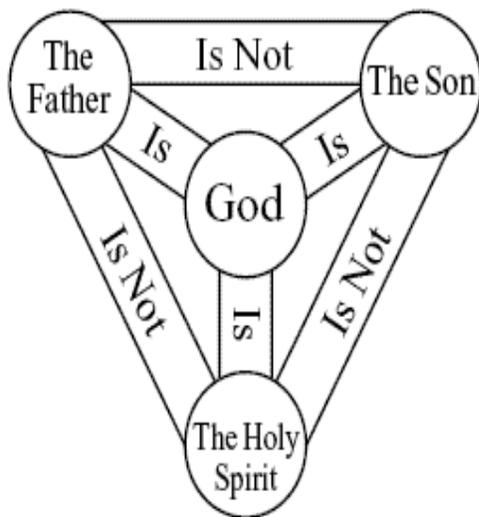


The Trinity as Metaphor

The majority of Protestant and Catholic denominations recognize God in the form of a Trinity. That is, they see God as “three persons,” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or something analogous, if not using exactly that wording. As a Unitarian Universalist the Trinity holds no significance to me as a representation of a Deity. However, I can see how the notion of the Trinity works as a metaphor for such wide-ranging topics from how I perceive myself to how I comprehend the Universe as a whole. I wish to share these understandings in this essay/post, as they have proved beneficial in my personal spiritual development and I have not seen the ideas published in other venues.

If you google “Trinity as a metaphor” your search will return many similes, but few metaphors. Some folks suggest that the Trinity manifests like the three forms of H₂O, ice, water, and steam. Other use a three leaf clover: three leaves, one clover, as an appropriate comparison. These are but two of the many simile examples out there. Or course mainstream Christian theologians will have none of them, decrying them all as heresies falling into the trap of either partialism or modalism. The three leaf clover analogy falls into the trap of partialism, according to theologians, because each leaf by itself represents only a portion of the whole, whereas each of the three parts of the Godhead stand alone, they are not part of God, they each are God. They deny the similarity of the Godhead to H₂O false because they claim that God is not modal. That is God does not manifest in different modes at different times and in various contexts. They maintain that God the Father does not ever morph into God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. They remain separate beings.



The standard way of representing the Trinity that reflects these arguments looks like the figure to the left. Of course this way of conceiving the Trinity brings out an inherent paradox. In formal logic if A=Z and B=Z, then A=B. So if you called The Father “A” and The Son “B” and God “Z.” We see the contradiction. The Father is not The Son, yet both are God. This failure in logic does not deter theologians, in fact they revel in it. They maintain that it speaks to the mystery of the Godhead, an unfathomable concept that one can only accept through faith or spiritual conviction.

If you search hard enough online you will run into at least one use of the Trinity as a metaphor. On the Progressive Christian Channel of www.pathos.com David R. Henson, after wrestling with the Trinity, decides that it is a metaphor about relationships, about not being alone in the universe. For Henson the Trinity points to the notion that we need each other. For him, the Trinity tells us about ourselves more than it says anything about God.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian Forrest Church takes a position that complements Henson's in his book *The Cathedral of the World*. Church writes that the Trinity is suggestive of God's nature by presenting a God above us, God within us, and God among us. I love Church's claim that this interpretation "liberates the mind to explore creation more creatively." I'm not sure exactly what this means but it does have a freeing effect on how one views the Trinity, a necessity for a Unitarian, I assume.

While Henson's and Church's ideas give food for thought on the idea of the Trinity as a metaphor they both lack concreteness, and while the vagueness of their ideas does not negate their ability to produce a warm fuzzy attachment to the Trinity, it does prohibit them from becoming an accepted manner for me to understand the Trinity as a metaphor. I need something more substantial. My solution to this dilemma of opaque Trinity metaphors uses an ontological approach.

I speak of ontology in the broadest sense. What can we say comprise the building blocks of our existence? I propose that the Universe consists of three and only three distinct components: 1) space-time, 2) matter/energy, and 3) consciousness. In support of this contention I will argue three things: 1) everything in the universe can be broken down into these three categories, 2) these three hold nothing in common with each other, 3) these three things totally depend on each other.

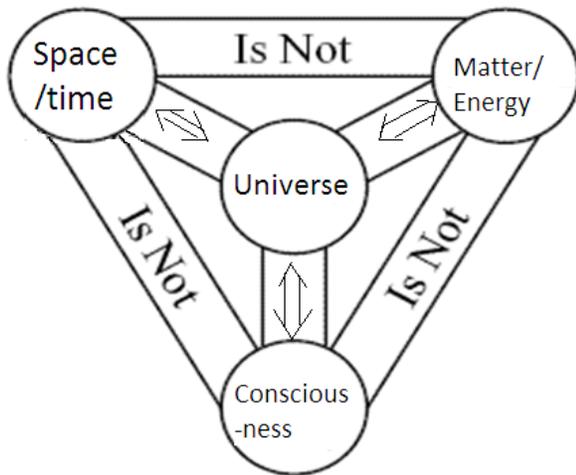
This first point - everything in the universe can be broken down into these three categories – seems self-evident. Galaxies, stars, planets, chemicals, biodiversity, all of these are forms of matter/energy that exist in space-time which we comprehend through our consciousness.

The second point - these three hold nothing in common with each other – is where I anticipate some pushback, especially from materialists. The standard accepted view from a majority of academics/materialists concludes that consciousness results from an interaction of chemicals and electrical signals in our brains, in other words, for these people consciousness can be reduced to matter/energy frolicking around in the space-time of our brains. However, to me consciousness comprises one of the fundamental components of the universe. For me the brain is simply a vehicle for consciousness. That is, I believe that brain molecules don't create consciousness, but rather consciousness uses the neural network of the brain in order to make sense of the world in which the body exists. I reached this conclusion by looking at research on reincarnation and scientific work in physics. Research on reincarnation (see the James Leininger case, or the work of Ian Stevenson and Jim Tucker at the University of Virginia, for example) supports the idea that after the brain ceases to function consciousness that had been associated with it can continue to exist in another fashion, perhaps in a developing brain or in some intermediary state. Experimental work in quantum physics suggests that nothing exists unless a consciousness has perceived it. (Read about the famous Schrödinger cat experiment to see what I mean.)

That space-time, matter/energy, and consciousness depend upon each other must follow. Space-time devoid of matter/energy has no reference and no differentiation and thus would imply an undefined singularity. Matter/energy cannot exist outside of space-time, but must occupy some specific space at some point in time. Also, matter/energy in space-time can only exist if some consciousness exists to

observe it. One might argue that they can imagine a universe that has only matter/energy existing in space-time without any consciousness, but this cannot be conceived without invoking some form of consciousness. Finally, consciousness cannot exist in a universe without space-time and energy because without these consciousness would have nothing of which to be conscious. One might suggest that consciousness devoid of space-time and matter/energy could simply be conscious of itself or self-conscious. But our concept of self-consciousness conflates consciousness with the matter/energy of our bodies. Consciousness outside of a vehicle cannot be conscious of itself, as there is no self without matter/energy existing in space-time.

So where does this argument lead us to in the context of the Trinity? I suggest that the Trinity is a metaphor for the Universe. God the Father represents space-time, source unknowable, ever-present, going on forever. God the Father (i.e., space-time) lays down the laws of the Universe. Space-time dictates the forms and interactions of matter/energy through gravity, electromagnetism, and nuclear forces. God the Son takes on the role of matter-energy, God manifesting itself in the world of space-time so that we can have eternal life, that is, so that consciousness can have something to observe. Consciousness plays the part of the Holy Spirit. It fosters the recognition of the will of God, that is, it allows us to experience the Universe.



The figure to the left represents the revised model of the Trinity, using the components of the universe in place of the persons of the Godhead. Instead of claiming that space-time, or matter/energy, or consciousness is the Universe I've replaced the relationship with a \Leftrightarrow sign indicating that each of the three components of the Trinity exists if and only if the Universe exists. From this we see that each of the individual components of the Trinity implies the existence of the whole and thus the existence of the other two.

We can take this understanding of the Universe as a Trinity and apply it to the human psyche in the spirit of the adage "As above so below" or perhaps in light of the scripture that considers humans being made in the image of God, or more to the point for this argument, in the image of the Universe. In any case this leads to the concept of the human psyche as being composed of three components. The most widely used configuration meeting this criteria comes from psychologist who point to the physical, emotional, and mental components of human psychology. This portrayal deserves a deeper look.

Understanding a person's psychological makeup requires a look at the human brain. One revealing examination of this subject came from Paul MacLean in his book *The Triune Brain in Evolution*. His treatise breaks down the brain into three evolutionarily distinct components: 1) reptilian complex, 2) paleomammalian complex, and 3) neomammalian complex. MacLean's model has fallen out of favor

because the evolutionary claims he made have been shown to be incorrect. However, the division of the brain into three sections still provides a useful way to understand the human psyche, even if the evolutionary claims first made about these divisions do not hold true.

For MacLean the brainstem, consisting of the basal ganglia, comprised the reptilian complex. We know that this portion of the brain controls behavior related to territoriality and other instinctual behaviors. These functions connect this portion of the brain to the physical aspect of the human psyche. MacLean's paleomammalian complex included the limbic system which controls nurturing behaviors, mutual reciprocity, and other emotion related behaviors. This functionality establishes the limbic system as the controlling center for the emotional facet of the human psyche. Finally, the neomammalian brain, according to MacLean, equates to the neocortex, the locus of the cognitive power of the brain and thus the center for what one would call the mental workings of the psyche.

So the question becomes how do you apply the Trinity of the Universe to this understanding of the human psyche? Certainly the physical space we occupy, and our territorial instinct that derives from the physical nature of our psyche, connects that physical nature to the space-time component of the Universe's Trinity. One can take this further and say that the physical portion of the psyche represents the Father of the Christian Trinity. The Father provides us with our unseen, unknowable, innate nature. Our physical nature dictates our laws, that is, what we hold important: a safe space where we can find food, shelter, and a mate.

The mental portion of the psyche and consciousness provides another easy connection between the Trinity of the psyche and the Trinity of the Universe. Our perceptions about the world, our intuitions, and our thoughts that come to us through our cognitive processes, facilitated by the neocortex that governs our mental psyche, all play through our consciousness. Almost by definition mental processes equates to consciousness. We can then align our mental processes/consciousness with the Holy Spirit of the Godhead. One can read of further support for the notion of perceiving consciousness as being the spirit of God speaking to us in Julian Jayne's book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*.

The third connection, the one between the emotional part of the psyche and the matter/energy of the Universe, takes a little bit deeper digging to arrive at the logic that bridges them. Without doubt one can argue that all components of the psyche have a connection to energy/matter, but the most salient part of our existence in the world centers on emotional experience. We have emotional responses to our territorial instincts and urges, and we have emotional responses to our mental ramblings. Emotions and moods are ubiquitous. With effort we can suppress our mental gyrations and with practice we can deny our basic urges and desire to establish personal space. However, as long as we breathe and have control over the matter and energy that comprise our bodies we cannot escape our emotions. If you have experienced deep meditation, void of thought and physical impulse, or have read comments from people who practice such meditation, then you know that when you strip away mental and physical processes through an appropriate meditative endeavor you arrive at an unforgettable emotional experience. Indeed, this points to the oft-mentioned notion of my spiritual teachers that the purpose of existence is to experience the world, not intellectually, but viscerally, emotionally.

This leads me to conclude that the emotional aspect of the self relates to the matter/energy component of the Universe. We can thus connect the emotional aspect of the psyche to The Son of the Godhead. Certainly of the three persons of the Godhead, The Son reflects the emotional connection. Christ's teaching of love and compassion for all stands out as his hallmark. In contrast The Father, as portrayed in the Old Testament conveys a sterner image, that of a law-giver. The most salient function of The Holy Spirit seems connected to rational understanding. Although the Holy Spirit does have a connection to emotional experiences, one can understand this in the same vein as the role of consciousness plays in our emotional experience.

The Universe and the human psyche comprise the two most important ways to apply the Trinity, but other groups of three that can benefit from a similar analysis exist. I will only mention a few here and let it to the reader to fill in the gaps. Consider the forces of physics: gravity, electromagnetic, nuclear; building blocks of Chemistry: proton, electron, neutron; dimensions of emotion: arousal, pleasure, control source; universal vowels: /ah/, /oo/, /ee/. I go into some detail about some of these on the Science page of my website: <http://www.holisticmotivepractices.com/science.html>.

I welcome comments on this essay. Please send them to brian@holisticmotivepractices.com. In the future I will make it so you can comment directly on the page without needing to email, but for now please email me the comments. I will post your comments, as long as they are relevant.