

The Ternary and the Quaternary

by Robert Bolton

The Ternary and the Quaternary are two universal, numerically-based relationships which manifest the archetypal relationships between many realities in both the spiritual and physical realms. In particular, they apply to and govern the inner constitution of the human state, together with its position in regard to God and the various orders of creation. In order to explain these things, I shall refer to some things said about them by René Guénon in his book *The Great Triad*, and also by Fabre d'Olivet, whose works Guénon makes use of. The Quaternary results from the fact that there are two different kinds of Ternary, as Guénon shows.

The first kind of Ternary is the more metaphysical of the two, as it is one in which the first term has some kind of superiority over the other two, which result from it. It can be represented by an upright triangle (see Figure 1) in which the two points at its foot both proceed equally from its apex. A possible example of this would be the Trinity, in which the second and third Persons both proceed from the Father. It also applies to the three Hypostases of Neoplatonism, which are not so much God as the primary realities which proceed from God, although there is a clear inequality between the *Nous* and the World Soul. Nevertheless, these two resultant terms are both implicit in the One, and are distinct realities when manifest.

Other examples of this kind of Ternary abound in nature and religion. It appears that kingship and priesthood are both implicit in prophethood

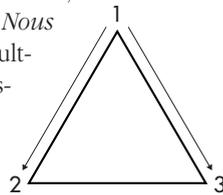


Figure 1

(as appears from the Old Testament), and derive from the latter as two simpler and more specialized realities. In geometry, there are a number of three-dimensional forms which give rise to two others when they are reduced to two dimensions. For example, a cone gives rise to a triangle and circle by this means; a cylinder gives rise to a circle and a rectangle; a cube to a square and hexagon; and a spheroid to an ellipse and a circle. More generally still, the laws of quantity give rise to the two realms of arithmetic and geometry. In physics, there are important phenomena which are manifest and treatable both as waves and as particles, as in the case of light, for example. One and the same planet, especially Venus, can give rise to both a morning star and an evening star. In the living world, the archetypal Species usually cannot manifest itself in physical form except as the male and female halves of it.

The second kind of Ternary is the less metaphysical of the two, and is more easily seen to be a part of creation. It is represented by an inverted triangle (see Figure 2) in which the two upper terms converge downwards to their resultant at the apex. The most obvious example of this is the relation of father, mother and child.

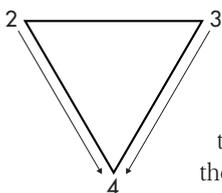


Figure 2

on the chemical level which result in a third compound are only too numerous. One striking natural example of this Ternary is the way the rainbow results from rain and sunlight. Fire and water give rise to steam. Another example is the way the orbital motion of planets and satellites results from linear motion and a force of attraction to a fixed point.

A more subtle example in this class is that of knowledge, as every act of knowing results from a relation between the two primaries, the knower and the known.

If the difference between the two kinds of Ternary relation is kept in mind, we shall be able to see how the Quaternary results from some among them. It depends on a combination of a Ternary as in Figure 1, where elements 2 and 3 derive from element 1, and another one as in Figure 2, where element 4 derives from elements 2 and 3, the latter being the same in both Ternaries. If the upper line of the inverted triangle is joined to the base of the upright one, elements 2 and 3 are common to both, and the result is quadrilateral relating the four elements (see Figure 3) and showing how 4 results directly from 2 and 3 and indirectly

from 1. If this were applied to living creatures, 1 would be the archetype of the species, 2 and 3 would be the male and female members of the physically instantiated species, while 4 would be their new-born offspring. The fourth element is in a sense a recapitulation of the first on a lower level, which also has some bearing on the meaning of childhood in relation to God.

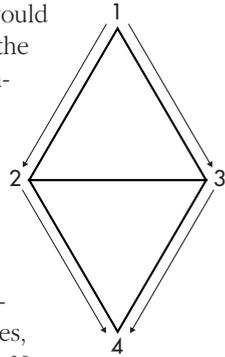


Figure 3

The four most universal realities which are related in this manner are known to both Pythagorean and Far-Eastern teachings under different names, these being God, Providence (or universal spirit), Nature (or fate), and Man (or universal soul). According to this scheme, Providence and Nature both proceed from God, while man is as it were the child of Providence and Nature, though he is no less a creature of God at the same time. This peculiarity of human origin is also indicated by the account in Genesis where Adam and Eve are only created on the sixth day of creation, the last of all beings. On this basis, the human can be taken to be resultant of divine action and the created natural order as a whole. Because of this relation to creation as a whole, the human state is understood to be an epitome or microcosm of all being, so that each person (the fourth element) will be composed of the same things as the “three worlds,” namely the providential or archetype world, the psychological or subtle world, and the material world. This is the three-fold inner structure which Fabre d’Olivet represents by the Intellectual, Animic, and Instinctive spheres in that of the human soul.

These spheres are represented by four circles (see Figure 4), three of which stand on a vertical line, while the fourth surrounds these three. The lowest circle of the three represents the life of instinct which attaches to the body, ruled only by pleasure and pain, because its higher possibilities depend on its participation in those of the soul. The central one represents what is most typically the soul, the realm of the emotions, which are roused by the sense of good and bad. The third circle is that of intellect, which is activated by truth and falsehood. All conscious activity is distributed among these three, in all kinds of combinations and proportions. Their combined effect is what determines the movement of the fourth circle, which represents the will of the whole person.

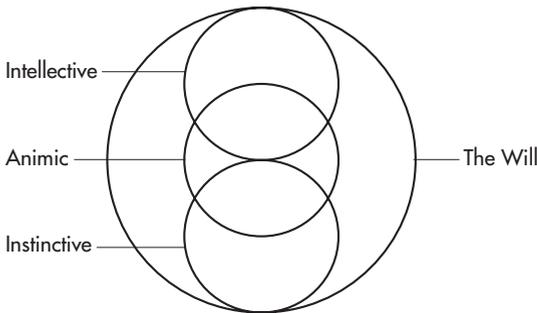


Figure 4

At birth, the soul or self is almost wholly identified with the Instinctive sphere, and it is only through the development of the possibilities of this sphere that it is able finally to

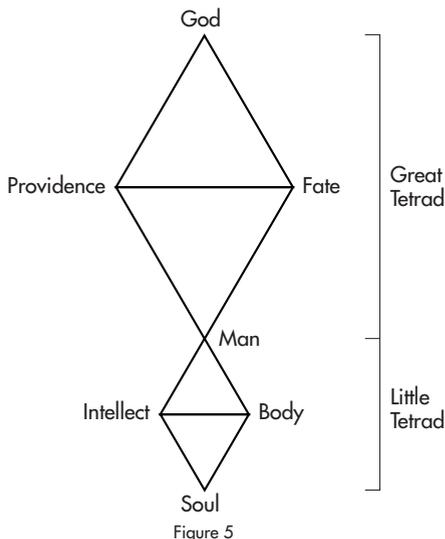
trigger the development of the second, or Animic, sphere, which is that of soul as such. Similarly, the development of life through the Animic opens up the possibilities of the Intellective sphere. Human beings are thus unique in being made up of a union of material, psychical, and noetic principles, reflecting the whole order of creation of miniature. In effect, the soul's activity evolves from a level inferior to the one specific to it, through that of its intrinsic nature, and up to one above its own level, in which it participates as the body participates in the soul.

This account of our inner formation is capable of being shown as another Quaternary relationship, which reflects the universal one. The fourth circle, representing the will of the person, relates to body, soul, and intellect in ways that reflect the relation of God to Providence, Nature (or Macrocosm), and Man (see Figure 5). There are thus two Tetrads with a common term, Man, which could be called the Great and the Little Tetrad respectively, and which show the correspondences between Providence and the intellect, between Nature and the body, and between God and Man. One thing this figure does not show is that these relations are dynamic, and in no way static, since the human will is able to strengthen or weaken the relationships it has to the others.

Unless there was such a being as Man, comprising both archetypal and material reality at once, these two orders of being would have no means of relating to one another. It is thus a question of Man's being a natural or universal *pontifex*, so long as it is understood that this function is a potentiality in need of realisation, which Fabre d'Olivet expresses as follows:

“At the moment when man arrives on earth he belongs to Fate, which leads him captive for a long time in the vortex of fatality...When this seed is fully developed, it constitutes the Will of Universal Man, one of the three great powers of the universe.”

Guénon points out that this mediating role of mankind in the cosmos is the macrocosmic equivalent of the mediating role of the soul in each human being, where it relates to and connects the spiritual and the material realms. All this has



far-reaching implications where it concerns the freedom of the will. If we start from the complex nature of the person, as above, and bear in mind that the Instinctive, Animic, and Intellective spheres are by no means bound to act in concert, but can modify the will by the equivalent of rotation at various speeds, both with and contrary to one another, there will be more than enough to support the idea of free will. (The usual philosophical reasonings about free will are based on the most minimal assumptions, for example, simply that we are capable of knowing and willing. This approach has some value, owing to the simplicity of its assumptions, but it is bound to be inconclusive insofar as it is based on incomplete knowledge of what we are).

The interior complexity means that each person has the means to unite himself or herself in an equally natural way to either the Providential or the Fatidic order. However, we do not apply the term “free will” to both of these options, because what we understand by freedom does not belong to Nature, where all is subject to efficient causality, but rather to Providence, which comprises the archetypes or formal causes of all that belongs to Nature. Providence is said to be free because it comprises the essential realities of the world as they are “before” being instanced in

material form and so subjected to all kinds of constraint.

The soul, which aligns itself with Providence and therefore with freedom, will thus be the one which realises the possibilities of the intellectual nature of the fullest extent possible for the individual concerned. This involves an orientation of the whole person, which is not to be confused with the divisive effects of an unintegrated intellectuality which is made an end in itself, and so denies its spiritual and sacramental role. On the contrary, it applies to the body as well, by its participation in the soul, which in turn participates in intellect; it too is spiritualised in its own way, therefore. Concerning the effects of this union, Guénon says:

“In uniting itself to Providence and consciously collaborating with it, the human will can become a counter-balance to destiny and finally neutralise it. In the words of Fabre d’Olivet, ‘the harmony between the Will and Providence is what constitutes the Good. Evil is what results from their opposition... Man either perfects himself or becomes depraved according to whether his tendency is to merge into the universal Unity or to distinguish himself from it.’ In other words he approaches either perfection or depravity depending on which of the two poles of manifestation he gravitates towards: the pole of unity or the pole of multiplicity.”

This also makes it easier to see how each soul can choose its own destiny, since the inward relations it makes with its material, psychical, and spiritual possibilities are in effect the formal causes of the outward conditions under which it lives and develops. In other words, it is not so much a matter of the person being modified by a set of conditions as of a soul gravitating to a set of conditions which correspond to its interior relations, and under which the latter will be best able to realise their potential.

This leads to certain questions about the will, which are hardly ever treated theoretically, particularly whether the distinction, so absolute for common sense, between the things we do and the things we suffer is ultimately sustainable. If events to which we see ourselves as passive were in fact occasioned by interior acts of thought and will, some ideas of morality would have to be different. The idea of responsibility would especially be affected, not being absolutely greater or less, but considerably redistributed.

The choice of freedom and free will outlined above is implicitly obedience to the will of God, where the universal Divine will can be dis-

cerned by means of the three-fold constitution of the being. Its implication is that each person is born with a destiny to develop as much as possible through the Instinctive, Animic, and Intellective levels, with the grace of sacred tradition. This is not merely in the interests of the individuals concerned, and their personal freedom, but it is also for the greater good of the world, since it is only through such persons that nature as a whole can connect with its archetypal causes, and thereby with God. Such is the relation upon which natural harmony and order among the elements depends.

This universal destiny is necessarily adversely affected by the Fall. For “unfallen” humanity, it would have been spontaneous and would have been wholly self-motivating. In the fallen state, however, there is much less, or even none, of the will to fulfil this destiny, so that individuals may often be content to remain even at the instinctive level if conditions allow. This is why in the actual world, this higher evolution usually does not take place except where individuals are subject to relentless external pressures which force them onto the battlefield, so to speak. Increasingly, it is a spiritual accomplishment if this kind of growth is recognised and undertaken voluntarily in later life.

The deepening identification between the soul and the intellective principle, which mediates between the Divine, is of course a union with an eternal reality. As such, it should obviously amount to what is meant by the immortality of the soul, especially as union with Providence must mean a deliverance from Fate. Mortality belongs explicitly to Fate, since aggregation and decay are its typical operations.

For Guénon, however, personal immortality seems to be no more possible for those who unite with Providence than for those who unite with Fate. There are two reasons for this: firstly it is because his idea of the soul is conditioned by its role in occultism, where one is concerned with the “subtle body,” which is defined as a quasi-material intermediary between the personal soul and the body. Following this materialised view of “soul,” Guénon expresses the view that the soul, just like the body, is an aggregate of elements drawn from its surrounding world, as in fact is the case with the “subtle body.”

Secondly, Guénon’s position is determined by his belief that there could be only one real being, which he refers to as the “Principle.” But the implicit idea that an exclusive reality must enhance that of the Prin-

ciple is in any case the exact opposite of the truth. To think in this way is to betray a suspicion that the higher reality will have to be exclusive because it is in fact too insubstantial to relate effectually to any other. At the same time, Guénon maintains that the individual person is what results when the Principle intersects a certain plane of existence, although this interaction would inconsistently imply that the Principle and the plane are both phenomena which have enough in common to be able to interact. He also speaks of a “passage” from one plane of existence to another without explaining what it is that thus passes. One is left with a supposed interaction of a reality which is beyond the need for salvation with a relative being which is incapable of it.

Finally, there is another aspect of this subject which reveals a close parallelism between Pythagoreanism and Far-Eastern tradition which is referred to in *The Great Triad* (p. 143), though no explanation is offered for the squaring of the numbers. This appears in the way that the 3, 4, 5 right-angled triangle is used by both traditions to symbolise the way in which the human Will in union with Providence can prove equal to Nature or Fate. Providence is represented by 3, because 3 is the first numerical unity after Unity itself, as befits the first reality in order after God. Man, or the human Will, is represented by 4, because this Will is the fourth principle in which the Instinctive, Animic, and Intellective are integrated. Fate is represented by 5, because 5 is the “first multitude” and so symbolically the origin of multiplicity. In Far-Eastern symbolism it represents Earth, while 6 represents Heaven.

In the 3, 4, 5 triangle, however, the sides corresponding to 3 and 4 only equal 5 when all the sides are squared, as in $9 + 16 = 25$. This raises the question of the symbolic aspect of the power to which the numbers are raised. The raising of a series of numbers to different powers appears in the Platonic Lamda, with its series 1, 2, 4, 8 and 1, 3, 9, 27, that is to say, $1, 2^1, 2^2, 2^3$ and $1, 3^1, 3^2, 3^3$. (In either group, 1 would result from a zero index as $2^0 = 3^0 = 1$). The unit is common to both and is any number to the power of zero. The indices are therefore 0, 1, 2, and 3. The power of zero represents all realities as they are in God “before” any kind of creation.

With the power of one, the realities represented by 3, 4, and 5 are the level of archetypal reality. Here, Providence (3) and Man (4) clearly outweigh Fate (5), as is shown by the way 3 and 4 exceed 5. In the human

microcosm, this 3 corresponds to the Intellective sphere.

Conversely, at the lowest extreme of instantiation in matter, the relation between these three elements appears as $3^3 + 4^3$ or $27 + 64 = 91$, while $5^3 = 125$, so that at this level Nature or Fate (5) must dominate the other two, Providence (3) and the human Will (4). In man, this corresponds to the Instinctive sphere.

Intermediate between the Intellective and the Instinctive levels is the realm of subtle or psychic reality, to which the Animic sphere corresponds, and here the index applied must be 2. It is also here that Providence (3) and the human Will (4) together can balance Fate, as represented by $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2 = 25$, or $9 + 16 = 25$. This applies to the highest level of creation as *natura naturata*, where Fate (5) is joined to its Divine origin by man's Will (4) being united to Providence (3). At this level, then, it is not a question of absolute superiority over Nature or Fate, but of an equality which can imply a richer and more prolific possibility than superiority alone could imply, because it must include a mutuality enriching both sides of the relation: Nature is spiritualised as its possibilities are able to reach their highest perfection, and the soul shares in another range of realities while remaining true to its own.