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THE TETRAD AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Graham Harman

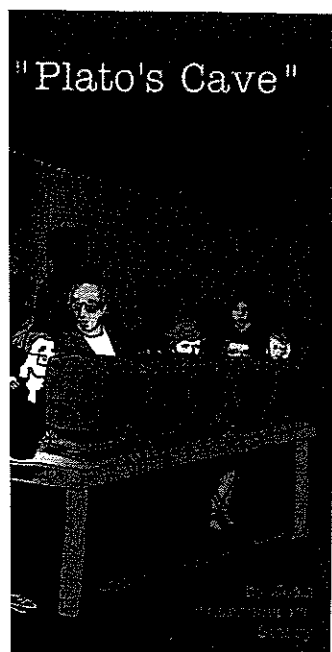
The tetrad, as developed by Marshall and Eric McLuhan, articulates a new approach to the interplay between visible figures and their deeper grounds—a central theme of German philosophy since Kant. The goal of this article is to outline the relation of the tetrad to three major German philosophers.

As far as I am aware, the tetrad¹ has never been mentioned by any mainstream philosopher, let alone fully assimilated. This is regrettable, because the philosophical aspects of the four media laws are worthy of a treatise-length work of ontology. My goal here is to provide only the barest outline of such a work, summarizing the relation of the tetrad to three major German philosophers: Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. Because *Laws of Media* (1988) mentions each of these authors by name (under the general rubric “phenomenologists”), there is no need to begin entirely from scratch. Marshall and Eric McLuhan presented the tetrad as a new approach to the figure-ground relationship. And true enough, the interplay between visible figures and their deeper grounds is a central theme of German philosophy since Kant—so central, indeed, that it has never been formulated as clearly within that tradition as the McLuhans have managed to do from the outside. In this sense, the work of the McLuhans is a perfect counter-environment for clarifying the deepest tendencies of phenomenology.

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acon,” said I, “to all we have
itation in prison, the firelight
w of the upper world is the
and you will not be far from
hear; but God knows if it is



(W. H. D. Rouse, Trans.,
k: New American Library /

?” when it was only a shadow
w of a growing tree: another
not the artificial puppet.

See *Apology*.

HEGEL

dialectic; negativity;
interrelation; rationality;
reconciliation with the
world as it is

Marx (independent
material things); Husserl
(independent intentional
things); revolutionary spirit

Socratic dialectic;
Leibnizian sufficient
reason

things-in-themselves;
skepticism; isolated figures;
romantic alienation; the
beautiful soul ("oh, miserable world!");
non-contradiction

Enhancement

The key word for Hegel is *negativity*. Any thought taken in isolation is found to imply more than it openly states. This method is the famous dialectic: figures are always found to imply other figures. Yet the figure is never left as an independent reality resonating in permanent dialogue with its ground; the whole point is to move along. In each case, thought proceeds to a more highly mediated figure of consciousness, eventually drawing every specific determination into the global system of "the concept." Everything is related to everything else. Nothing is unthinkable, and hence nothing is finite in the Kantian or Heideggerian sense. Thought is infinite. The real is the rational and the rational is the real, with no poignant irrational residue lying outside the movement of negativity. Hence, the typical Hegelian would be a happy citizen, devoid of existential torment over his or her tragic finitude.

Obsolescence

Hegel opposes Kant's things-in-themselves. If things-in-themselves can be thought but not known, their very thinkability brings them within the sphere of human thought, and they no longer lie beyond us. Because skepticism and romantic alienation imply some unknowable ground whose absence is a supposed obstacle to knowledge, they can safely be discarded. Also discarded is the beautiful soul, who cries in horror before each inhumane event in the world because even this sensitive, suffering creature is implicated in the parade of wars and exploitations that he or she denounces. More generally, the presence of a thing to us is not some sort of tragically limited quasi-knowledge. The law of noncontradiction is also violated because every shape of consciousness is both itself and its other. Each thought implies others; their mutual negativity reigns.

Retrieval

The word and method *dialectic* obviously point back to Plato's dialogues, with their dizzying alternation between opposite arguments, each of them reaching a higher stage of complexity that exceeds the previous dualism. In Hegel, we

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Reversal

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EXPLORATIONS IN MEDIA ECOLOGY

also find the return of Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, which Kant had changed into a mere form of human thought, but which counts for Hegel as an infinite principle governing everything. For Hegel, nothing happens without reason—and this is true not just for human thought.

Reversal

Individual things had disappeared in Hegel. An individual thing always simply is what it is. It does not pass into other things, but just sits around being a tree, hammer, television, or mailbox, independent of our dealings with it. Hegel suppresses this stubbornness of things by bringing everything into infinite negative interrelation. This reverses into (a) the philosophy of Marx, for whom the stubbornness of matter gives genuine weight to the economic class struggle, which persists in the real world rather than passing away rapidly in a movement of thought; and (b) Husserl's phenomenology, in which the phenomena are not just temporary shapes of consciousness dissolved quickly by the dialectic, but stubborn phenomena such as houses and rivers that resist our efforts to grasp their essence. And ironically, the well-adjusted Hegelian citizen reverses into all manner of radical social critics: Marx, the Frankfurt School, Lacan.

HUSSERL

"to the things themselves!"; essences behind all partial profiles

Berkeley's idealism (independent reality of things is "bracketed"); Platonic essence; Kantian fixation on human access to an otherwise unknowable world

Heidegger: centrality of human existence and focus on the independent thing (in late period); also, Husserl was accused of relapsing into psychology

naturalism; psychologism; isolated figures

Enhancement

By abandoning scientific explanations and describing things solely as they appear to us, Husserl proclaims his mission to be "to the things themselves!" We brush aside all theories of the wood and metal composing a mailbox and describe instead the subtlest contours of our perception of this object. Husserl's "things themselves" are not the same as Kant's because Kant was speaking of real things outside all possible human experience, whereas Husserl is speaking of "the things themselves" as units lying within perception but never entirely visible in any of

their individual profiles. Behind any specific "adumbration" of an object lies its *essence*, a once discredited term that Husserl did much to revive.

Obsolescence

Husserl discards scientific naturalism, which invents theories about the inner structure of things, and replaces these theories with the principle of minute description of what actually lies in consciousness. When a door is slammed, Husserl avoids explaining this in terms of sound waves and vibrations of the eardrum, and seeks instead to describe the slightest permutations and assumptions lying in the pretheoretical experience of hearing the door. He also rejects psychologism, the theory that logical laws are reducible to psychological conditions of the human mind, and in fact spends hundreds of pages demolishing this theory. Like Hegel, Husserl does not believe in isolated figures. But for Husserl they do not pass away into other more complicated figures by way of negativity (not an important word for him). Instead, perceptual figures shimmer permanently on the surface of the deeper intentional objects that unify them.

Retrieval

Husserl cannot be called as strict an idealist as Berkeley because he never states outright that things only exist when they are perceived. But for all practical purposes, he might as well have done so. There is no room for the natural world in Husserl's philosophy, save as a correlate of the human practice of natural science. He also retrieves Plato to some extent because they agree in regarding sensual appearances as imperfect manifestations of an underlying essence. For Husserl, of course, the essence of a chair or mailbox is not a chaste Platonic form revolving in the heavens; it lies directly before us, although covered up with distracting extraneous detail, and can be approached more and more closely through patient description. Husserl also retrieves Kant's highly technical approach toward the finite conditions of human access to phenomena, which Hegel had dissolved into an infinite discourse devoid of all pathos of limits.

Reversal

Husserl reverses into his student, Heidegger. If Husserl tried to eliminate psychologism in the name of objectivity, and natural substance in the name of phenomenal objects, Heidegger reverses both of these steps to a certain extent. Heidegger brings back something resembling a psychology with his analysis of Dasein in all its tortured moods: guilt, curiosity, anxiety toward death, and gossip. Heidegger also brings back something like natural substance in his later writings on "the thing": a dark fourfold reality that partially resists all attempts at analysis. Finally, a certain reversal is found even in Husserl's own works, since his anti-realism in some way resembles the very psychologism he condemns.

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HEIDEGGER

being; hidden tools
that never become visible
(*Zuhandenheit*); context;
interpretation (hermeneutics);
historicism; impersonality
("language speaks")

Parmenides and other
pre-Socratics; mystical
pathos

the next philosophy:
isolated, independent things
not reduced to groundless
figures; McLuhan (each
technology is a new drama
of figure and ground)

isolated figures (presence-
at-hand, *Vorhandenheit*);
faith in reason; individual
substances (dissolved in a system
of equipment); importance of
specific technologies; human agency

Enhancement

Heidegger raises anew the question of the meaning of being, which in his view has been forgotten since ancient Greece. The world is not primarily made up of visible shapes in consciousness, but of entities that we rely on invisibly. Prior to this malfunction there are no individual pieces of equipment because all of them gain their meaning from mutual references. Humans are embedded (or "thrown") into this context of mutual references, and because nothing can ever break entirely free of this context and be seen in pure lucidity, knowledge is not vision but interpretation (hermeneutics). For similar reasons, Heidegger strips a great deal of power from human freedom. The responsibility for nihilism lies with being itself, not Russian novelists; language speaks, not people.

Obsolescence

Heidegger has his own critique of isolated figures, which he interprets as present-at-hand entities that conceal the deeper ground from which they emerge. Husserl's faith in a lucid, scientific method for philosophy is replaced by Heidegger's more turbulent model of knowledge. The isolated substances of classical philosophy are dissolved into a holistic relational system in which objects gain their meaning entirely from their surroundings. Specific technologies are obsolesced for Heidegger: it makes no difference whether we are speaking of hand grenades or Gutenberg's press because both are equally guilty of turning the world into a stockpile or standing reserve that obliterates the ground lying beneath all figures.

Retrieval

Heidegger explicitly retrieves many of the pre-Socratic philosophers, but has especial similarities with Parmenides. Like Parmenides, Heidegger is left with a

fairly abstract duality of being and nothingness, and for this reason both thinkers rank specific individual beings as trivial. Parmenides is also famous for the phrase that "being and thinking are the same," a motto that Heidegger translates in more ponderous fashion, but which he upholds through his permanent correlation of human being (*Dasein*) and being itself (*Sein*), neither of which exists without the other. In addition, Heidegger also revives the haughty attitude of the pre-Socratics with their contempt for the foolish masses, as well as the mystical tone of Medievals such as Meister Eckhardt.

Reversal

In one sense, Heidegger has still not been reversed because no philosopher of comparable stature has yet emerged. But because Heidegger dissolves individual things into a system of mutual references, we can expect that the next philosophy will bring back some radical new theory of substance. And as a philosopher of technology, Heidegger has already been reversed: his disdain for specific technical artifacts is merrily outflanked by the McLuhans.

TETRAD

(The McLuhan Version, *Laws of Media*, p. 224)

awareness of inclusive, structural process	technology (hardware) becomes software (word)
metaphor, logos	dominance, logical method

Enhancement

The tetrad clearly enhances our awareness of ambiguity and complex synchronic structure in any artifact. Gone is the vision of technology as a linear expansion of one ability that can then be extrapolated into endless future improvements. Any artifact carries fourfold baggage, and preserves traces of archaic forms that were thought to be gone forever.

Obsolescence

The logical classification of artifacts in a list of easily visible qualities and improvements is suppressed, in favor of a more obscure interplay of contradictory forces.

Retrieval

Metaphor is no longer just for poets, but is brought back to life for the philosophers who wished to tame metaphor and banish the poets from Athens.

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EXPLORATIONS IN MEDIA ECOLOGY

For the McLuhans, all human products have a linguistic and metaphorical character.

Reversal

Concrete technological hardware is described in the tetrad as having a linguistic structure. In this sense, we experience a return of the external logical method, thereby losing the murky, nonlinguistic materiality found in actual hammers and televisions.

TETRAD

(My Version)

synchronic fourfold;
specific character of
each technology;
interface; importance of
individual technological
breakthroughs

a theory of figures:
no ground outside language;
non-human ground disappears

Bacon; Vico; grammar;
rhetoric; four causes;
alchemy (transmutation
of media); occasionalism
(interface without contact);
soothsaying ("what will the
next reversal be?")

isolated figures; separation of
figure and ground;
Heideggerian monotony ("all
technology is the same"); linear
history; absolute split between
modern and pre-modern media

Enhancement

The tetrad clearly enhances our simultaneous awareness of the many faces of artifacts. It shifts our focus to the interface or dusky middle ground where otherwise independent things link up: a car is not a simple improvement over the wagon, but a fourfold intersection where various past and future forces intersect. The tetrad increases our excitement about individual inventions from iPods to the Hillary Clinton campaign.

Obsolescence

Isolated figures are banned from the outset, as every visible thing is locked in permanent interplay with its hidden ground ("the medium is the message"). Heidegger's monotonous reduction of all technologies to the same sad tale of presence gives way to a joyful pluralism of plastic and electrified entities. The linear history of human progress is gone, and with it the enlightenment belief

that superstitions are being replaced forever by reason, and that any return of an old form is a sheer relapse of irrationality.

Retrieval

The most obvious retrieval is of Francis Bacon and Giambattista Vico, whose shared fondness for the title *New Science* is echoed in the subtitle of the McLuhans' own *Laws of Media*. Marshall McLuhan saw himself as completing the work of Bacon and Vico: grammarians and rhetoricians who shunned the dialectic of figures and thereby lined up with the ancients against their contemporaries. With its doctrine of transmutability and its celebration of recurring archetypes, the theory of tetrads also retrieves a form of alchemy. Furthermore, the McLuhans' doctrine of interface between things without direct contact retrieves the Muslim and Catholic occasionalist philosophy, in which God is responsible for all interactions. The tetrad also retrieves the old technique of soothsaying. Who needs a crystal ball? For any weapon, artwork, or political administration, we can take a good guess at how it might reverse when it finally overheats.

Reversal

We now come to my one and only philosophical criticism of the tetrads. . . . Despite their obsolescence of groundless isolated figures, the tetrads are meant to be applicable only to human artifacts. Eric McLuhan specifically denies that they are applicable even to the products of animals, let alone to the inanimate sphere. In short, the fourfold resonance of the tetrad supposedly applies only to the sphere of human language. And what is language if not the ultimate manmade figure? Deep below language lies a ground—a ground made up of inanimate reality neither expressed nor fully expressible in language. What happens when two inanimate entities collide in distant space, with no sentient observer? Is the fourfold resonant interval really absent in such a case? My answer would be "no." But to explain this answer would require a longer, weightier investigation.²

Notes

1. See McLuhan and McLuhan (1998).
2. For a partial answer, see Harman (2005).

References

- Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla metaphysics: Phenomenology and the carpentry of things*. Chicago: Open Court.
- McLuhan, M., & McLuhan, E. (1998). *Laws of media: The new science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.