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Rosenstock-Huessy's "Cross of Reality" and Systems Theory

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Outline

Abstract

This paper is a systems theoretic examination of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's "cross of reality," a structure that fuses a vertical spatial dyad of inner-outer and a horizontal temporal dyad of past-future into a space-time tetrad. This tetrad is compatible not only with the human-centered phenomenological point of view that Rosenstock-Huessy favors, but also with a world-centered scientific point of view. It is applied by him explicitly or implicitly to a wide variety of individual and collective human experiences. In this paper I mention a few examples of these applications from the realm of language, religion, and social critique. I also show that Rosenstock-Huessy's tetradic structure accords with and diagrams some basic concepts in systems theory.

Keywords

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, cross of reality, tetrad, systems theory, structure-function, inner-outer-past-future, subjective-objective-trajective-prejective, Franz Rosenzweig

Introduction

This paper continues my study of analytical structures that are displayed in diagrams, where the diagrams express systems theoretic ideas. Here I consider a tetradic structure proposed by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888-1973), which he called the "cross of reality," shown in Figure 1(a). Figure 1(b) shows this tetrad as a cross, and displays other terms that Rosenstock-Huessy used for inward and outward, namely "subjective" and "objective," and for backward and forward, namely "trajective" and "prejective." "Inner" and "outer" also often substitute for "inward" and "outward."

Figure 1 Cross of reality
(a) Rosenstock-Huessy (2017); (b) Chrysalis (2016)
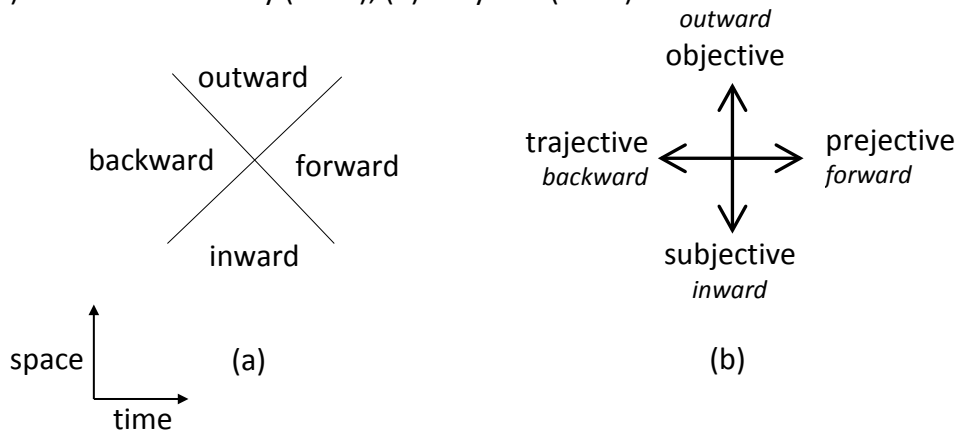
My interest in Rosenstock-Huessy's structure connects to work I've done on the relation between ideas and graphs (Zwick 2018). Graphs are mathematical structures defined by nodes and links between nodes, and different graphs provide syntactic structures for different ideas. My ideas and graphs paper focused on tetradic graphs, specifically a particular structure proposed by the philosopher and religious teacher, John G. Bennett (1966). In earlier work (Zwick 2013), I had analyzed a tetradic structure proposed by the sociological theorist, Talcott Parsons, which is similar to Bennett's tetrad.

My interest in Rosenstock-Huessy's "cross of reality" also connects with my past work on *The Star of Redemption* of Franz Rosenzweig (2005), a Jewish-German philosopher-theologian (1886-1929) with whom Rosenstock-Huessy engaged in intense philosophical-religious dialog. Rosenzweig's work is saturated with symbolism of the triad, and in an earlier work (Zwick 2020) I analyzed his triadic structures from the perspective of systems theory. Rosenstock-Huessy's book, *In the Cross of Reality*, is saturated with symbolism of the tetrad, and in this paper I examine his tetradic structure from the perspective of systems theory. The prominence in the *Star* of the double triad of the star of David (the *Magen David*) reflected Rosenzweig's Jewish identity. The prominence of the tetradic cross in Rosenstock-Huessy's book correspondingly reflected his Christian identity. Rosenstock-Huessy regarded his *In the Cross of Reality* as a companion and complement book to Rosenzweig's *Star*

Except from a few diagrams at the beginnings of parts of the *Star*, Rosenzweig did not deploy diagrams, yet his book is deeply architectonic. In my paper on this book, I showed that the structures fundamental to the *Star* are readily interpreted via systems-theoretic ideas and diagrams. Rosenstock-Huessy, by contrast, made some use of diagrams in his writing. Before I encountered his work, I had used both spatial and temporal dyadic diagrams (Zwick 2020), but had not fused these two dyads together to form a space-time tetrad, so I was interested to discover that in his cross of reality Rosenstock-Huessy had done precisely that and then had used this cross as the underlying structure for wide-ranging discussions.

This paper has two parts. The first part presents general remarks about the cross of reality and gives some examples of Rosenstock-Huessy's use of this structure. The second part shows its affinity to systems theoretic ideas.

The cross of reality

General remarks

Rosenstock-Huessy called this structure the "cross of reality," implying that it applied to *everything*. He writes, "And from this Archimedean point, with its subdivision of inner and outer, backward and forward, we can launch our quest for determining the forces of reality. For every manifestation of reality may now be accounted for as an ensemble of two spaces and two times, comprising the fullness of reality" (2017, p.45). Elsewhere, he interprets "reality" as *experience*, writing, "Reality is for us whatever we can apprehend from these four regions of experience" (2017, p.37).

Rosenstock-Huessy's project can be understood either as human-centered or world-centered; this terminology for subjective vs objective orientations is adapted from Rosenzweig. Or, this distinction might be called epistemological – here meaning experiential – or ontological. While the word "experience" is human-centered, the word "reality" is neutral; it could be viewed as either world- or human-centered. To a scientist, "reality" is independent of human observers, though knowledge of reality obviously requires such observers. To a phenomenologist, however, "reality" is experience-dependent. While Rosenstock-Huessy leans to the human-centered perspective, occasionally he seems to adopt a world-centered perspective. Interestingly this very polarity is encompassed in the cross. He assigns the scientific view of "reality" to the "outer" ("objective") term of the cross, contrasted with the "inner" term which he calls "subjective." This latter word does not necessarily mean humanly-subjective; any inner-centered view would probably be called by him "subjective."

Aside from the wide range of subject matter to which Rosenstock-Huessy applied this cross of reality, he also uses this structure in different ways. In some applications, the four terms label different manifestations within some domain of experience. In other applications, the terms are different aspects of an integral whole that are simultaneously present in that whole. The first use *partitions* the subject matter under discussion; the second use *differentiates* it as one moves from the center of the cross to the ends of its arms (or integrates it if one moves from the ends to the center).

Rosenstock-Huessy's use of the cross is also descriptive or normative. Accounts that reflect partition are generally descriptive, but can have normative implications. Accounts that reflect the differentiation of some whole are often normative, pointing to the absence of integration of the four terms or the presence of too much specialization in one of them, resulting in dysfunction or movement to a polar opposite.

Finally, the cross can be understood as either synchronic or diachronic. All but one of the examples of its use that I show below are synchronic, but the last example, in Figure 3, is diachronic.

Some examples

I can offer here only a few examples of Rosenstock-Huessy's use of this tetrad; these are summarized in Table 1 just to show the diversity of their content.

Table 1 Summary of examples

	Inner	Outer	Past	Future
Societal pathologies	anarchy	war	decadence	revolution
Speech	lyrics	analytics	epics	dramatics
Religion founders	Lao-Tzu	Buddha	Abraham	Jesus
Idols	metaphysics	myth	romanticism	utopianism
Degeneracies	poor relations with nature	cultural demoralization	spiritual callousness	denial of death

The first example, one of partition, is a taxonomy of societal pathologies (Figure 2). In decadence, the past enervates the present; in revolution, the future attacks it; anarchy dissolves the society from within, and war destroys it from without.

Figure 2 Societal pathologies
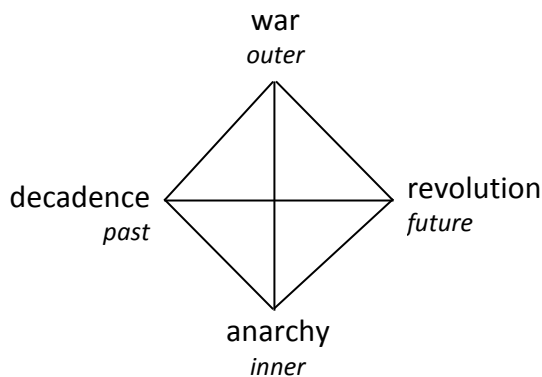
I follow with a few other examples, not displayed in figures, and add the appropriate terms of the tetrad in brackets. To fully understand these assignments and how Rosenstock-Huessy uses this tetrad, it's really necessary to read his full discussion of these examples. But mentioning them here with just brief extracts from his analyses will suggest the range of their subject matter and something of their character.

Rosenstock-Huessy was very interested in speech and language, an interest he shared with Rosenzweig. Here is something he wrote about names; this is in the mode of differentiation, not partition.

> This name, which has ceased to be self-verifying, is retained in memory. Otherwise we would become speechless. Its life is mirrored in the self-consciousness of speakers [*inner*].... It is integrated into the empirical world [*outer*] by the reifying gaze, which apprehends it objectively and turns it into a thing among things. Living experience gropes for the name's origin [*past*].... Its future effectiveness depends on personal cooperation, on the significant affirmation [*future*]. (2017, p.7)

And here are some related comments about words; again this is differentiation.

> A word, after all, makes its impact on the world by subjugating a soul for its project [*future*], coercing it to communicate subjectively [*inner*], enforcing a trajective report [*past*] from all participants in those elaborations, and finally facilitating an objective reckoning [*outer*] that everyone can share. (2017, p.122)

However, his classification of genres of speech is partition:

> These three phases of speech—dramatics [*future*], lyrics [*inner*], epics [*past*] —have been known to all men always as indispensable and as normal. The fourth phase, analytics [*outer*], is indispensable too, but the men of antiquity denied that it was normal. On the other hand, our times have declared that the first three phases were dispensable, and that the fourth phase was both normal and imperative. (1970, p.58)

Another deep interest that Rosenstock-Huessy shared with Rosenzweig is religion. While Rosenzweig had room in his philosophical-theological scheme only for Judaism and Christianity, Rosenstock-Huessy was somewhat more ecumenical. Taken descriptively, the four tradition-founders that he mentions is a partition, but he intends also a normative implication. He is calling for the future integration of these traditions (this is taken up in his book *The Christian Future* and in the second volume of his *Soziologie*), so from the perspective of such a future possibility, one might regard these four traditions which are separate in the present as a differentiation.

> And the human soul owes to four founders the achievement of overcoming its shame and fear of death, through religion, as well as its confession that the call to pain and death has been made and heard. Those four founders are Buddha [*outer*], Lao-tzu [*inner*], Abraham [*past*], and Jesus [*future*]. (2017, p.176)

Rosenstock-Huessy's religious orientation was the basis of a normative critique of contemporary society and culture. He wrote, "We have to dispense with the four great modern "false idols." One of these false idols was science, which he viewed, as did Adorno (Bielik-Robson 2007), as a source of modern myth.

> The four false idols are the mythmaker, enraptured and seduced by the patterns of the world that invariably fall out of the strictures of science [*outer*, i.e., objective]; the metaphysician, seduced by the pathways and workings of thought itself [*inner*, i.e., subjective]; the romantic, overawed by the past and its charms [*past*]; and the utopian [*future*], so convinced that the future will be free of all the burdens of the past. (2017, p.xxii)

This list is a partition as these idolatries do not seem to be linked. Here is further critique, which seems to be a partition, but perhaps these degeneracies are linked.

> With this, we have a table of the four great degeneracies of reality: Weakness in our relations with nature [*outer*]; demoralization in cultural life [*past*]; callousness in our spiritual existence [*inner*]; and dissemblance in the face of death [*future*]. (2017, p.175)

A different way that Rosenstock-Huessy used his cross of reality is to represent stages in a temporal process that have the following sequence: future-inner-past-outer (Figure 3). The "word" example above illustrates this approach in its tetrad being ordered precisely in this sequence. This example thus illustrates the relation a graph can have with an idea or set of related ideas. In my work on the Bennett tetrad, I showed that his tetrad had multiple possible sequences, each capable of supporting a different idea (Zwick 2018). The same might be true of Rosenstock-Huessy's tetrad.

Figure 3 The cross as temporal sequence
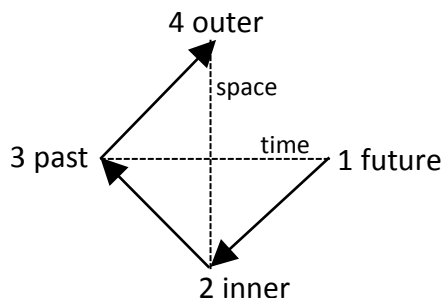
These quotes only sample two areas, namely language and religion and religiously-inspired social criticism, but he applied his structure to numerous other domains of human experience, including social events, the workplace, and the army. He saw himself as a sociologist, although his friend Rosenzweig saw him as a philosopher. His interests were wide-ranging, and beyond his four-fold scheme and its diagram, his general mode of thought, seeking isomorphisms across diverse phenomena, identifies him as a kind of systems thinker. The cross of reality is the core idea in his "theory of everything." Unsurprisingly, his mode of thought did not meet with approval. He writes,

I have survived decades of study and teaching in scholastic and academic sciences. Every one of their venerable scholars mistook me for the intellectual type which he most despised. The atheist wanted me to disappear into Divinity, the theologians into sociology, the sociologists into history, the historians into journalism, the journalists into metaphysics, the philosophers into law, and—need I say it?—the lawyers into hell, which as a member of our present world, I never had left." (1969, p. 758)

Affinity to systems theory

Space: structure-function

A "system" is a set of elements and a set of relations between the elements (Hall & Fagen 1956). This simple definition can be expanded in a variety of ways. The concept of "system" encompasses two subsidiary notions: "order" – a system is an ordered unity as opposed to a disordered aggregate – and "distinction" – a system is distinct from the environment in which it is embedded, where the environment is also ordered in some way, and the system participates in that order. These notions of order and distinction lead to the structure-function dyad that is often used to characterize a system. The notion of distinction, and implicitly the notion of order, can be graphically represented by the double-cone diagram of Figure 4(a).

Figure 4 Double-cone diagram of structure & function; system-environment dyad

Here, structure is defined as the internal order of a system and function as participation by the system in the external order of the environment ("function" does not here mean "purpose"). The system is a center uniting structure and function. This double-cone representation is spatial and synchronic. This structure-function dyad and related system-environment dyad are the same as Rosenstock-Huessy's inner-outer dyad.

In the systems-theoretic diagram of Figure 4(a), structure and function are shown as cones that expand downwards and upwards. The cones expand because the definition of "system" is recursive. This means that the elements of the system that are organized by its relations are themselves systems, more precisely sub-systems, that include sub-elements organized by sub-relations, and so on. So structure expands as one descends to lower and lower levels. Being recursive also means that the system as a whole is an element, a supra-element, organized within the environment by supra-

relations, and so on. So function also expands as one ascends to higher and higher levels. In this representation, the definition of the system is open-ended, but as one moves away from the vertex of the double cone the relevance of the contents of these cones to the system diminishes. One might speak here of a spatial "discount factor" that is analogous to temporal discount factors that give less weight to the distant future (or distant past).

A different and more clearly spatial depiction of the system-environment dyad is shown in Figure 4(b). There, only the environment is visibly open-ended. The structure-function double-cone representation of Figure 4(a) is dyadic, as is the system-environment representation of Figure 4(b). The vertex of the double cone in Figure 4(a) or the boundary in Figure 4(b) represent the unity of structure and function, just as the central point in the cross of reality unites inner and outer.

Time: past-future

The vertical double-cone diagram of Figure 4(a) is spatial, but one can rotate the diagram clockwise 90° to obtain a horizontal diagram that is temporal and models an event. This is shown in Figure 5(a). An event, viewed as a temporal unity, might be viewed as an analog of a system, viewed as a spatial unity. Antecedents of the event, its past, correspond to internal structure in Figure 4; succedents of the event, its future, correspond to external function. The vertex of the horizontal double-cone, the event as a unity, corresponds to the system in Figure 4 viewed as the unifying center of structure and function. One could simply broaden the notion of "system" so that it is not merely spatial but also temporal, in which case the vertex of the above horizontal double-cone could also be labeled "system," understood here as temporal.

Figure 5 Diachronic double-cone diagram of event antecedents and succedents
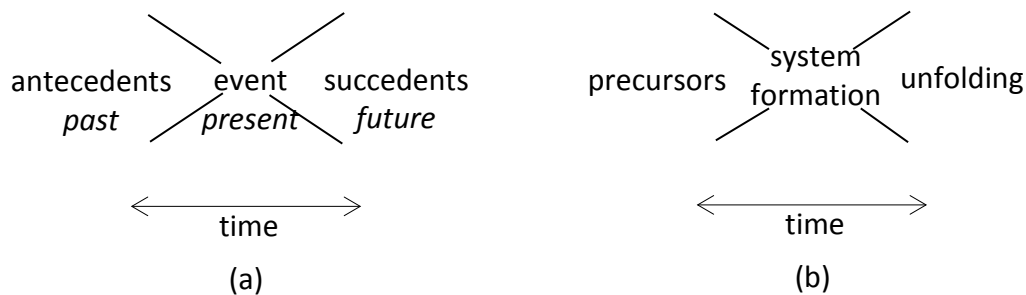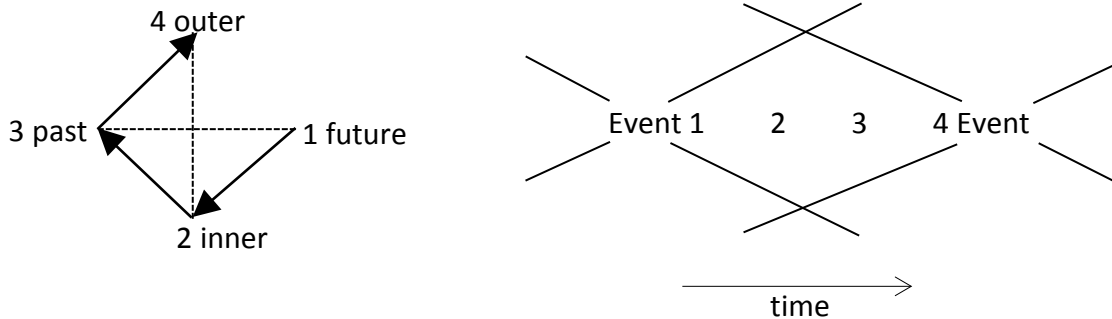

This antecedents-succedents (past-future) dyad is identical in meaning to Rosenstock-Huessy's backward-forward (trajective-prejective) temporal dyad. In the systems representation, the cone of antecedents expands to the left, since immediate causes of the event in turn have causes, and so on. The cone of succedents also expands to the right, since the immediate consequences of the event in turn have consequences, and so on. But again, as one moves away from the vertex of the double cone the relevance of the contents of these cones to the event diminishes. This is usually reflected in a temporal "discount factor" applied to events far from the present.

An event that is especially salient for systems theory is system formation, the subject of Figure 5(b). System formation is never ex-nihilo: there are always precursors to the crystallization of a system, and of course, this event always unfolds in subsequent developments. In Rosenstock-Huessy's discussion of the temporal dyad of past-future, sometimes "past" refers to the immediate past, sometimes it refers to some indefinite past, and sometimes it refers all the way back to the system formation event that can be regarded, even though it still has precursors, as the beginning of the past. Rosenstock-Huessy was also very interested in the very distant future, in eschatology, so temporal discount factors were perhaps not at all prominent in the way he thought.

Figure 5 shows an event as open-ended towards both past and future, as concentration of the past and expansion into the future. This expansion sometimes reverses into concentration leading to an event that completes the process and initiates a new process. The horizontal double-cone diagram can model such process initiation and completion, and the diachronic interpretation (Figure 3) of the cross of reality can model the sequence of stages from initiation to completion. This is shown in Figure 6. In step 1, crystallization of an event (system formation) is inherently *future*-oriented. In step 2, the process undergoes *internal* development. In step 3, as the second event is approached, converging phenomena make inherent reference to the entire *past* of the process. In step 4, when the new event is finally reached the process manifests as a completed *objective* event.

Figure 6 Diachronics of completion

Putting space and time together

If the vertical-spatial double-cone diagram and horizontal-temporal double-cone diagram are fused, and antecedents-succedents are replaced with the simpler words "past" and "future," the result is Figure 7(a), a variation of which is Figure 7(b). If one fuses the dotted and solid lines between each pair of words into single lines, one obtains Figure 7(c), identical to Rosenstock-Huessy's cross of reality shown in Figure 1(a).

Figure 7 Fusing the spatial and temporal double-cone diagrams

(a)   (b)   (c)
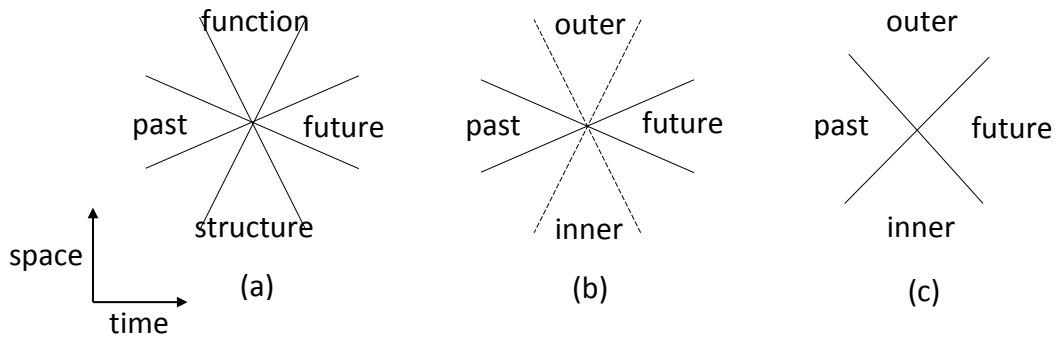
The tetradic structure Figure 7(c) has "system" at its center, although this is omitted in the figure. This central point represents the unity of structure and function and past and future. The diagram is perspectival or local, or in the language of physics "body centered." This perspectival view and the inner-outer (system-environment) dyad are inherent in systems thought. If "system" is not only spatial but also temporal, the past-future dyad naturally follows.

The structure-function-past-future tetrad is an elaboration on the classic systems theoretic triad of being (structure)-behaving (function)-becoming (history), discussed by Gerard (1958). It is an important systems principle that understanding most systems requires a triadic analysis of structure, function, and history. In Rosenstock-Huessy's cross, the third term in this triad, namely "history," is divided into the two terms, past and future, to parallel the spatial dyad of inner and outer, as shown in Figure 8.
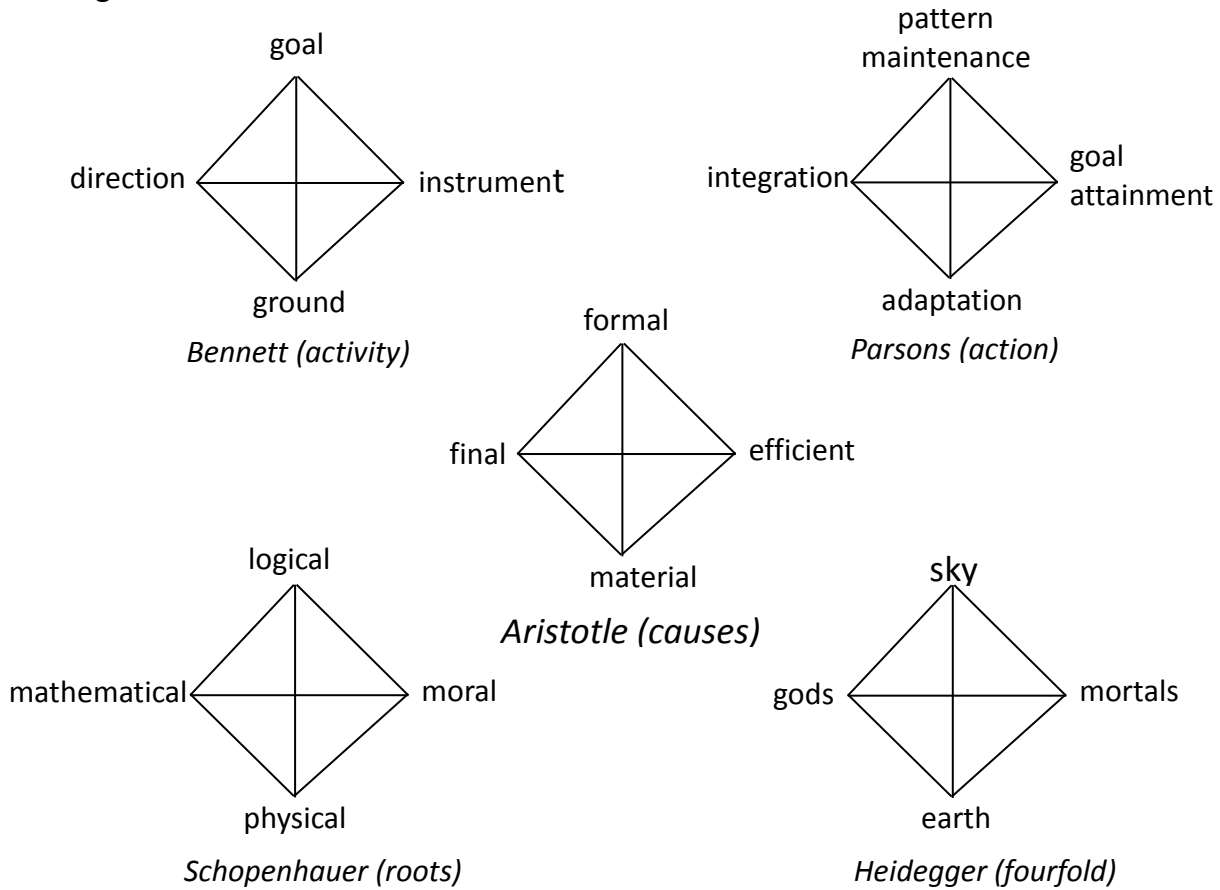
Figure 8 Triad to tetrad
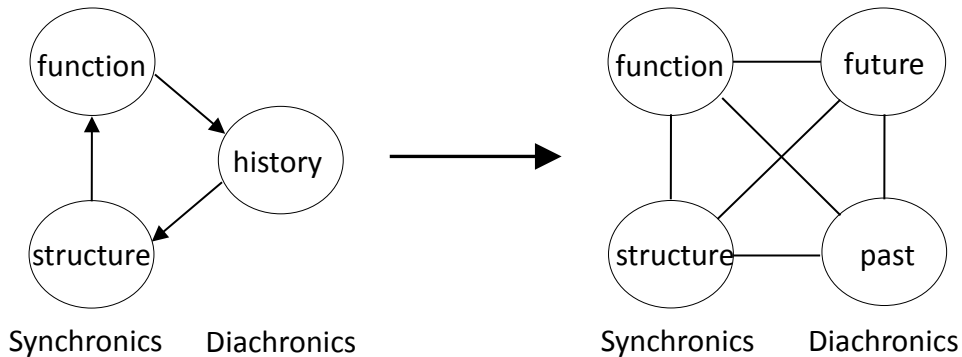
Summary

This paper is only a preliminary examination of Rosenstock-Huessy's cross of reality, and its relation to systems thought. The cross is a simple and flexible framework of analysis that captures some fundamental aspects of reality. It diagrams basic systems theoretic ideas. The way Rosenstock-Huessy applied it to very diverse subject matter illustrates a systems mode of thought, though Rosenstock-Huessy, who was critical of science, would have been surprised to hear this said of his work. He condemned abstraction, but a deep abstraction underlies his creative deployment of this tetradic structure.

Of course, the tetrad of inner-outer-past-future is not the only tetradic archetype that can illuminate human experience or the world as science understands it. It would be of interest to examine how Rosenstock-Huessy's structure compares with Bennett's tetrad of activity or Talcott Parson's tetrad of action or Schopenhauer's four roots of the Principle of Sufficient Reason or Heidegger's fourfold; or one could go all the way back to Aristotle's four causes (Figure 9). I've looked at these other tetrads briefly, and they do not appear to be unrelated to Rosenstock-Huessy's scheme, but saying more must await a specific and careful study.

Figure 9 Some other tetrads

Bennett (activity)

Parsons (action)

Aristotle (causes)

Schopenhauer (roots)

Heidegger (fourfold)

Acknowledgements

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