

# TALK ON TRIADS - BALTIMORE APRIL 5, 1991

*Extract from The Meaning of the Triad, DuVersity Publications.*

## Introduction

For the record - and for those of you not familiar with the background - the concept of the Triad I am concerned with here was first introduced by Gurdjieff about 80 years ago, during his teaching period in Russia just before the Bolshevik revolution. These ideas were taken up in groups run by Gurdjieff's one-time pupil Ouspensky. In these groups, the idea of there being 'six laws' of the triad was evolved. J. G. Bennett belonged to this circle and, later on his life, developed the ideas in his own way.

Gurdjieff's idea of the triad was very simple and direct, as a lot of his teaching was. It was about how things change, or about how change was at all possible. His originality was to insist that nothing is brought about, or nothing is really changed, unless there are THREE INDEPENDENT FORCES INVOLVED. Gurdjieff's emphasis was quite different from the three main alternative interpretations established in eastern and western traditions.

## Traditional Views

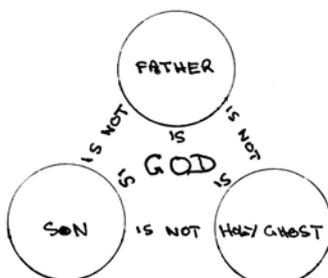
The first of these alternatives was the Hindu (Samkhya) doctrine of the THREE GUNAS or qualities inherent in phenomena. I know that Ouspensky's pupils were directed to investigate this system and reported that, in their opinion, it had little to offer. The second tradition, this time a western one, was that of the DIALECTIC, mainly associated with the name of Hegel; which, incidentally, gave rise in its turn to Marxism and the communist theories of the dialectic. In this scheme, whether Hegelian or Marxist, the emphasis is on a SUCCESSION OF TERMS and not on their mutual impact. In the opinion of the Ouspensky people, this was only a partial view.

The third tradition was that of Christian Orthodoxy, from which we receive the doctrine of THE HOLY TRINITY. The idea of the Trinity has been a mystery through the ages and there has always been the belief that, in this doctrine, we reach the limits of human reason. Gurdjieff had a great respect for this tradition, but took it up in his own way, turning the Divine Relationship of Persons into an explanation for the creation and maintenance of the Cosmos.

As I said, the Hegelian version was based on a succession of terms. In an historical process of change there is, first, the THESIS or affirmation. This produces a reaction or ANTITHESIS; a contrary thought or energy. The third stage is when these two fuse into a SYNTHESIS, which then becomes the new Thesis and so on. The sequential form is always of the one type:

### Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis.

In the Guna system of Samkhya, you divide any situation - for example, possible states inside a person or community, or a class of objects such as foodstuffs - into three classes. One part is inertial or Tamasic. Another is energetic or rajasic. The third is balanced or harmonious and is called Sattvic. Thus, for example, meat is tamasic, onion is rajasic and rice is sattvic! This system reflects a static point of view, in contrast with the western historically minded view of Hegel.



I mentioned that Gurdjieff was most aligned with the doctrine of the Trinity which, we might say, he tried to up-date for a modern scientific culture. I often tell people that the arising of this doctrine of the Church never ceases to amaze and puzzle me. It is one of those enigmas that I put on a level with the arising of modern science in Europe. We had generations of some of the best minds of the early centuries battling to make this concept work at all. What came out of it was

not only the terrible suppression of dissent, the destruction of Gnosticism and the setting up of the methods of totalitarian thought-control (of which we have witnessed the final fruit in our own century) but also a tremendous insight into the nature of thought and reality.

Some of the essential meaning of the Trinity was put into a well-known diagram from the Middle Ages, which shows that God is Father, Son and Holy Ghost while Father, Son and Holy Ghost are distinct.

This is somewhat antimathematical, since we have two things equal to a third but not equal to each other.

### **Gurdjieff and Bennett**

Gurdjieff postulated (in his book *All and Everything*) a primitive active substance that he called OKIDANOKH. This substance was the agent of all change, but arose in the three forces: active, passive and reconciling. All three forces had to be present for something to happen. Now, once you had the idea of these three 'forces', then you could think about how they combine together and whether there might be more than one way of combining. Put crudely, Gurdjieff suggested that everything came from the Reconciling Force - in other words, the Reconciling Force took the 'initiative' - but, thereafter, in the working of the universe, the Reconciling Force served simply to keep things connected - it linked the active and passive forces which proceeded by their own 'momentum'. Thus, it seemed plausible to think of the different forces TAKING DIFFERENT ROLES.

The idea of various COMBINATIONS of the three forces - that is, of different orders in which the forces can appear - was implicit in Gurdjieff's writings. However, in writing *All and Everything*, he eschewed the formalistic schemes which Ouspensky reported in *In Search of the Miraculous* and spoke of ideas poetically, metaphorically and through stories. But, the more mathematically inclined of his pupils, particularly Bennett, saw the possibility of developing a completely formal schema in which all the possibilities of the three had meaning. In this way, they hoped that the various ways in which things happened or in which change came about could be distinguished, giving a much deeper understanding than was possible before. Perhaps the things hinted at by Gurdjieff concerning World Creation and World Maintenance could be made explicit.

There are three important ideas concerning the existence of this world. The first is that of Creation - bringing into existence. The second is that of Interconnectedness - keeping everything working. The third is that of Perfecting - an improvident in existing things which raise them beyond their created form towards the Source of the Creation. These were discussed, though in various guises, by the early fathers of the Church, in relation to the Doctrine of the Trinity. Gurdjieff introduced these ideas in his own way, though nothing was ever spelled out (especially in the final, ultimately published, version). His followers were given a puzzle to unravel. It seemed that the combinatorial possibilities of the triad offered a method of investigation. Could even these kind of fundamental ideas be derived from yet more basic considerations?

Bennett, reflecting over the years on the prominence Gurdjieff gave to the idea of the Law of Three (and the Law of Seven) failed to see why other numbers should not be given significance as, of course, they had in various other traditions. He also came to the conclusion that all this might be approached with some abstract rigor by basing the investigation on the essential properties of the numbers themselves. In a word, he aligned himself with Pythagoras. There is something in number itself that is fundamental to the way in which the world is made and the way in which we can understand it. If we are able to penetrate more deeply into the nature of number, then we must become able to see reality more clearly.

### **The Third Force**

The relation between number and direct perception was highlighted in the case of the triad by the notion of 'third-force blindness'. We are all aware of conflict, of the clash of

forces, of push-pull, action-reaction and it is this which tends to fully occupy our attention. Gurdjieff taught that this leads to a fatal misunderstanding, which is the belief in the struggle of Good and Evil. Not only was this a misunderstanding, but it had contributed greatly through the ages to human misery and slavery.

The notion of 'third-force blindness' was that we do not see what actually happens. We do not see what 'resolves' the clash of forces and makes things work. We see the first force and the second force, but not the third force. In an earlier version of *All and Everything* Gurdjieff implied that this was tantamount to being unaware of God's Will, the Primal Reconciling Force. The importance given to the reconciling force can hardly be exaggerated. It was, obviously, absorbed from the Christian tradition - there is little hint of it in Islam because of its rejection of Trinitarian notions. But, it was not an exclusively religious idea. It was the idea that we are bound to fail to understand just about every situation in which we find ourselves!

If, then, we get the idea that there might be a way in which we could train ourselves to focus our attention in a different way, such that we could become aware of the workings of the third force, then this would be something very important indeed. Such a method would have a very positive future. Just imagine that we could attune ourselves to the fact that we need THREE factors and that two will not achieve anything real - that the two are non-productive, simply conflicting with each other, or alternating in dominance, so that nothing really changes - then this would be a very valuable help to us in our lives and inner work.

I am speaking of the motivation behind the work done on the triads because we need to know about that. Most of the things I shall be talking about will be quite abstract and it is all too easy to forget the relevance of these schemes to real human needs.

The usual concept of the reconciling force is, all too often, a vehicle for wishful thinking. We feel the conflict and disorder in the world and in ourselves and wish that some principle would come down and sort it all out. The reconciling force becomes a kind of 'deus ex machina', a salvation that comes out of a mechanism. But, man is third force blind and his fantasies about the third force remain just fantasies. So we have a rather severe contradiction: a scheme to explain the workings of reality in which the crucial element is something we are not aware of. We must, at least, be cognizant of this situation.

This idea of being third-force blind was taken up in another form in Bennett's treatment of space and time. In this case, it was proposed that man was 'eternity-blind', that is, he was not aware of the arrangement of things in a dimension outside of space and time, a dimension that contained the 'inwardness' of things. Because we have no direct perception of the order or pattern of events, we see the world as a number of things with forces between them that cause them to follow curved paths of change. But, Bennett claimed, this is a misunderstanding. In reality, there are no forces and in the real universe everything travels in straight lines. In order to see this, we would have to have organs of perception that see into eternity as well as into space and time. The forces which appear to us - such as gravitation, electromagnetism and the strong and weak forces - appear because of a deficit in our perception. We impugn these forces to nature in order to explain to ourselves the otherwise inexplicable behavior of things.

So, there is this attitude of mind which says: "There is, in the way in which things work, a hidden component. And, unless we get hold of it and take it into account, we *can't* understand what is going on" This is a very positive idea; but it leaves us with the question: "If we don't see it, then what are we doing?"

### **The Abstract Approach**

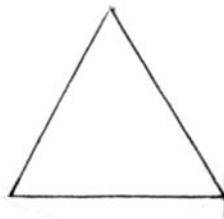
I am going to leave these questions and turn to the abstract possibilities. When Bennett decided to go for what he called the 'categories of understanding' through researching into the essential qualities of numbers, he tried to do away with all that

came from traditional material such as alchemy and from people such as Jung who had already developed their own interpretations for their own purposes. He tried to start directly from intuition, from an intuition of form. Others, including myself, who were with him at that time, became quite used to going around muttering "threeness, threeness, what is threeness?" Eventually we did come up with some ideas and formulations and these were written up and incorporated in Volume III of "The Dramatic Universe".

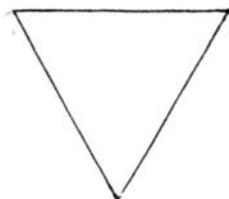
I have gone back to tell you about that 'workshop period' because, as far as I can see, we can never understand anything until we get into the workshop that made it. This can be quite hard for people of contemporary cultures, such as the American, who are used to products rather than to work. What interests me is how to get into the workshop, where the feel is quite different from that of the goods on display. How on earth do we bring the intuitions out of the depths? How do we handle them? What do the raw materials and the factory processes look like? How can we get ourselves to see beyond the packaging and the advertising?

You see, there is a tremendous inertia from the past and a lot of not seeing the wood for the trees. You can be sucked into Jung and then you go round and round in a Jungian world. If you get interested in the hermetic tradition, alchemy and so on then you go round in that world. Similarly, if you become involved in the Buddhist tradition. In every tradition or school, there is a good chance of getting lost. It is very difficult to see what is primary and what is secondary; what is essential and what is an accidental accretion. One way is to go right back to the bare form, stripping away all external associations, metaphors and images.

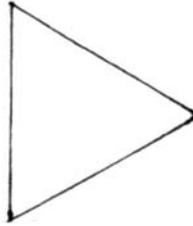
Let us look at how we might do this and what we have to do on the way to guard against the inessential. Take the triad. We are all of us used to representing this in the form of a triangle - what could be more basic than three connected lines? However, the way in which we make the triangle on a page can have a big influence upon us. This is because it suggests things from the very form of our experience and imagery as beings who live in a 'gravity-well' (providing an inbuilt sense of 'up and down') and regard what is 'above' superior to what is 'below'.



In this version, putting one term at the top immediately suggests that it is a higher unifying principle. In a second version, putting one term at the bottom, on the contrary, suggests that it is some kind of underlying connection, the visible tip of a hidden marriage of two higher principles.



If we arrange the triangle in a third way, then we have the idea of a 'middle' principle, mediating between the higher and the lower. So, the three obvious possible arrangements of the triangle figure each have their own fascination AS SOON AS WE TRY TO READ THEM. As soon as we start making an *interpretation*, we involve ourselves more and more in a sequence of mental operations that has its own kind of logic. Perhaps some cultures put higher things towards the bottom. It makes no real difference.



It is a fact that the form of a page in itself influences our thought. We are used (in our culture) to horizontal sequencing, whereas the vertical dimension always has some element of hierarchical ordering. If we were pilots used to flying over landscapes and taking pictures, then we might feel differently, because the field of representation is not then governed by up and down. To release oneself from the conditioning of up and down, one would need to be especially vigilant.

Now, let us stop and ask ourselves what we are after. One answer is that we want a system of representation in which none of the terms is especially favored. Why? Because having a favored term would be to prejudge the issue.

If we ascribe the terms to the lines instead of to the points, then we get much the same kind of problems. However, the 'feel' of the triad is somehow different. That is because, whereas points tend to stand for things, lines tend to stand for connections. A diagram that emphasizes connections is far more fluid and dynamic than one which emphasizes things. Remember that we have not stopped to consider what a term of a triad might be. Maybe, this would bring the whole process of enquiry to a halt! But, it is certainly easier - or so it seems - to think in terms of things rather in terms of connections. Modern physics gives equal place to each. For example, we have both particles and the force-carrying particles that mediate between them. What matters at this point is to realize that, whatever kind of thing we take to stand for a term of a triad, the WORKING of the triad must take up what we have LEFT OUT by starting with such 'terms'. The more simplistic the identification of the terms, the more complex our interpretation of the 'laws' will have to be. And, vice versa, the more complex our identification of the terms, the more simple our interpretations can be. This is a kind of DYAD.

Consider, then, the kind of space in which we could represent the three terms without any bias. It is, indeed, a very special kind of space. In our ordinary space of the page, we always end up with one of the terms standing off from the two others. This is, in fact, a tremendous clue to what is going on in reality. Just faced with drawing a triangle on a page, we are unable to do this without making some kind of distinction between two of the terms and the third. This is, itself, why we must have this notion of being third force blind. IT IS NOT A QUESTION OF BEING BLIND TO THE THIRD FORCE AS SUCH BUT TO THREENESS ITSELF. It is hard to see threeness without bias; that is, without making it into two plus one. And this is the way we talk about it. Three is taken as the fusion of one and two. This even applies in the doctrine of the Trinity, where in the profession of faith the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son.

So, even the most bland, abstract, empty, geometrical representation already introduces a bias. We have a problem in visualizing pure number. Any picture we make brings with it certain assumptions or tendencies of thinking. In the present case, we can come to see that two dimensions is really not enough in which to visualize threeness - that we need, in fact, three dimensions. That is the true visualization of threeness - in three dimensions. Perhaps, then, it is these three dimensions themselves that are the terms of the triad? All that dimensions are simply INDEPENDENT 'directions' of variation that inhere in the same things. Those of you who know elementary physics might recall the 'right hand' and 'left hand' rules for electromagnetism in which electric field, magnetic field and motion are related. In this case, the three terms are what are called 'vectors' and this is something that interests me right now in my own thinking, but which I will leave on this occasion to your own

meditation and researches.