

## Varro's *tria genera theologiae* as Social and Political Reform

The 'three kinds of theology' (*tria genera theologiae*) – the tripartition of divine affairs into civic, mythical, and natural conceptions of the gods – has long been a commonplace of modern scholarship on Varro's religious antiquarianism (e.g. Cardauns 1978; Rüpke 2005). As has also long been known, the form is not Varro's invention, but has its origins in either Stoic philosophy (Pépin 1956), or the religious thought of Mucius Scaevola the pontifex (Schiavone 1976, 5-15). In this paper, however, I argue that central to Varro's use of the tripartition was its extension to encompass far broader functions, with important implications for understanding the historical and intellectual dimensions of his work. Beginning with a discussion of *De Lingua Latina* (*LL*), I demonstrate how the tripartition serves as a structuring device, for example, in the etymology books (Books 5-7), and as a linguistic schema in the books on inflection (Books 8-10). The point, however, is not simply linguistic: rather, Varro's comprehensive division of the affairs of the *res publica* into three general categories is central to his influential response to Roman political corrosion (e.g. *LL* 5.5-8; cf. Cicero, *Acad.* 1.9; Augustine, *Civ. Dei* 6.2) – as is his own intervention as a philosophical authority on *natura*.

Overlooked in the intricate organization of the etymology books of *De Lingua Latina* (e.g. Dahlmann 1964, 16-24), the dominant structuring device of the catalogues is the tripartite organization of the etymologies into natural, mythical, and civic categories. Although Varro's account of time (*tempus*, *LL* 6.3-34), for example, observes a basic distinction between 'natural' (*LL* 6.3-11) and 'civic' (*LL* 6.12-34) methods of temporal measurement (Feeney 2007, 198-200), the 'civic' section is also subdivided into two further distinctive measures of the Roman state calendar: those days which affect the gods (i.e. the 'mythical' component, *LL* 6.12-26); and those which have only to do with men – the 'civic' section proper (*LL* 6.26-34). In Varro's account,

therefore, Roman time can be read as a tripartition, corresponding to his understanding of the gods. Book 5, a tour de force of Varronian scholarship, similarly presents its etymological material as a conceptual tripartition: on *natura* (LL 5.16-56); ‘mythical’ etymologies of the gods (LL 5.57-74); and the ‘civic’ etymologies pertaining to the Roman *res publica* (LL 5.75-183).

The ubiquity of the tripartition in the etymology books – and the corresponding emphasis on *natura* as the kernel of Varro’s etymological analyses – also applies to Varro’s regularization of Latin inflectional morphology (or ‘natural inflection’, *declinatio naturalis*: Books 8-10). In this instance, the tripartition emerges as a mechanism for the correction of linguistic norms. Despite Varro’s claim that morphological forms should only be innovated by philosophers like himself, he notes that correct diction can only be properly instituted by poets (LL 9.5; 9.115), who, in their imaginative, mythical accounts of the gods, are best placed to influence the language of the people. This turns out to be a circular, tripartite division of linguistic labor: in which the philosophers – intellectual authorities on *natura* – innovate correct linguistic forms; the poets, who are concerned with myth, implement them; and, the people follow the poets – and, in turn, supply the philosophers with defective forms to correct.

My exploration of the tripartition in *De Lingua Latina* shows that Varro’s use of the heuristic device is only linguistic (or even theological) in a limited sense: rather, it is used in the etymology books as a useful tool for describing any number of political and cultural phenomena; in the inflection books, meanwhile, it is a mechanism for social engineering. Indeed, the prevalence of the tripartition in both of Varro’s monumental works – the *Antiquitates* and *De Lingua Latina* – strongly suggests that it was a major component of his intellectual program as a whole. On a wider view, through his use of the tripartition, Varro caps a key trend in Roman thought – beginning with Scaevola’s ‘secularization’ of jurisprudence (e.g. Moatti 1997, 186) –

which advocates for the separation of spheres of Roman authority to contend with different social forces. In this regard, and not without influence in subsequent generations, Varro argues for the social implementation of the tripartition as an urgent matter of governance.

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