

The Blessed Trinity and the Practice of Threeing

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Threeing is a three-person solution to relational confusion. At the core of this solution is a voluntary practice in which three people take turns playing three different roles. These roles are indicated by a topological figure on the floor. The figure is a development of a Klein bottle into a six-part unambiguous figure called the relational circuit (Ryan, 1976, 1993: 93-103). Participants learn a flow pattern of moving through the circuit and follow it without using language (Ryan 1976, 1993: 104-113). Through this non-verbal role-playing, a clarity and ease about relationships emerge. This clarity and ease can be cultivated by practice and developed into stable, healthy relationships. In a sense, *Threeing* can be described as a “yoga” of relationships. When you learn *Threeing* you stretch your capacity to relate in three different roles. Just as practicing yoga can keep a person healthy and thriving so the practice of *Threeing* can keep relationships healthy and thriving.

This paper is adapted from a chapter in a book length manuscript titled *The Three Person Solution* (Ryan: 1999). The purpose of this paper is to clarify *Threeing* by comparing and contrasting the immanent practice of ritualized *Threeing* with the transcendental mystery of the Blessed Trinity. By immanent I mean remaining within the totality of all that is part of one’s life. By transcendental I mean the presumption that there is a separate realm above, independent of the material universe, which controls one’s life. As my background includes

spending four and a half years in a monastic order of the Roman Catholic Church (1960-65) as well as inventing the practice of *Threeing* (Ryan: 1973-76), this paper addresses the concern that *Threeing* may be a process of reinscribing a divine mystery into the human condition that will falsify our understanding of the human condition. After comparing the Trinity and *Threeing*, I will briefly discuss the tripartite self-cultivated by *Threeing*.

In contrast to family settings, in *Threeing* the roles for relating are not fixed. Three people rotate through three different roles. Each role is defined in a very broad way, in accord with the categories of the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1903: 160-178). The first role, the initiator, invites you to express your sensibilities and feelings spontaneously, to be such as you are regardless of any other. In the second role, the reactor, you maintain your own sensibilities, but you express yourself in response, even reaction to the person in the first role. The third role, the mediator, is the most complex. You attend to both the spontaneity in the first role and the responsiveness in the second role and mediate between them without losing touch with your own sensibilities. Once three people establish a fundamental circuit of relationships among themselves using these three roles, they can go on to establish more complex circuits of relationships with four, five or more people.

Let me say at the outset that I will not address the self in terms of the psychoanalytic tradition. One factor in this decision is simply a matter of staying within my expertise. I have studied Trinitarian theology in a monastery; I have not undergone psychoanalysis. Moreover, others are better suited to build a bridge between Peirce's categories and the

psychoanalytic tradition. The suggestion I offer to those who would address the psychoanalytic tradition from a Peircian position is to explore Lacan's triad of real, imaginary and symbolic as, respectively, instances of Peirce's categories of secondness, firstness and thirdness.

Another factor in my decision not to address the psychoanalytic tradition is my assessment of Freud's Oedipal complex. Freud assumes the development of the self happens on the horns of what I call the relational dilemma. In this dilemma relationships among three people are routinely subsumed by acts of choice. I cannot look into four eyes at once. I tend to choose one person and exclude the other. The practice of *Threeing* neutralized the excluding effect of choice on three person relationships (Ryan 1999). By contrast, Freud assumes two roles and an outside rival. The male child wishes to slay his father and sleep with his mother. As a rival, he wants to take the place of his father. The family is reduced to three competing pairs: father/mother, mother/son and father/son. With different specifications, the psyche of the female child is understood in a similar way. Two against one dynamics are assumed. The nuclear family triad is taken as inherently "degenerate", to use Peirce's term (Brunning: 1997). No genuine triad is found. Without a genuine triad, the situation may well develop in the same direction as the Oedipus tragedy. By contrast, *Threeing* is a practice involving genuine triadic relationships.

The tradition of Trinitarian theology is not tragic and Trinitarian theologians were not fools. They created a rich tradition of precise thought about three person relationships. My assumption is that this tradition of thought, shorn of its transcendent dimension, can offer

some guidance for understanding *Threeing* and how the self would be cultivated by the practice of *Threeing*. Accordingly, this paper differentiates *Threeing* from the Trinity in terms of immanence and transcendence and goes on to suggest how Trinitarian theology might illuminate *Threeing*.

What I am putting forth is not a psychoanalytic theory or a theologian tract, but an art of triadic behavior. The value of *Threeing* can only be determined by practicing the art. The issues between psychoanalysis and theology are not my concern here. From a psychoanalytic point of view, one could characterize Trinitarian theology as a preoedipal fantasy, a vain effort to recover that time in an infant's development before conflict over gendered relationships begins. In the artistic tradition recovering this "preoedipal," unpolarized domain of perception is not vain, but fecund. An information transmission system based on perception and not language, which I developed (Ryan: 1991b), has some resonance with the unpolarized, unverbilized, preoedipal perception of the infant. The ritual practice of *Threeing* takes the nonverbal domain and organizes it into a safe space for genuine interpersonal triadic relationships among adults of mixed gender. Elsewhere, I address issues of gender and *Threeing* (Ryan *Semiotica* forthcoming).

Immanence and Transcendence

In Christianity, the effort to understand how three Divine Persons can coexist in One God is a complex tale of belief, heresy, imagery, devotion, and dogma. The traditional Christian teaching is that the

Trinity is both transcendent of the human condition and immanent in the history of humans. When I was growing up, the Trinity was presented as a “triangle in the sky” emphasizing the transcendent status of the three Divine Persons, the Father, the Son and The Holy Ghost, who in themselves were separate and unknowable to the human. Nor did they have any essential need for the human. The disjuncture between the transcendental Trinity and the immanent human is overcome in the person of Christ. According to the orthodox interpretation of the biblical narrative, one member of the Triune God, the Son, chose to become human and die on a cross for us out of love. As God, he died out of love. As human, he did not want to submit to the agony of death on the cross. The God/man submitted to death on the cross out of obedience to the Father.

In cyberneticist Gregory Bateson’s terms, the crucifixion can be seen as a wooden image of a double bind (Bateson: 1956, Ryan 1974: 102-107). The prayer offered by Jesus to his heavenly Father before his crucifixion, “Not my will but thine be done”, is a classic case of submitting to the contradictory commands of a double bind. In the structure of religious sacrifice, the ambiguities and relational contradictions (sins) among community members are resolved by being heaped upon a scapegoat, - in this case, - Jesus (Girard: 1977). The three-person solution resolves relational issues and double binds without generating a sacrificial scapegoat (Ryan 1999). In place of a transcendent mystification of the contradictions, *Threeing* offers an intransitive practice that precludes relational contradictions. Rather than mystify three person relationships and entrust the mystery to a priestly authority, *Threeing* addresses interpersonal relationships

directly, remaining within the realm of human experience, without resorting to transcendence.

In Trinitarian theology, how three can be one is ultimately a mystery. The mystery is not clear to ordinary people or to theologians. The mystery is revealed in scripture. There must be an authority to interpret the mystery. As mentioned, the history of the disputes over the proper interpretation of the Trinity is long and contentious in western history. In orthodox Catholicism, at least, the mystery remains in the keeping of those in authority. The Trinity is a matter of faith. Validity is a function of belief.

Threeing is not a triangle in the sky. It is an on the ground practice for humans. The self-cultivated is not a transcendent self that easily escapes into a private relationship with God but a self embedded in a circuitry of relationships. *Threeing* holds with the understanding that comes out of cybernetic theory that mind itself is immanent in the interconnecting processes of differentiation that constitute the evolving world (Bateson: 1970).

The validity of *Threeing* is a function of practice, not belief. There is no set of propositions to be believed in accord with an orthodox interpretation. There is a self evident practice to be performed. Without the repetition of that practice, there is no *Threeing*. The relational circuit itself is self-evident (Ryan: 1991a). It is not a mystery. Any practitioner can grasp the complete circuit in her mind just as she can make a fist in the hand. Any practitioner can grasp the choreography of the practice. No authority is needed to interpret the

practice. No director outside this practice is needed to interpret the roles for you.

As mentioned, the roles are based on Charles Peirce's three phenomenological categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness. Peirce was careful to differentiate his immanent phenomenological categories from transcendental phenomenological categories such as those put forth by Husserl (De Tienne 1990-91: 499-509). As was Peirce's habit, he coined a new word "phaneron", to distinguish his understanding of the immanent collective totality of whatever shows itself to awareness. By contrast, Husserl's phenomenology requires a "bracketing off" of the human part of what is manifest into a privileged transcendental position. To use an analogy, Husserl's phenomenology provides a kind of transcendental flashlight that shines on and illuminates whatever. For Peirce there is no privileged flashlight. The totality illuminates itself from within its own being and includes our being. The Phaneron is the "single entirety, or total, or whole of that which the reader has in mind in any sense." (Peirce: c.1904). The complex ingredients of that totality have, as irreducible elements, firstness, secondness and thirdness. The roles in *Threeing* are grounded in these irreducible elements in our direct awareness.

A practitioner of *Threeing* may not understand the larger totality beyond the relational circuit of which she is part. However, the practitioner does not put that which is not understood into a separate heavenly vault called transcendence. Rather there is an approach to knowledge in the tradition of Charles Peirce that combines humility about what we know with a refusal to block the road of inquiry. Any

practitioner is part of a community of fallible interpreters seeking a larger understanding, not a community that assuages doubt by putting its trust in an infallible dogmatic authority. (Peirce: 1877: 109-123).

Threeing is not a mystery. Anybody can practice without submitting to an authority. While experience with *Threeing* does build up a certain authority based on experience, the authority remains with the voluntary practitioners. They have the authority to agree with each other on how they will interpret the practice and how they will use the practice.

Three in One

Here is a classic Christian orthodox statement about the Trinity.

“The Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son wholly in the Father and wholly in the Spirit; the Holy Spirit wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son. None precedes the other in eternity, none exceeds the other in greatness, none excels the other in power.” (Decree for the Jacobites, Council of Florence, 1442. Boff 1988: 75)

In the Trinity, the Three Divine Persons share one divine nature. God is one nature in three distinct persons. Not one Supreme Authority who created and manages two subordinates. Not one person with three different disguises. Not three distinct gods who form an association. Orthodox teaching proclaims that there are three Divine Persons in One Divine Nature. They interpenetrate each other.

In *Threeing*, there are three distinct persons. The unity shared is not the unity of one nature. There is no interpenetration of beings. In fact, while the notion of "penetration" may be proper to describing divine union (Boff 1988: 134-136), it is a misleading sexual metaphor for *Threeing*. In *Threeing* people are wholly present to each other but do not identify with each other in any "interpenetrating" way. There is no mystical union. There is no alienation from one's own presence to oneself and subsumation of the self in a fusion with another. You are copresent in a circuit with two other people. If there is an absorption into one of the others, - as in falling in love, - then it is impossible to be present to the third party simultaneously. You have chosen one instead of the other and are not *Threeing*, even if you are standing in the relational circuit. *Threeing* does not involve explicit sexual activity. *Threeing* involves love without falling.

Threeing is a unity of relationship, an orchestration of differences. The relationship is not given by nature but depends on the performance of a practice. That performance, at its best, expresses some of the same sort of "communing" that characterizes the relationship within the Trinity: open presence to each other in a welcoming spirit with a genuine reciprocity among participants. Mutual self-revelation and mutual self-recognition abide. In that mutuality, each self is strengthened. The practice of such a three-person relationship, of being *three*, depends on the oneness of the relational circuit that guides the practitioners. The unity of the circuit makes possible the organization of distinct persons into a united performance. Unlike in the orthodox understanding of there being only one Trinitarian God, with *Threeing* there can be a plurality of trinities.

People can take part in more than one trinity. The organization of these differences does not involve any one person being rendered indistinct by another. No person subsumes another. Each person maintains the fullness of self in balanced relationships with two other full selves.

Roles

In the Trinity, Persons have fixed roles. Each member of the Blessed Trinity has a set role, depending on His identity. The names indicate the roles. The Father creates the world. The Son redeems the world. The Holy Spirit maintains the redeemer world in holiness. Their internal relationships to each other match the relationships to the world. The Father is the Father of the Son; the Son is the Son of the Father. The Spirit, created by both of them, is also the bond between Father and Son.

In *Threeing*, you do not have one set role based on one identity. You take turns playing three different roles. The roles are ways of relating to each other. Of course, you bring your identity to each role; your physicality, your gender, your genetics your proper name and so forth, but the role is not fused to your identity. The role is determined by your position in the relational circuit. A difference in position makes a difference in your relationship to the other participants. As you learn the flow pattern for changing positions in the relational circuit, you learn to relate to others without relying on a fixed identity.

Learning to relate to others without relying on a fixed identity is not easy. The difficulty stems from the fact that as members of a family

we learn to relate to others in such a way that our identity and our role are fused. Moreover, that fusion is fixed. One is father, mother, oldest female child, second oldest male child and so forth, all the time. Perhaps one of the reasons that the Blessed Trinity holds such fascination for humans is that it offers a model of relating based on fixed identities that is very close to how families relate based on fixed identities.

What practitioners of *Threeing* often find is that they are most comfortable in one of the three roles because that role is the best match for their role in the family. I once invited an actress to participate in the production of a videotape of *Threeing* with the agreement that she would choose the two other people from her network of fellow actors. It happened that this actress was the oldest sister of three sisters. Without knowing the birth order of her peers, she choose a woman who was a second oldest and a woman who was the youngest of three sisters. Rehearsals went on twice a week for three weeks. The youngest gravitated toward the first role, (initiator) the second oldest towards the second role (reactor) and the oldest to the third role (mediator). Gradually, however, they learned to trust themselves, and each other, to play all three roles. For example, the oldest "sister" came to really like being in the first role where she was not responsible for the two others. Hidden aspects of her personality emerged (Ryan: 1985).

In playing roles, one's identity is not wiped away. As any actor will say, you make the role your own. By making the three basic roles one's own, one has more flexibility to interact with other people

depending on the circumstances of the situation. Some situations call for initiation, others for strong reactions and others for thoughtful mediation. Some situations call for different combinations of these three broad skills. Rather than be stuck in one habitual role, a person can make all three roles her own and play them according to life's circumstances without abandoning her own identity.

Equality

The three members of the Trinity are equally God. Sharing one divine nature, sharing their identity as God, none is less than another is. Currently there is a renewal of interest in the Trinity that accentuates this equality. Leonardo Boff, author of *Trinity and Society*, has been at the forefront of this effort. Boff is a liberation theologian working for justice among the oppressed people of Brazil. He sees the equal relationship among the three members of the Blessed Trinity as an inspirational model for a just society.

In *Threeing* participants have equal access to every position, but they are not equal in the sense of being exactly the same. Since no two positions on the circuit are identical, no two participants share the same "identity" at the same time during the performance. Performers maintain their identity, as described above, but in the performance there is never a reduplication of roles. No two people are ever doing the same thing at the same time. Differences in position make for differences in roles. As we have seen in the discussion of roles, the roles in *Threeing* are free from fixed identity. Being free of fixed identity, participants can never be "equated" one with another as in $A = B$. Alice never "equals" Barbara in this sense. There is no one-to-

one correspondence between participants, no identity that they necessarily share. Opportunity and access are equal in *Threeing*, but *Threeing* involves the play of differences among “uniques,” not sharing between equals.

Perhaps this notion of three uniques operating with equal access will become clearer if we use an example of a relational pattern somewhat similar to *Threeing* taken from professional basketball. When the Chicago Bulls hired basketball guru Phil Jackson as their head coach, Jackson promptly hired the seasoned Tex Winter as his offensive coach. Why? While the Bulls had signed the young Michael Jordan to play the outside shooting position, they did not have a tall dominant man for the inside center position. In the history of basketball, all winning teams keyed off a dominant center, like the Los Angeles Lakers keyed off the graceful Kareem Abdul Jabbar. The tall center posts up inside, that is to say, he stands firm with his back as close to the basket as possible. The team can then run a variety of successful plays through him, beginning with passing the ball into the center at his post. Tex Winter saw another way to win (Winter: Undated).

Over many years of coaching, Winter had worked out a formal approach to winning basketball games by posting three players off to one side of the basket in a triangle, facing each other. No dominant big man was needed. Winter taught his three-post offense to Jackson's Chicago Bulls. This form of offense enabled talented triads, such as Jordan, Pippen and Kukoc to play together, each at the top of his game. They would set themselves in the triple-post and pass, pass, pass until the defense exposed a weakness. Each of them had

equal access to scoring opportunities; each took advantage of those opportunities according to his unique talents. Jordan to Pippen to Kukoc to Pippen to Kukoc to Jordan --*weakness*- Jordan to Pippen. *Score!* The three-post offense worked. The Bulls won six National Championships. Just as the triple post offense enabled the Bulls to maximize unique talents and win, so *Threeing* is a formal approach to relationships that enables participants to sustain each other at their best, in their uniqueness.

In the practice of *Threeing*, the self is never identical to another self and the self is never subordinated to another self. The self is one among three with equal opportunity at every position. By moving from position to position in the flow pattern proper to *Threeing* the self maintains different ways of being without forfeiting uniqueness. The uniqueness of the self thrives.

Choice

In The Trinity, the Three Persons never choose each other. The members of the Trinity have always been part of each other. "None precedes the other in eternity". They did not find each other and choose each other. They cannot unchoose each other.

In *Threeing*, the members choose each other. Alice invites Barbara to Three. Barbara accepts or declines. Given that Barbara accepts then she and Alice agree to invite Carol, who accepts or declines. Given Carol accepts then Alice, Barbara and Carol all Three. If at any time during the *Threeing* one does not want to stay, that person can opt

out. During the practice of *Threeing* itself, respect for choice is maintained. In other writings, I discuss the relational dilemma and explained how respect for choice is maintained in *Threeing*. (Ryan: 1999).

Respect for one's own right and ability to choose becomes part of the process of *Threeing*. Along with this respect for oneself comes the respect for the right and ability of other people to choose. As we have seen, however, choice does not cut you off from relating, rather choice becomes part of how you relate.

Admittedly, comparing and contrasting the practice of *Threeing* with The Blessed Trinity is an abstract exercise. The practice is nonverbal and the Trinity is an "ineffable" mystery. There is no "evidence" for the Blessed Trinity and not enough evidence of *Threeing* to draw any empirical conclusions. However, properly screened for transcendent notions, the effort to articulate three person relationships in the tradition of Trinitarian theology can serve as a rich resource for the practice of *Threeing*.

The Tripartite Self

I believe I have shown that *Threeing* is not disguised transcendence but a transparent practice. The practice would cultivate an immanent sense of self. That immanent self would be tripartite. Taking turns in the three interpersonal roles proper to *Threeing* would simultaneously cultivate three intrapersonal aspects of self-corresponding to Peirce

three categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness. As mentioned, these broad and inclusive categories defy easy labels. We can say the three aspects of self are inclusive of the whole of the self. Facets of the self that correspond to firstness include feelings, intuitions, and sensibility to immediate qualities in the surrounding world. Facets corresponding to secondness include responsiveness to specific facts, capacity for action and strength of will. Facets of self-corresponding to thirdness include an ability to mediate between qualities and facts, awareness of broad patterns and an ability to think about the future. Participates in *Threeing* would be cultivating a range of sensibility and skills proper to these three aspects.

Within the practice of *Threeing*, the relational circuit provides clear unambiguous positions for emphasizing these aspects of self. Outside the practice there are no such unambiguous positions. Awareness of these three aspects of self must be composed in the compact awareness of one's own being. For example, as a runner you can pay attention to each step as it hits the ground (secondness) the form of your gait as you run uphill (thirdness) or the feeling of tiredness (firstness) as you move up the hill. In composing your attention with these categories you can pay attention to one aspect without cutting yourself off from the others (Peirce 1955: 97). The ratio of attention to these three aspects changes as the situation changes. Your success as a runner depends, in part, on an ongoing process of composing your awareness for optimal effect.

In terms of Peirce's phaneron, out of all the ingredients of running, you are composing your attention in terms of the irreducible elements of firstness, secondness and thirdness. Ingredients are not elements.

(De Tienne 1990-91: 413-415) The song of a bird as you run through the woods is an ingredient in the collective totality, the phaneron of your lived experience, but it is not part of your running/composing awareness based on firstness, secondness and thirdness. The ingredients of a good meal include a range of tastes, textures and contrasts, but if you are following a diet you are paying attention to the irreducible elements of fats, carbohydrate and protein. To figure out carbohydrates, fats and proteins we consult charts compiled by experts. To compose our awareness with firstness, secondness and thirdness we rely on training our own mindfulness. In "running", you are paying attention to three irreducible elements in the phaneron that optimize your process of running. The practice of *Threeing* cultivates that sort of mindfulness for the self. The individual cultivation of a mindfulness proper to the phaneron itself, prior to the "self", and prior to the differentiation of the phaneron into firstness, secondness and thirdness, seems to be the task of certain meditation practices such as Zen. (Suzuki: 1970)

Based on this discussion of firstness, secondness and thirdness as intrapersonal aspects and what we learned about *Threeing* by comparing it with the Blessed Trinity, let me summarize the characteristics of the tripartite self-cultivated by *Threeing*. By formally engaging in firstness, secondness and thirdness such a self would be practiced in feeling, willing and thinking, respectively. She would recognize that she might have one particularly strong suit such as willing, but would balance that out with awareness that she needs some help at times with spontaneity and long-term thinking. The tripartite self would be capable of being fully present to others in a

context of mutual respect for each other and for each other's choices. Open to others she trusted, she would be capable of being part of a genuine triad and a healthy family. Ritual work within different gendered triads (FFF, FFM, MMF) would give her a comfort zone with both men and women. Within dyadic gendered relationships her success would vary depending on many factors, but she would be able to keep the play of differences between her and her sexual partner in a larger context based on her experience with genuine triads.

She would be capable of disagreement as well as cooperation and comfortable with the idea of a society with equal access to opportunity. The tripartite self would be systemically aware of the larger world as part of a community of people trying to interpret and live in that world. The tripartite self would be her own person and value her own singularity as well as that of others in any network of relationships. Capable of playing many roles without falsifying her interactions, she would be flexible and savvy in her relationships to other people.

I have sketched the tripartite self in somewhat idealized terms by referencing the theology of the Trinity, the protected realm of ritual *Threeing* and Peirce's phenomenological categories. These worlds invite idealized sketches. Living as a tripartite self in the rough and tumble of the real world raises a whole other set of issues beyond the scope of this paper, some of which I address in *The Three Person Solution* (Ryan 1999).

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