

*If there were no transcendence, the industrialisation of the earth
would be the ridiculous culmination of history.*

*The eras in which majorities rule are transitional periods
between eras in which minorities rule and those in
which minorities are oppressed.*

— Nicolás Gómez Dávila

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INTRODUCTION

The triads and modernity

This book is a prologue to a philosophical trilogy. It outlines a general line in the history of the West from roughly the year 1,000 AD to the present. However, it is not merely a work of history; it also identifies some crucial metaphysical aspects of reality: *triads*. I borrow this word from the German psychoanalyst and philosopher Hermann Lang (1938—2019). He used it to explain family life, but I apply this word in metaphysics. I will explain the idea of metaphysical triads in the following pages, but it suffices for now to say that attention to the respective natures of tripartite *soul*, tripartite *family*, tripartite *people*, and a tripartite *God* is essential to the true flourishing of humanity.

My historiographical and metaphysical projects are deeply intertwined, as one of my key claims is that modernity has damaged our apprehension of and relationship with these triads. Modernity (or perhaps modernization) has done this damage not merely through abstract philosophical argument, but by means of changes made to man's physical environment. In a single millennium, people in the West have changed from living in small communities that encouraged a right relation with the triads to being mere cogs in the machine of a very large and ambitious project that spans the entire world as a Global Village.

To understand this historical process, I contend that one must understand the triads as centers of our existence. They are, as it were, layers of existence. Each is analogous to and entangled with the others. Crucially, these four concepts are de-

nied and contested within the prevailing patterns of thought taken for granted in the contemporary West. These contemporary assumptions, in my view, constitute a form of nihilism, for without the soul, marriage, the people, and God, it is hard to conceive of any form of thought that can provide any coherent account of man's existence.

In any form of life that has not been thoroughly modernized, the four realities are recognized as triads (soul, family, people and God).¹ Wherever modernity has great influence, these triads have been eroded. To a thoroughly modern man, the very idea of these triads has become meaningless. The process of modernization is therefore infinitely fascinating, not least because of its irrevocable tragedy. The four layers share something crucial with each other, but they are by no means identical to one another.² The greatest of these triads, God, is also the foundational layer. He is all-encompassing in the classical sense of the term.

This prologue, as well as the subsequent three parts of the trilogy, traces the ongoing tension between a thousand years of modernity and these four concepts. As noted above, the four triads can be seen as 'layers of existence'. They form the centers of the 'transcendent' nature of reality³, and thus of life itself—

1. Other traditional cultures in the world suffer from the same effect on their triads as we suffer from modern culture: Triads always come together, and if one aspect of one triad is rejected, we see consequences in all other triads. But the huge difference between traditional cultures and modern culture is the distinctive, destructive agenda of modernity. This stands in contrast to traditional cultures that still try to preserve the triads as far as possible. To an extent, even certain anticipations of the divine Trinity do appear in other cultures, analogous to the tripartite soul and family, which even means that the metaphysical idea of *analogia entis* is implicitly accepted by more cultures than just those that have been Christianized.

2. This is after Thomas Aquinas' concept of analogy, see L.J. Elders, *The Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas in Historical Perspective*, p. 54 vv (Dutch translation as in all further footnotes). The concept of analogy was developed to explain how God is both like and unlike created being. It is necessary to say that God's Being is not identical to our own being, but we also cannot say that God has nothing in common with that which He creates. The two things said to be analogous must share something essential with each other.

3. In this argument, I hold to the Thomistic conception of transcendence. Thom-

which contrasts with all sorts of current modern conceptions of a purely immanent reality.

Traditionally, fatherhood has been associated with the creation and cultivation of vitality, space, order, and the transcendent. Not only does the father procreate in his own offspring, but he must also be able to create space for them by analogy with what God did in His creation.⁴ He first made us Paradise. Accordingly, when a father can no longer provide space—in analogy with God and in the creation of life—he cannot act as a father. The present book outlines how, as patriarchal space is lost, the rise of mass man is made possible. The crowd has no inner structure or space. It knows only density and motion.⁵ So the paternal role in the triads of marriage and people is suppressed, but this is also done in the triad of the soul, as I will argue.

The regularly recurring plea for more space for masculinity today reflects a realization that sufficient masculinity actually makes space for healthy ways of life, while the lack of masculinity, paternity, and the corresponding space transforms the triad of the people into the modern crowd.⁶ The spirit of our age is that of the crowd—stifling to the individual, patronizing, risk-averse, and politically correct.

as Aquinas assumes a coherent reality in which, while God and man do not coincide, neither are they completely separate. Thomas sees God and man as distinct, yet not separate. God participates in the human, and when man lives purposefully, he in turn participates in the divine. Thomas begins with the unity of creation, doctrine and life. See Ch. 2.

4. See also A.E.M. van der Does de Willebois, *Het vaderloze tijdperk*.

5. In the next part of the trilogy, *Permafrost*, I will study the issue of the modern crowd more extensively.

6. For an example of such increasing awareness, see *Katholiek Nieuwsblad*, January 28, 2009: “The president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum is concerned that weakening masculinity around the world is an obstacle to understanding Jesus’ teaching about his Father. ‘Today, the self-understanding of masculinity and especially of fatherhood is in crisis,’ Cardinal Paul Cordes said Jan. 23 at a meeting at the Pontifical University of Manila. *UCA News* reported that the German cardinal, who heads the Council responsible for coordinating charitable work, spoke after officials at the papal university awarded him an honorary doctorate in theology. The cardinal cited reports and studies that showed ‘declining male identity.’ One report stated that 24 million children in the U.S. live without a father. In 1960 there were only 10 million, Cardinal Cordes noted.”

The structure of this book is as follows: the first two chapters are more metaphysical in nature, intended above all to dispel some of the misconceptions that obscure the central theme of the argument. These chapters are thus somewhat more theoretical than the last three. Consequently, the introduction and the first chapter are somewhat more demanding than the subsequent ones, but I trust that readers will be willing to make the requisite effort. Chapter 1 begins by discussing metaphysical errors from the millenium and some of their real-world consequences in history. Chapter 2 deals with the question of what reality is.

The first two chapters outline only the beginning of modernity, namely the social, philosophical, and physical changes wrought in late medieval culture, as exemplified by the castle. However, it also moves forward and backward through history, making broader chronological leaps where necessary. Chronology is less central here than in the last three chapters. This book is primarily concerned with untangling the metaphysical knot woven by modernity, and thus has compelled me to work upon a broad historical canvas. Ultimately, the metaphysical problem in our time is reduced to the tension between the modern view and the classical transcendent approach to reality.

The late medieval castle is considered in *The Triads* as the first of four phases of modernity. In the last three chapters, the remaining three phases of modernity are explained. The second phase begins with the early modern city, the third with the modern state, and the fourth with the as yet only half-realized postmodern world order, whose full manifestation still lies ahead.⁷ Chapter 3 deals with the history urban and rural development, the transformation of habitat or living environment. Chapter 4 deals with human beings living within that space, compelled to change constantly along with it. It focuses on the question of the changing attitude of this human being;

7. While I reject the conventional scheme of premodern, modern, and postmodern in favor of the four phases outlined here, I nonetheless retain the terms modern and postmodern, as they take on a specific meaning within this framework that they lack in isolation.

the *habitus*. Finally, Chapter 5 reflects on this centuries-long development and traces its lines forward into the future, toward the World State that is taking shape in our time.

This development is related to the four triadic realities: soul, marriage, people, and God. At this point, it is possible to say something briefly about each one here:

Soul: eros, thymos, and logos. Plato's tripartite division of the soul—*eros*, *thymos* and *logos*, or the appetitive, the spirited, and the intellectual parts—is now once again a common topic of conversation among intellectuals. The main philosophers in recent decades to whom I am indebted on this point are Peter Sloterdijk and Francis Fukuyama. They focus their discourse mainly on the vanished balance between *eros* and *thymos*. They argue that this shift has been in favor of *eros* to the detriment of *thymos*. Sloterdijk and Fukuyama are particularly interested in the curious manipulation of *eros* by outside impulses. In short, eroticization in our time comes at the expense of the *thymos*, but especially at the expense of the balance between *eros* and *thymos*. For eroticization is not only a surplus of *eros* and a deficit of *thymos*, but is also a distortion of *eros*.

Marriage: father, mother, and child. In recent decades, on the fringes of public opinion, calls for the restoration or return of masculinity and paternity have been growing. Families are strained by the absence of fathers, and so the classic triad of father, mother, and child has been violated. This also distorts femininity and childhood. Again, due to outside manipulation, there is a shift in the relationship between men and women. Too much femininity and too little masculinity comes at the expense of both man and woman. The converse is equally true.

People: Middle class, elite, and lower class. In the current debate one regularly hears complaints about the absence of a

true elite and the war against the middle class. It is said that we no longer have healthy communities (popular life). We are plagued by the tyranny of the majority, by spoiled citizens, by rampant individualism, and by a detached elite composed of mere profiteers and self-enrichers. This enrichment, according to Peter Sloterdijk, finds expression in the centralization of both money and power.

God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For some time now, theologians have spoken of the “death of God.” I understand this death as the disappearance in popular consciousness of the paternal God in favor of the multitude of movements that alternately emphasize personal identification with the ‘Sun God’ (Jesus movement) or with the ‘Spirit God’ (fixation on the Holy Spirit) to the exclusion of the Christian God’s triune nature, or in general the rise of spiritualism and the New Age movement from the nineteenth century. A vague belief in “something higher” and scientism are likewise manifestations of a fragmented view of God. The fragmentation is not only an attack on the dogma of Trinity, but on the Being of God as such.

In our era, the problems facing our relationship with the four triads are linked to each other. This is hardly surprising; whenever there is a crisis in one of the layers, sooner or later it also permeates other layers, assuming the crisis is tenacious and deep enough. This book seeks to trace the paternal element within all four layers—or, more precisely, the space-creating and transcendent element. The paternal element in anything is that which provides objective order, preserves a space from suffocating forces, and establishes the conditions for transcendence, thereby connecting all layers of existence.

By now it is becoming clear that the problem of culture cannot be seen exclusively in terms of God, or community, or the nuclear family, or the state, or any other singular issue. Our crises are all connected to the unifying and connecting element in all triads.

For three of the triads, one element is repressed by modernity. In the soul it is *thymos*, in the family it is fatherhood, and in the people, it is the middle class. However, modernity attempts to completely repress the fourth triad, God, rather than simply emphasizing two of the Persons of the Trinity at the expense of one (although, as previously indicated, in some spiritual groups it is the Father who is repressed in favor of exclusively emphasizing the Son or the Holy Spirit).

Over the course of this book, I will argue that, by removing these elements from the triads, the other parts in the triads become increasingly problematic. The space-creating element in each of the four layers of existence has disappeared. To take a concrete example, the triad of the people: this book is not a plea for more elites or for a better aristocracy, since such groups are rarely capable of correcting themselves. Rather, the real suppressed element in the triad of the people is the middle class. Most genuine leaders are born there. All social corrections come from the middle class, while revolutionary destruction comes from elites, as well as the abuse of power. Anarchy and tyranny can only be avoided by a strong middle class. Precisely as the *thymos*, the heart, is the crucial bridge between mind and body, the middle class is the condition for a functioning labor class and upper class, both nobility and clergy. A healthy middle class has always been the cradle of aristocracy, whereas the absence of a middle class results in a two-tier society: a small elite and an enslaved lower class—the crowd.

The best-known absence is the so-called absent father in family life. Natural authority, care, connectedness, and a sense of overarching focus are being demanded more urgently than ever in our time. These are typical of the paternal character, whereas the maternal character tends to be more verbal and detail-oriented, with a lesser sense of the overall picture.⁸ The pa-

8. Interview with Iain McGilchrist, November 2025, on the YouTube channel *The Triads*. Interestingly, in this conversation he links the man–wife dichotomy to the brain and its two hemispheres. In our time, the right hemisphere is suppressed and associated with more traditionally masculine qualities, whereas the left hemisphere, now dominant, displays more feminine characteristics.

ternal appears to be pre-eminently about home and homecoming. The German word *Unheimlichkeit* is literally a homelessness: one still lives somewhere but is no longer at home. Or, to quote Joseph Roth, “We live in cities where coming home is no longer possible.” But why? It is not that good family life has disappeared altogether, but there is a clear trend that each succeeding generation becomes less and less able to mature, to form lasting bonds, and to take responsibility. Dutch professor of clinical psychology and psychotherapy Jan Derksen is not shocked by the high number of millennials who feel mentally unwell. “I’ve been predicting that for years,” Derksen says.⁹ He considers three-quarters of people in their twenties and thirties to be in need of treatment. I’d like to find out why people are less and less capable of fundamental human actions. The complaint that common life is decaying or that there is a loss of shared values,

9. “Looking at the figures, one can safely speak of an epidemic. We have brought a vulnerable generation into the world. This is due to the way children are raised, to an increasingly stressful society, and to addiction to social media. Parents tend to think everything their children do is wonderful and constantly praise them, which has fostered narcissistic patterns. Once they enter the workplace or the lecture hall, they are confronted with their limitations and discover that they cannot do everything—and this creates stress. We have raised tropical fish and released them into the North Sea. It’s harsh, and the stress and pressure keep mounting. Parents are driving their children over the cliff, and young people are doing the same to each other on social media. They constantly reinforce their outward image, yet cannot escape their inner world—the sadness, the fear, the cry for attention. The millennial presents a positive exterior, but inside it says: Help, I’m drowning. Driven by their urge to perform, they collide with their own vulnerabilities, having never learned how to deal with them. Everyone must be able to do everything, and inevitably, there are casualties along the way. It is a sick morality. When asked whether they would rather go without sex for a month or without the Internet, 58 percent of millennials said they could do without sex. Derksen finds this deeply troubling: “They would rather avoid a human relationship. The mental health system can no longer handle the massive influx of young people. A preventive approach is needed, Derksen argues—one that addresses parenting, work pressure, and social pressure. “The performance morality must normalize,” he warns. “We already see an increase in suicides. Society-wide policies are needed, or things will get out of hand.” ‘Millennial only sleeps in psychologist’s chair,’ *Metro*, July 1, 2017. <https://www.metronieuws.nl/nieuws/binnenland/2017/06/millennial-slaapt-pas-in-de-stoel-van-de-psychooloog>

is very unsatisfactory. Decay masks the fact that people are no longer capable of certain types of actions.

The inability to feel at home has a crippling effect on existence, making it increasingly difficult for most children to grow into stable characters themselves and, for example, to marry for life and to build and sustain a home and family. Husband and wife now live together rather temporarily, and a large percentage of families are made up of unmarried parents, who already have a marriage or relationship with children behind them, so that the children in the new 'temporary family' do not have the same parents, or even live half the time in one home and half at the home of another biological parent. And even the biological aspect is already being taken away from children by law. A truly stable home is becoming increasingly rare, rendering the concepts of home and homecoming themselves meaningless. Thus, the ground beneath the child has been removed. Meanwhile, single-parent families are increasing in number, with custody usually granted to one parent while the other is relegated to weekend visits. In most cases, the children are assigned to the mother upon divorce, further reinforcing fatherlessness. In some cases, the mother bears the entire burden of care and upbringing from pregnancy onward, as the father withdraws from his responsibility. Men from some ethnic groups are less likely than average to take responsibility, but the fathers who do, still have a lower legal position than the mother. This imbalance is present from the very moment of conception, as seen in abortion laws where only the mother has the deciding voice and is thereby recognized as the sole claimant in matters concerning the child. An increasing number of fathers report psychological damage because of their disenfranchisement in the abortion of their child. This imbalance deepens in recent proposals permitting single women to undergo IVF treatment and bear children without paternal involvement. Children seem to be an exclusive right of the woman, while a father present is no longer a requirement. Dutch lawyer Peter Brons, an advocate for fathers' rights in divorce cases, estimates that more than 500,000 children in

the Netherlands grow up without a father, as custody is routinely granted to the mother.¹⁰ Fathers cannot be expected to fully assume their paternal role if confidence in that role is barely there beforehand.

As you may have noticed by now, the purpose here is not so much to provide a set of recommendations to alleviate a specific social, legal, or societal wrong. It is rather an attempt to analyze what modernity is and does by uncovering its motives throughout history, on both concrete and theoretical levels. It is the presentation of a number of issues that have preoccupied me for some years, and that I want to put into context. I also aim to uncover modernity as a force that exerts a freezing effect on our classical and Western thought, metaphysics, faith, and life. This is a topic of the next part of the trilogy, *Permafrost*. By declaring that God is dead, we have closed our minds and hearts. We have ceased to be part of creation. As a result, we have become sterile.

A final note: many problems of our time are not isolated but are profoundly intertwined, having deep roots in the history of the West. The problems are integrated with each other and cannot be understood in isolation. As a result, the following text does not confine itself to a single topic of interest—say, love or urban planning. Instead, I necessarily address a range of seemingly disparate topics, from economics and capitalism to politics and public opinion. Do not be surprised, therefore, as my argument takes certain surprising twists and turns in the many and different examples I use to make my points; this is by design. In doing so, I aim to make metaphysics tangible.

A final note: all books cited are referenced according to the page numbers of the editions I used, which are mostly in Dutch.

10. I assume throughout the argument that, according to nature, a woman needs a man and vice versa, and that a child is entitled to his own father and his own mother.