Rosenzweig's *Star* & Systems Theory

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10/15/2018

Introduction

As Moses (1992), Pollock (2009), and others have noted, Franz Rosenzweig was committed to systematic thought and developed in *The Star of Redemption* a highly structured philosophical theology. This paper argues that Rosenzweig's thought has affinities with contemporary systems theory. While being systematic is not the same as using systems theoretic ideas, systematicity in any domain of knowledge invariably requires general ideas that are applicable to different phenomena. Such ideas are the core of systems theory.

It is not surprising that a philosophical-theological work should have to some extent a systems-theoretic character, since systems ideas are ubiquitous not only in the natural and social sciences, but also in the humanities, including religion. Works by Kauffman (2008), Locker (2010), Luhmann (1984, 2014), Macy (1991), Rajendran (2013) and Zwick (2007, 2008) are but a small sample of the relevant literature. What *is* surprising about Rosenzweig's *Star* is the salience of its architectonic features. These features include the following systems themes:

1. The *Star* is built around three "elements" – God, World, and Man – and three "relations" that the elements enter into – Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. This exemplifies the basic definition of "system," which is a set of elements and a set of relations connecting the elements. For Rosenzweig, each element emerges from and can fall back into its respective "Nothing." Linkage of the three elements by the three relations constitutes the "All."

2. In the systems literature, there is a tension between the ontological and epistemological interpretations of the word "system." To adopt terminology suggested by the *Star*, these interpretations are "World-centered" and "Man-centered" views, respectively. Rosenzweig embraces both views and tries to unify them, although he favors the latter view.

3. Rosenzweig conceives of an element as both a whole and a part, as does systems theory. As a whole an element has internal structure; as a part it has external function, i.e., relations with other elements. Systems are constituted by structure *and* function, not structure alone.

4. Rosenzweig joins a synchronic view of "being" to a diachronic view of "becoming" that extends from past to future from the perspective of the present. A joint synchronic-diachronic view also characterizes systems thinking. "System" encompasses both being and becoming.

5. In Rosenzweig and in systems thought, elements, which are themselves systems, integrate unity and multiplicity and are bounded above by "All" and below by "Nothing." Both Rosenzweig and systems theory reject any metaphysics that privileges unity over multiplicity.

The systems character of the *Star* is, of course, only one feature of Rosenzweig's work, which has deep connections with German idealism and is a forerunner of existentialism, but these familiar aspects of the *Star* are not addressed here. Rather, the subject of this paper is an aspect of the *Star* not previously noted, namely its use of ideas akin to those present in systems theory. This said, some aspects of the systems content in the *Star* are not found in the systems literature, especially Rosenzweig's ideas of the polarities of attributes and reversals of these polarities.

1. Elements and relations

The starting point of systems theory is the notion of "system," whose simplest definition is a set of elements and a set of relations between the elements. In the *Star* there are three elements and three relations. The elements are God, World, and Man. The relation between God and World is Creation; the relation between God and Man is Revelation; the relation between Man and World is Redemption. The *Star* is systematically organized around this hexad. Rarely does a philosophy have a skeletal structure that is so explicit.

A systems theorist might diagram Rosenzweig's system with Figure 1(a), and which can be transformed into the Davidic star of Figure 1(b). God is placed between World and Man in (a) to conform to the central location of this element in (b).

Figure 1 Two views of Rosenzweig's star

(a)   (b)
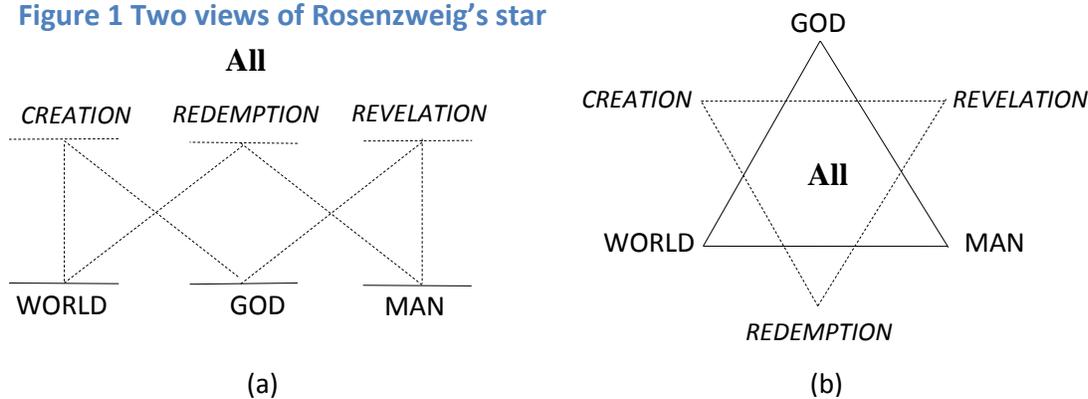
For Rosenzweig, reality is "shattered": three distinct elements exist, not two, not one. Rosenzweig's elements have a dual character. While the elements are in one sense equal, in another sense they are unequal. God, in some ultimate sense, contains World and Man. World also at least partially contains Man, although not Man in a transcendental sense. This dual character is shown in Figure 2, the equal perspective by (a), the unequal perspective by (b).

Figure 2 Equal and unequal elements

(a)   (b)
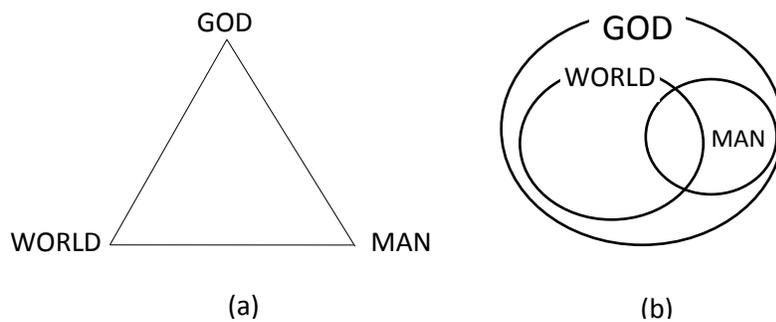
Rosenzweig's joining of these two perspectives generates a contradiction, which he resolves by distinguishing between synchronics and diachronics and between how things appear to us versus how they are ultimately. Synchronically, and from the human perspective, the All manifests as three equal elements. But diachronically the elements are unequal; this is especially so after Redemption when World and Man are absorbed into God, and God is then All.

There is a second contradiction in the *Star*, in addition to the one exemplified in Figure 2. While the Man-centered view is only one of three views, and in the unequal perspective is even encompassed by one or both of the other views, Rosenzweig privileges the Man-centered view. The *Star* primarily depicts human thought and experience.

Rosenzweig's triad of elements not only structures a human-centered metaphysics. It also promotes a diagnosis of errors that abound in philosophy and theology. For Rosenzweig, it is an error to recognize only one element, i.e., to reduce all three elements to one. It is an error to say that All is God or Man or World. Conceptually, the elements are incommensurable, and the perspective of any one is incomplete.

Let me take the liberty here to state– without elaboration – what I see as some implications of this assertion – without necessarily implying that Rosenzweig would agree. To say that All is God is the error of the mystic being one with the truck bearing down on him, or the error of a Monism which cannot explain multiplicity or change. To say that All is Man is the error of phenomenology, which reduces All to human experience, or the error of taking Man as "the measure of all things." To say that All is World is the error of materialist reductionism in science, which has been unable to account for experience. From the perspective of the *Star*, it is also an error to reduce any two of these elements to one by declaring their equivalence. Spinoza errs when he equates God and World and leaves no natural place for Man, thus depriving the injunctions of *The Ethics* of necessary grounding. The view that Jesus was both God and Man, and the Mormon view that Man can become God, are likewise errors of conflation, as is the equivalence of God and World in animism and many forms of indigenous religion. The contemporary *secular* view (joining Anglo-American and Continental philosophy) in which World and Man suffice to constitute All is also an error.

2. Ontology and epistemology

Let me continue a bit further with these implications. Man-centered phenomenology and World-centered materialism, if regarded as all-encompassing, are opposite errors of reductionism. Man-centered reductionism favors epistemology over ontology; World-centered reductionism reverses the priority. To use terminology from physics, epistemology reflects a body-centered coordinate system, centered in an observer or in any individual system. Ontology reflects a space-centered coordinate system, a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1989). In the Man-centered view, only phenomena are accessible, but things-in-themselves, Kantian noumena, are not. What we say about the world is epistemology; ontology is precluded. In the World-centered view, however, our knowledge provides a valid ontology; epistemology is even subsumed by ontology since Darwinism (evolutionary epistemology) explains how organisms came to have knowledge about the world. Kant's alleged "Copernican revolution" was in fact not Copernican at all, but Ptolemaic. Replacing World-centered ontology with Man-centered epistemology makes everything again revolve around us. Kant's turn towards the Subject was a regression, not an advance.

This same tension between ontology and epistemology exists in the systems literature, being reflected in different notions of what "system" means. In the ontological notion, the world *consists* of systems; this is the view, for example, of Capra (1996). The alternative notion is epistemological: "system" is in the eyes of the beholder, and is merely another name for "model"; this is the view, for example, of Lendaris (1986). The word "system" is neutral and amenable to both interpretations. In the inception of the systems movement during the post-World-War-II era, researchers in General Systems Theory tended to be natural or social scientists who preferred the ontological notion. Researchers in Cybernetics, however, tended to be mathematicians or engineers who preferred the epistemological notion. Cybernetics eventually engendered the development of Second Order Cybernetics which included the observer in the model of the phenomenon observed; this was the approach, for example, of von Foerster (1981).

In positing World and Man as separate and distinct elements, Rosenzweig offers a way to assert the impossibility of subsuming ontology within epistemology or epistemology within ontology. In positing World and Man in relation with one another, and with a third element of God, he points to the possibility of reconciling or transcending the ontology-epistemology duality.

## 3. Wholes and parts; structure and function

An element is a whole – a system – and also a part. As a whole, it has its own parts; as a part it is embedded in a larger whole via its relations with elements in its environment. There are two different senses in which Rosenzweig's elements have parts. The first sense of having parts is the internal multiplicity of the individual objects and processes in World. There may also be

multiplicity in Man, but this is not developed in the *Star*. Arguably, there is multiplicity in the Christian triune God, and also in the Jewish God if one invokes the Sefirot of Kabbalah. The second sense of having parts, more salient in the *Star*, consists of the pair of attributes that characterizes the elements and is similar for all three.

The first sense is shown in Figure 3(a), where World (or perhaps Man) is taken as system (element) S, with parts A and B. If S is World, its environment, E, is God and Man. Relation AB is equivalent to element S. This is Koestler's (1969) notion of a system as a "Janus-faced holon": looking inward towards its relata, a system is a relation; looking outward towards its environment, a system is an element. Figure 3(a) is recursive: A and B are connected by internal relation AB; S and E are connected by external relation SE. If SE involves all three of Rosenzweig's elements, it is a supra-system with no environment.

Figure 3 Structure and function
(a) and (b) are systems-theoretic; (c) uses (b) to depict the attributes Rosenzweig assigns to elements. "System" and "Tatsache" label the whole double cone figure, not merely its vertex.


| (a) | (b) | (c) |
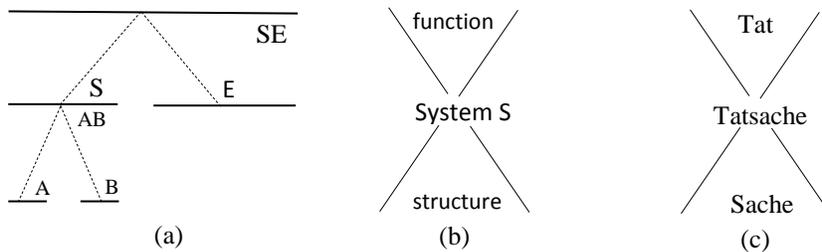
The body-centered view implicit in Figure 3(a) is explicit in Figure 3(b). S is centered at the apex of a double cone. The cone expanding downward is internal structure AB; the cone expanding upwards is external function SE. This conception of system as a union of structure and function is prominent in Rosenzweig's view of each element having an aspect of "substantiality" (in German, Sache) and an aspect of "act" (Tat), the two joined together as "fact" (Tatsache), as shown in Figure 3(c). One might be tempted to say that substantiality is what an element *is* and act is what it *does*, but for Rosenzweig, what an element does is an inherent part of what it is.

The second sense in which elements have parts invokes a definition of "system" in which elements have *attributes*, and relations connect elements via these attributes. This is shown in Figure 4(a), where elements e and e′, having attributes A and B, are linked by relation AB′. Figure 4(b) shows Sache and Tat as attributes, and diagrams below show how these attributes bring elements into relation. In the *Star*, Sache is "Yes" and Tat is "No," the two united by "And," which might be regarded as the element, e, itself. The element together with its attributes is Tatsache. To interpret these attributes for Rosenzweig's elements: the Yes of God is unmoved

infinite being; the No is divine power. The Yes of World is its unitary logos; the No is its many particulars. The Yes of Man is character; the No is freedom.

Figure 4 Adding attributes to definition of 'system'

(a)   (b)
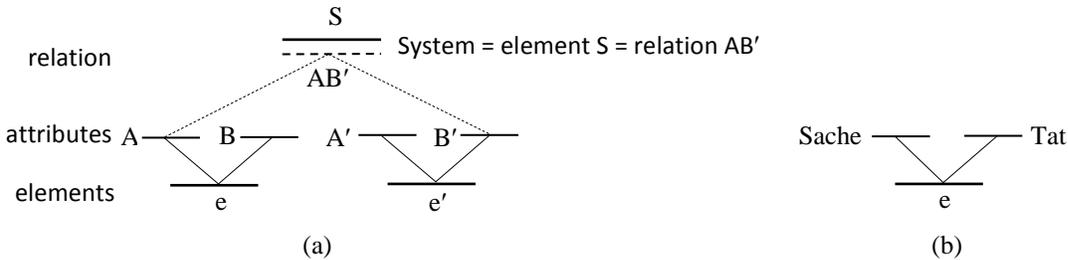
Upon entering into relations with other elements, attributes undergo reversals of polarity. For God, divine power becomes positive; infinite being negative. For World, the many particulars become positive; the unitary logos negative. For Man, freedom becomes positive; character negative. Size limits on this paper preclude saying more here about attributes having polarities or about polarity reversals, except to note that these ideas are not common in systems thought.

With these reversed polarities, Creation links the Yes of God with the No of World; Revelation links the No of God with the Yes of Man; Redemption links the No of Man with the Yes of World. This is diagrammed in Figure 5, which offers more detail than earlier Figure 1(a).

Figure 5 Elements, attributes, and relations constituting the All
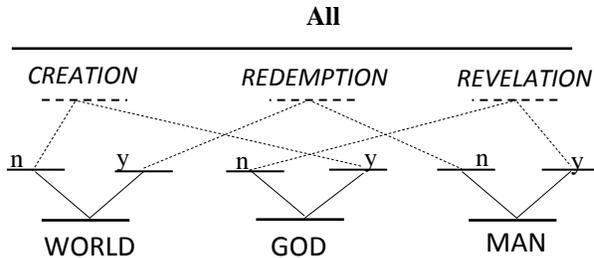

4. Diachronics

Figure 5 actually shows the All only after all three relations are established. A full depiction of diachronics would display the sequence of these relations: first Creation, then Revelation, then Redemption. This sequence is shown in Figure 6, in which the direction of time is down. The figure indicates the polarity reversals that allow elements to be linked. In each successive stage, the elements become increasingly interconnected, until Redemption locks them together and finally brings the All into being, which is also represented by the Davidic star of Figure 1(b).

Figure 6 Three relations in sequence, made possible by reversals of attribute polarities
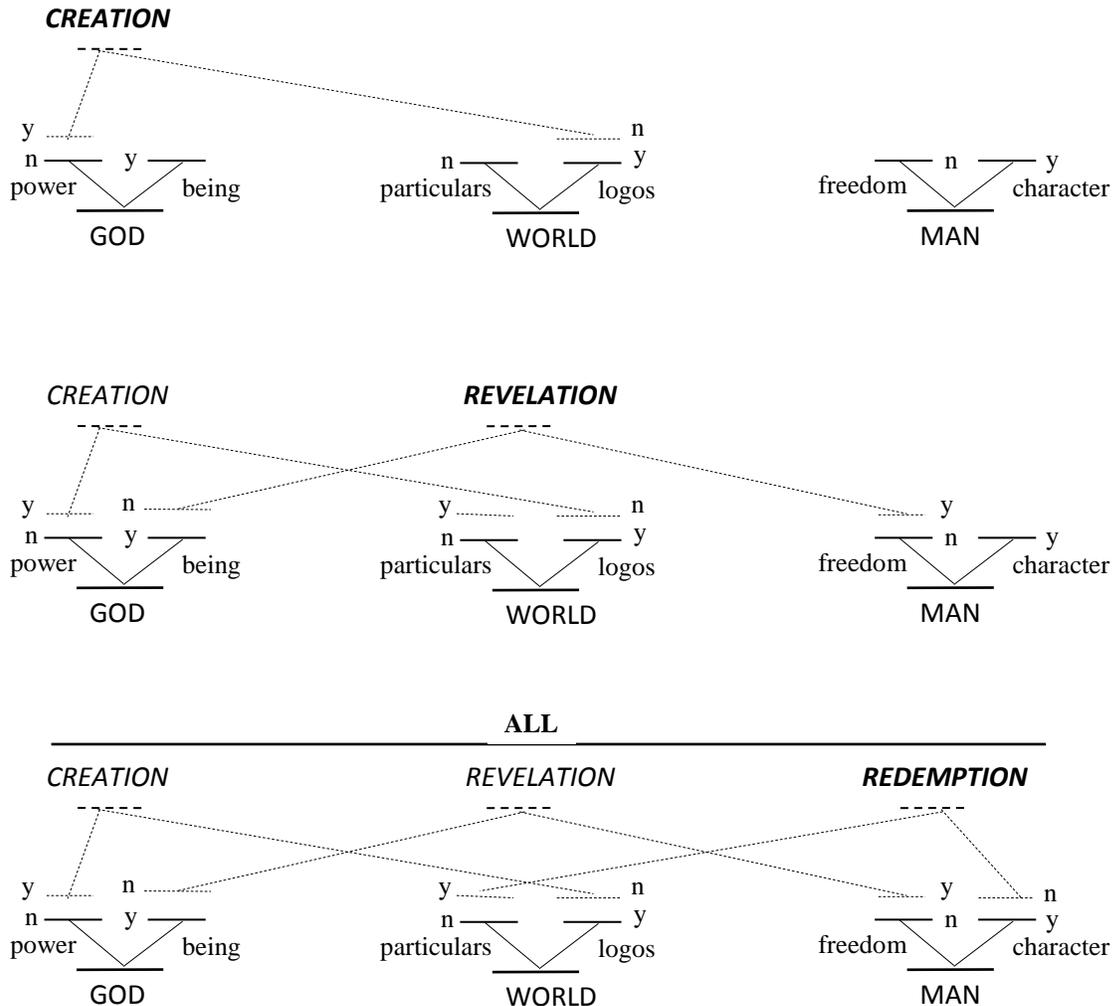
Although Rosenzweig asserts that each relation can be experienced in some sense by us, the process shown in Figure 6 transcends ordinary human perception, although this process and its result can be thought, and perhaps even grasped directly via mystical intuition. A more ordinary Man-centered view, anchored in the present moment, is captured in Figure 7. This diagram rotates the vertical "spatial" double-cone diagram of Figure 3(b) by 90 degrees, yielding a horizontal "temporal" diagram. In each present moment, a human being experiences Revelation in self, Creation in the past that is given (the "always already there"), and Redemption in the future that is anticipated (the "not yet").

Figure 7 Diachronics of the Star
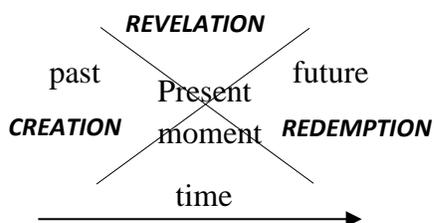
5. Metaphysics of number: All, Nothing, One, Many

Rosenzweig's *Star* speaks of the All and of a Nothing that is his version of the Nothing that Hegel opposed to Being. It speaks about the One and the Many that need to be united, and about the dual sense of All that implies both One and Many simultaneously.

All and Nothing are complementary. As George Spencer-Brown (1972) noted, "...nothing is formally identical with everything, since by definition there are no distinctions within either. All you have to do is show how the first distinction can lead to all the rest." One and Many are also complementary in the traditional dyad of unity vs multiplicity. These four archetypal "numbers" are displayed as a tetrad in Figure 8. In the history of religious thought, each component of this tetrad has been used to characterize God.

Figure 8 Tetrad of number
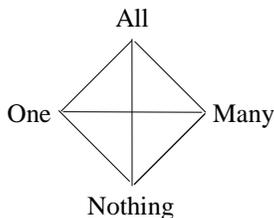
All has the dual character of being both One and Many. So does Nothing. In binary logic and mathematics, Nothing (zero) is the complement of One. It is also the complement of Many in two senses. In the first sense, Nothing is an inexhaustible matrix of potential arisings. The void as plenum has a long history in philosophical and religious thought, and has contemporary endorsement by quantum physics. In the second sense, each individual of the Many has its own individual Nothing, and it is the personal Nothing of death facing each human being that gives Rosenzweig's philosophy its existential character. But the multiplicity of Nothing is more general than the individual human death. John Cage writes (Capra & Steindl-Rast 1991): "Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it." For Rosenzweig, each element emerges from the Nothing, but suffers the constant threat of returning to it.

This threat is neutralized only when the elements enter into a network of mutual relations. This is an aspect of Rosenzweig's metaphysics that has deep affinity with systems thought, which asserts that beyond some minimal complexity, all systems are incomplete (Zwick 1984). System and environment are co-dependent. Function is as constitutive as structure. For Rosenzweig, the hexadic star locks the elements of God, World, and Man and the relations of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption into a system of reciprocity that finally stabilizes each element against dissolution. Man needs God and World. World needs God and Man. But God also needs World and Man. The present moment, transformed by Revelation, opens up to horizons of Creation in the past and Redemption in the future. This gives a temporal and eternal context to human death, and meaning and significance to human life.

Acknowledgement

This paper draws extensively from Pollock's *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy* (2009), which both inspired this study and made Rosenzweig's thought much more accessible to the author.

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