19th century philosophy regularized conceptually as thinking, feeling and willing. I have been unable to find a methodical history of that concept but it was in practical usage at least by the time of Descartes⁴. These faculties are still very much a part of popular usage⁵ but there is no longer a trace of them in academic psychology as a triadic interlocking soul-unity, and seemingly the last exposition of them as such was given by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) in the early part of this century. There has been, to my knowledge, no direct issue of Dilthey's brief and almost mysteriously isolated and systematic exposition of the concept as an evolutionary process in the life of societies—hence, in its macrocosmic aspect (see “The Structure of a World View” below). Steiner, working on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic level, seems to be the only thinker to make a direct connection with Aristotle's views on the subject (to which I shall return) and evidently with Plato, in that he located these functions anatomically, although not in the same way as Plato.⁶

In formulating these relationships I have not gone beyond the evidence but I am obliged to emphasize, if it is not clear already, that Greek “psychology” is much more fluid and, basically, seminal than Greek science, which was so firmly organized on the basis of the four elements. Even so, the question arises once again as to whether Platonic-Aristotelian soul triadism rationalizes some quite general, perhaps loose, conception that had been handed down. I believe that there is a case for a positive answer to be made, primarily, if not exclusively now, from the field of artistic convention.

A triadic division of human psychic functions is described by Plato in the *Timaeus*. These seem to correspond roughly to thinking, feeling and willing in this way: the activity of high reasoning is said to take place in the head; courageous manly feeling (*thumos*, also thought-penetrated feeling) has its seat in the breast; and desire for food, drink, etc. is considered to originate in the belly but can get out of hand and override rational control. There may be hints of this view in earlier literature, which remains to be investigated.⁷ Above all, however, the fact that Plato himself embodied the moral consequences of this

system in a striking pictorial image in the *Phaedrus* can perhaps suggest a course of investigation into iconography: a charioteer (generally equated with the reflective part of the soul: *logistikon*) is confronted with the task of controlling his steeds of whom one “is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite” (Hackforth translation).⁸ We are almost, if not quite, compelled to suppose that the “spirited (*thumoeides*)” and “appetitive (*epithumetikon*)” souls are alluded to as the driver seeks to keep his winged steeds from grounding.

It is not a question of weighing this passage as proof of a doctrine but of seeing it as an artistic reflection of a fundamental orientation toward human behavior. It is not necessarily inconsistent of Plato to think at one point in terms of a bipartite nature and at another to imply a tripartite soul. In the framework of the four member system, the physical body, nutritive and sensitive souls would constitute a mortal part and the *nous* as a whole an immortal part,⁹ just as we speak in popular language of the body-mind split. In Aristotle, a similar dichotomy: rational-irrational is mentioned as a contemporary usage. But none of this prevents the same thinker, in another context, from looking at *nous* with a magnifying glass and finding it to consist in a tripartite structure. In the chariot myth *nous* is surely to be thought of as something intact in itself, whether incarnate and hence bound in with the lower members or discarnate, as it would be in a god. If we go to the *Timaeus* for Plato’s more clinical analysis of the *nous*, and obviously the one to be preferred, we find that only a part of it, the *logistikon*, is actually divine. It is quite understandable that Plato should approach such complicated matters with diffidence. He himself does not admit to confusion about them but he may have felt that to deal with them in sufficient depth was not right for his purposes or for the times, especially if his ultimate source was the Mysteries of which he was an initiate, so that great discretion was in order.

The poetic quality of the myth, which involves a description of how human beings incarnate and then find themselves faced with diverging or unharmonious forces, is heightened by the contrast with Zeus who as a discarnate deity has no such problems in driving, for (the chariots of the gods) “are well-balanced and readily guided; but for the others (men) it is hard, by reason of the heaviness of the steed of wickedness, which pulls down the driver with his weight, except that driver have schooled him well” (Hackforth). Surely the general idea for the picture must come from the story of Phaeton and Helios¹⁰, for the basic parallel occurs there: Helios never had any trouble keeping his steeds on exactly the right course (they were well schooled), but Phaeton, as not fully divine, could not manage them and came to grief. I refer here only to artistic continuity, not continuity of content.

Out of his poetic consciousness Plato suggested a visual image of great power, one that can offer inner guidance. We know from Egyptian and Christian iconography that morally educative concepts could be conveyed in actual visual images supplied by written sources (Book of the Dead, Bible). In Minoan/Myceanaean Greece—a culture without such a (known) written source—there are iconographic elements that suggest similar educative concepts.¹¹ *Faute de mieux* one may suggest that these were handed down verbally, perhaps leading to adaptations in literary form.¹² Plato’s chariot imagery

seems to offer itself as a microcosmic moral lesson, but the collective application of the same idea, as the structural principle of the state given in the *Republic*, is so insistent that it has tempted some commentators to regard the military contingencies involved in activating it as the source of tripartition in Plato's works.¹³ In the light of the chariot myth such an interpretation is altogether too simple a solution. Moreover, the parallel myth of moral choice, Herakles at the Crossroads, guarantees that Plato did not have to observe the state in order to achieve a concept of three factors: a conscious agent and a choice between good and bad¹⁴.

Aristotle proceeded differently from Plato. Eschewing poetic visions, he worked in the dispassionate manner of a scientist in dealing with the theme of the triadic ego. First he gives an account of the nutritive and sensitive souls and then, instead of referring directly to the *nous*, mentions three further soul members which at first sight have a strong resemblance to the system of Plato, *viz.*, (at 433bl): "an intellective, a deliberative and now an appetitive part; for these are more different from one another than the faculties of desire and passion" (J. A. Smith translation).¹⁵ The latter comment is not entirely easy to understand, especially since Aristotle did not really explain his own version of the triadic *nous*, nor give its source. The passage has regularly been taken to be a rejection of Plato's system. In this regard it may be noted that Aristotle uses the term *epithumetikon* (desirous) and *thumikon* (high-spirited) both in this passage and earlier in 432a22 and seems to have regarded them as subsumable—as two aspects of one faculty(?)¹⁶—under other faculties. In the earlier of the passages he introduces the imaginative soul above the sensitive soul—incompatibly with the neat multi-partite list in 433bl. In any case, his main criticism is that he equates Plato's *epithumetikon* and *thumikon*¹⁷ with his own *orektikon* and does not want to see the latter divided. He also has reservations about having appetite appear in all three faculties. In modern triadic theories (Dilthey and Steiner) such an admixture of soul qualities is regarded as natural and necessary, even though one quality is always recognizably dominant.

Out of all this complexity I believe that a few general conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. First, although Aristotle clearly did not approve of Plato's terminology and what he thought it harbored, he was by no means specifically rejecting the whole idea of a triadic ego; in fact, the version of it he reports in 433bl seems to suggest that, *if* one were to pursue that line of investigation, one would have to use this particular frame of reference as a scientific starting point¹⁸. He himself chose not to do so and we hear no more of it in a systematic sense. Perhaps the conception of *nous pathetikos* and *nous poetikos*, which he apparently originated, seemed a more promising way to investigate the human mind, even though again he did not discuss it very extensively and it remained for later philosophers, particularly in the Middle Ages, to raise a philosophical structure on it. In this realm we see Aristotle pretty much as a compiler of current ideas—and a tripartite ego must have been one of them.

The second conclusion is correlative. In the circumstances it is impossible to imagine that Plato did not know the concept of the three lower members. If he did take them for granted, then his triad in the *Timaeus* is indeed his version of the subdivisions of the *nous*. Furthermore, *pace* Aristotle, the sense of these subdivisions does not seem irreconcilable¹⁹ with the sense of Aristotle's list at 433bl. And despite the more vague

poetic references elsewhere, Plato's treatment of the triadic concept in the *Timaeus* shows the characteristic Classical consciousness of the human organism which is so dynamically revealed in the phenomenon of the contrapposto stance; for he locates his souls among the actual areas and organs of the physical body.

I should find it difficult to doubt that both philosophers were aware of a conception of the structure of the *nous* as three soul faculties which is as basic to the reality of the human being as the Four Elements theory is to the general cosmic structure. The souls-theory, if the artistic parallels are to be trusted, has a traditional aspect but seemingly very little an intellectual one—or at least this was not agreed on—and was therefore not something that could pass into the general consciousness in the same way as the Four Elements theory. Its brief appearance, as if by the raising and lowering of a curtain, in the Late Classical period nevertheless technically rounds off the achievements of Classical Greece as the prototype of all subsequent cultural development in Europe.

Aristotle, choosing to let the triadic ego as a theme for investigation drop, left it to continue a subterranean existence in artistic composition, which is yet to be properly investigated. In his investigation of thinking, however, and in his conviction that mind and nature comprise a unity, Aristotle kept his psychology within the Classical spiritual vision, although driving it to a point where it could no longer be understood even by his closest successors, as has been pointed out by a recent sympathetic critic.²⁰ This is basically in accord with the view of Rudolf Steiner, which is worth quoting as a kind of summary²¹ of the ancient and a modern view of the triadic ego:

Many of the expressions used by Aristotle are no longer understood. However, they are reminders that there was a time when individual members of man's soul being were known; not until Aristotle did they become abstractions. Franz Brentano (1838–1917, German professor of philosophy—ed.) made great efforts to understand these members of man's soul precisely through that thinker of antiquity, Aristotle. It must be said, however, that it was just through Aristotle that their meaning began to fade from mankind's historical evolution. Aristotle distinguishes in man the vegetative soul, by which he means approximately what we call ether body, then the *aesthetikon* or sensitive soul, which we call the sentient or astral body. Next he speaks of *orektikon* which corresponds to sentient soul, then comes *kinetikon* corresponding to the intellectual soul, and he uses the term *dianoetikon* for the consciousness soul. Aristotle was fully aware of the meaning of these concepts, but he lacked direct perception of their reality. This caused a certain unclarity and abstraction in his works, and that applies also to the book I mentioned by Franz Brentano. Nevertheless, real thinking holds sway in Brentano's book. And when someone applies himself to the power of thinking the way he did, it is no longer possible to entertain the foolish notion that man's soul and spirit are mere by-products arising from the physical-bodily nature. The concepts formulated by Brentano on the basis of Aristotle's work were too substantial, so to speak, to allow him to succumb to the mischief of modern materialism.

RECAPITULATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DILTHEY'S “STRUCTURE OF A WORLD VIEW” (SEE APPENDIX A)

Dilthey discusses his “Structure of a World View” in terms of psychical processes (three phases of consciousness) which occur (and recur) in a fixed order, that is, over a period of time which is required for a development and its true fulfillment. The “structure” rests on a concept of reality which can be called a cosmic (thought) picture. On the basis of this, situations and objects are evaluated in sympathy and antipathy (feeling), thus fostering ultimately the formation and direction of the will. In this way Dilthey sees the formation and then the simultaneous operation of first one substratum, then two, with a new leading principle, until finally all three are intermingled in a whole (three-story) edifice: “indeed a structure, where eventually the permeating influence of the soul finds its expression”.

In another sentence he terms this “a structure of psychological life”. The successive steps are now more clearly defined: observation of occurrences within us and objects outside us; clarification of such observation by emphasizing fundamental relations of reality; depiction and classification of these in a world of ideas (essentially all this is the activity of thinking); in the second stage: becoming conscious of ourselves we enjoy the full measure of our existence; then we ascribe to objects and persons around us a certain effectual value; we then determine these values according to their prospective influence, useful or harmful, giving rise to a search for an absolute standard of measurement, a way to evaluate meaningfulness. (In short, at this level we are guided primarily by our life of feeling). The third is the highest stage, for here are the ideals, the highest good and the supreme principles. This stage also is experienced in three phases: momentary intent, striving and tendency; permanent aims directed toward the realization of a concept (relation between means and ends, choice between goals, selection of means of attainment); the final systematization of all aims into a highest order of our practical behavior—highest good, highest norm, highest personal and social ideal. (All this, if properly realized, amounts to transmutation, if not transfiguration, of our life of will).

In reviewing Dilthey’s formulations, we realize that the whole process includes nine phases in three groups of three, as follows:

- *Thinking* Cognitive activity dominates throughout.
- feeling
- willing

- thinking Affective activity dominates throughout.
- *Feeling*
- willing

- thinking Volitional activity dominates throughout.
- feeling
- *Willing*

THE AUTHOR'S CONCEPTION OF HOW "THE STRUCTURE OF A WORLD VIEW" MAY THROW LIGHT ON GREEK ART²²

First of all, I consider it necessary to find another term for the translation of "Weltanschauung" than (the usual) "world view", for this latter seems less flexible in English than its equivalent in German. I suggest "understanding of life" in the sense of an active, as opposed to a contemplative, process. This has at least two advantages: it eliminates any overtones of political power struggles that may be present in the literal translation, and it calls attention to Dilthey's real contribution, which is to insist that an emotional and a volitional factor are just as significant for a view of life as an intellectual one. For this is often ignored or suppressed in arguments by antagonists who imagine or pretend that they are acting purely out of principles arrived at only by rigorous intellectual analysis unadulterated by their own deep emotional prejudices and intentions.

Thus, if considered with an open mind, Dilthey's analysis of human activity is so disarmingly simple and indisputably cogent as to seem an unexceptionable commonplace: any completed human endeavor must have had a beginning, reached a middle and then an end stage. But to explain this, the dynamic energy inherent in the endeavor has to be considered. It must have been planned (thought out) out of a physical and soul environment. Then the feeling life of the planner must have consented to execute the plan; and, finally, the will actually to achieve it—to whatever degree successfully—had to have been activated. It is clear that these phases are present whether the activity is quite private, or in a social context (affecting other people) or, indeed, carried out in cooperation with other people (in which case complexities in clearly differentiating the stages can easily be imagined).

But Dilthey goes further. He sees this threefold sequence as so fundamental that, in any long term endeavor, it is repeated as a necessary, inescapable technique of the human condition within each one of the stages. Thus the planning stage, the stage of primarily intellectual activity, goes through a subtle metamorphosis of feeling and willing—but always under the aegis of the intellectual, structural problem involved—in order to get successfully to the next major phase, in which the feelings are aroused to justify, judge, above all to feel joy or satisfaction (or even the opposite) in the creativity that is going on. But always, feeling is decisive for the carrying on of the project. It is not uncommon at this stage to say: I feel that the project cannot be carried out because the planning is insufficient, the enthusiasm of the co-workers has dissipated, the opposition is too great or the criticism too devastating, etc. Supposing that the second stage has in fact been successfully achieved, then the third phase is one of refining and honing the "product" for distribution, for wider use, for admiration, for influencing the course of things willfully. It is easy to see how this process might involve renewed intellectual consideration and judgmental activity to accommodate changing or unexpected conditions—but always with the now fully aroused volition in control.

I do not pretend to be a Dilthey specialist, but even with considerable effort I have not been able to discover any attempt by him or his followers to apply this

theoretical pattern of periodicity for the emergence of an “understanding of life” to the life of a specific person or culture, though it seems to have a potential value in either case. Obviously, real life comes upon us in such a complicated way that one may not easily become aware of patterns of events. Moreover, in our age there can be an underlying fear that any theory of patterns in human activity is incompatible with freedom of action, particularly of artists. Such an objection seems to me to result from comparing apples and oranges: the problem of freedom, in the sense intended, exists on the level of morality and, above all, on the level of individuality. Our conception of these levels is strongly affected by the materialistic, scientific civilization in which we live, whereas earlier cultures had quite other conditions with their own special conception of morality and of individual freedom—if they had any conception of the latter.

In any case, what Dilthey proposed has nothing to do with the problem of freedom of action, which does not legitimately arise in this context. For his reasoning concerns only the natural limitations which the sheer task of physically functioning on a purposeful basis in a material environment imposes on any human being any time, anywhere. The effectuation of any impulse in the plastic arts, for example, ultimately involves a sequence of phases by an individual or a group of individuals. Character, status, destiny itself are marked by the thousand-fold coping with the sequence over the lifetime of an individual or—in the collective sense—throughout an era. This process itself is not a case of “determinism”, for not the goals are what Dilthey had in mind but the *process* by which, for better or for worse, they are achieved.

Accordingly, in my attempt in Chapter IV to make Dilthey’s insights fruitful in understanding the emergence of Greek sculpture, it must be reiterated: the stages by which it emerged reflect only the procedural solutions with which Greek sculptors responded to felt needs. In this study, the philosophy of the four elements is treated as the underlying “understanding of life” of the Greeks, that is, the driving force to which expression is given by Greek art. The unceasing metamorphoses of this force have emerged for me more clearly by taking into account Dilthey’s stages than would be the case without them.

To try to clarify this in another way: the stages themselves have nothing to do with the reasons of the Greeks for making sculpture, or the socio-religious-economic conditions in which it emerged. All that exists on another level. The stages involved are thus not “an understanding of life” but only the vehicle for one. It is perhaps doubtful that such stages could emerge very clearly in the study of more recent, especially contemporary, art, for we are too close to it. But the situation of Greek art is more favorable. First, it has receded far enough from us in time that we can get a certain perspective on it. Second, Greek culture in general as seen in this perspective was extraordinarily homogeneous and original, regardless of the varied influences it absorbed, or may have absorbed, and of internal interactions of Greek city states; and it lasted over a long period of time, by any standards. However, with the increasing complexity of Greek culture and its position in the world in the later 4th century and especially in the Hellenistic period, it is much more difficult to discern the sub-phases (Dilthey’s microperiods) than in the earlier periods. At the risk of being importunate, I shall state again that his macro- and micro-periods have no existence whatsoever in

themselves. Only in conjunction with “an understanding of life” do they become operative. At that point, the question can be raised as to when and how they are effectuated. That is the question posited here in relation to Greek art.

My task will, therefore, be to evaluate the progress of Greek art from its beginnings in terms of the “understanding of life” behind it. This understanding I take to be the emergent, exploratory, not fully conscious goal-seeking which culminated conceptually in the Four Elements philosophy of Empedokles, but did not ever cease to be lived out. To achieve this I will assume that this “understanding of life” went forward in some semblance of the Diltheyan stages. Can these in fact be recognized? At this point a reader might have the impression that such an undertaking would not bring us closer to life—as Dilthey intended—but remain theoretical. Against this I must affirm that such was not my experience in actually creating Chapter IV (where the stages are worked out) and simultaneously ask for suspension of judgement until the entire chapter has been read. Moreover, as a kind of prelude to Chapter IV I have experimented with a project closer to our times. Is there an “understanding of life” which scholars who (have worked and) work on ancient art take for granted, and if so is this collective understanding and the work resulting from it susceptible of being articulated in the Diltheyan stages? These questions proved to have sufficient substance in their own right to justify a separate chapter (II), as well as being a “dry-run” for Chapter IV. Chapter III takes up an additional factor of importance to the results of Chapter II: the difference of the time-sense of the Greeks from our own time-sense.