

The Center Cannot Hold: Structures of Political Choice

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Abstract

In times of political polarization, we are well-advised to heed Spinoza's injunction, "Not to lament, not to curse, but to understand." Understanding needs to be informed by ideas about the archetypal structures of political choice.

The primary question is whether available or desirable political positions are dyadic or triadic, and if dyadic, whether they are good versus bad or complementary. Various modes of polarization are possible if two or more positions are arrayed on a line, horseshoe, or circle.

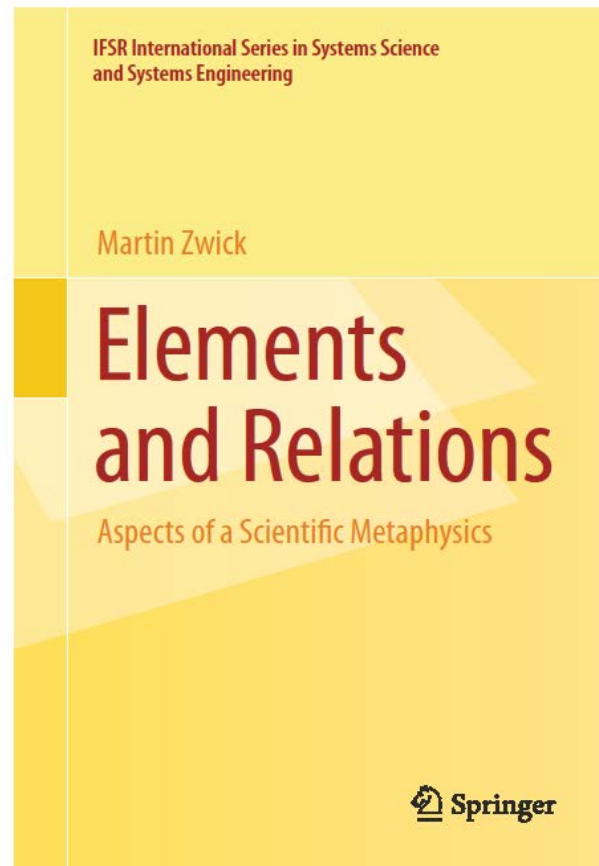
It behooves us to grasp the structure of the political situation we face to avoid making moral or intellectual mistakes.

Outline

- **1 Introduction**
- 2 Manichean and Daoist dyads
- 3 Dialectics and topology
- 4 Holism and intersectionality
- Acknowledgments
- References

Zwick, Martin (2023). *Elements and Relations: Aspects of a Scientific Metaphysics*. New York: Springer

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-99403-7>

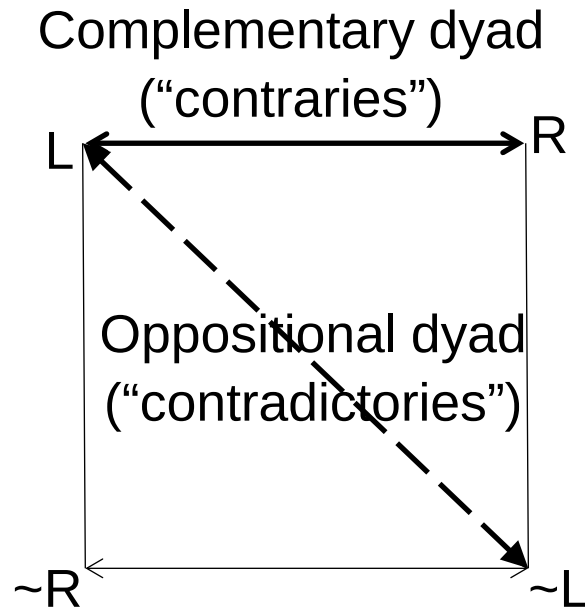


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Complementary & oppositional dyads

Greimas square: Relationship between Daoist & Manichean dyads *resembles* relationship between complementary & oppositional dyads, BUT alternatives of *both* Daoist & Manichean dyads can be *contraries*.

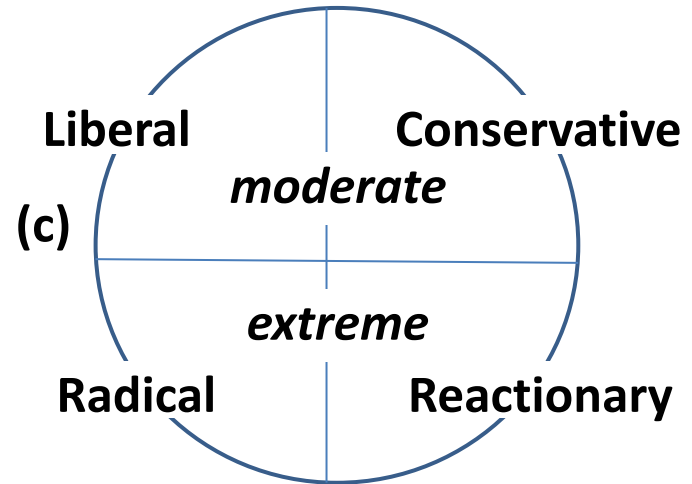
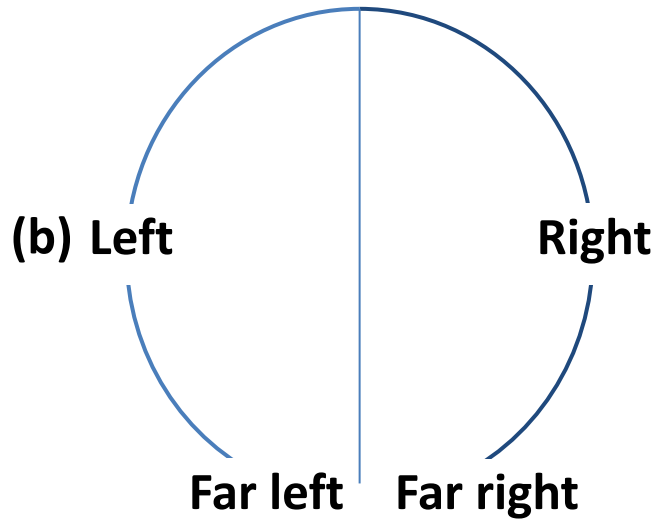


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Representations of the political spectrum

(a) ——— Left ——— Right ———



(a) Simple lineal spectrum; (b) Horseshoe; (c) Circle

Modes of polarization

(a) _____ **Left** _____ **Right** _____

(b1) _____ **Left** _____ *Right* _____ **Right'**

(b2) **Left'** _____ *Left* _____ **Right** _____

Narcissism of small differences?

“No enemies on my right/left!” --Sixties slogan (left)

Modes of polarization, continued: extremes

(c) — Left ————— Right —

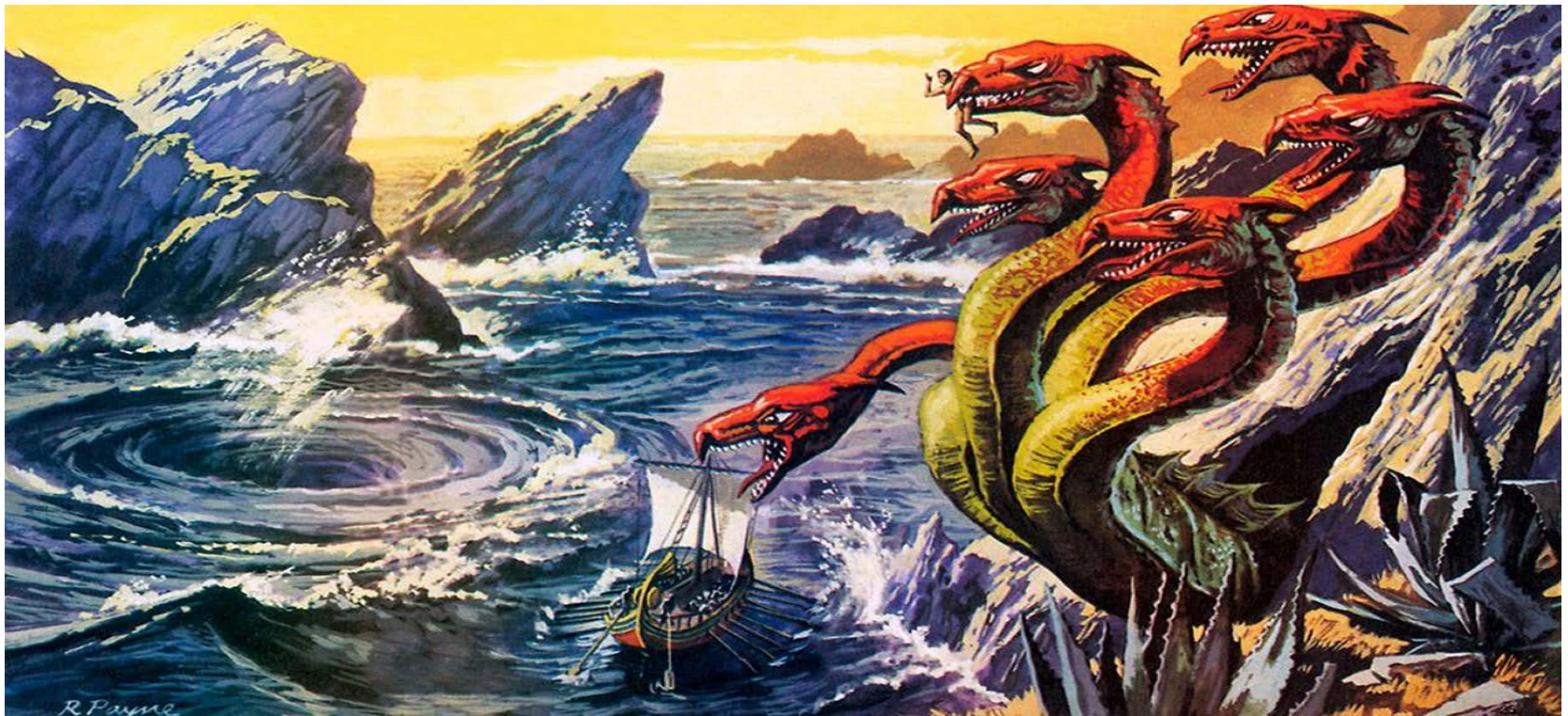
“A plague on both your houses!” --Shakespeare

“Only the extremes are logical, but they’re absurd.” --Butler

“Tetralemma” (originally about logic, here about political positions)

- (iv) Neither Left nor Right *Freedom ... or irrelevance?*
- (iii) Both Left and Right
- (ii) Right (or Left)
- (i) Left (or Right)

Between Scylla & Charybdis --Kirkpatrick



Modes of polarization, continued: asymmetry

(d1) ————— Left ————— Right —

(d2) — Left ————— Right —————

Is it better to be “reasonable” (moderate) or “principled” (extremist)?

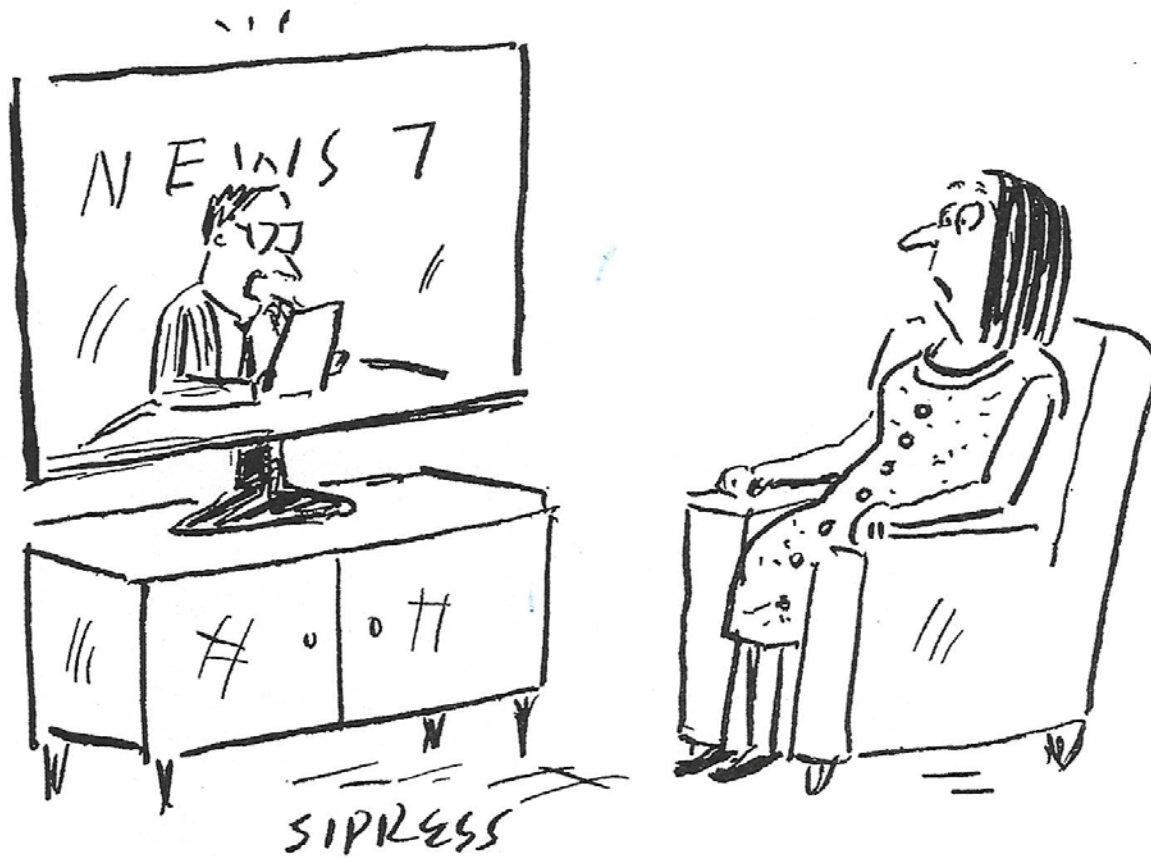
To every thing there is a season: a time for nuance, and a time to refrain from nuance.

Modes of polarization, continued: triad

(e) — Left ————— Center ————— Right —

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
**The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity...**

-- Yeats, The Second Coming



*"Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy
is loosed upon the world. Details at eleven."*

The New Yorker, May 26, 2025, p.61

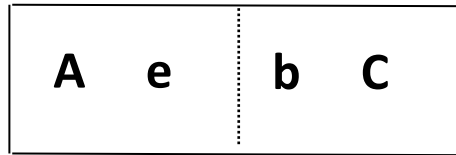
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Two possible macro dyad bundles

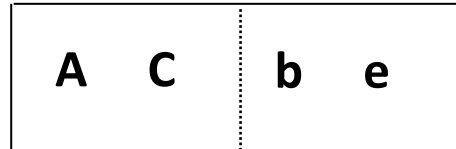
micro-dyads: A vs b, e vs. C

(i) Actual
macro dyad



Vowels vs. consonants
(e.g., left vs. right)

(ii) Alternative
macro dyad



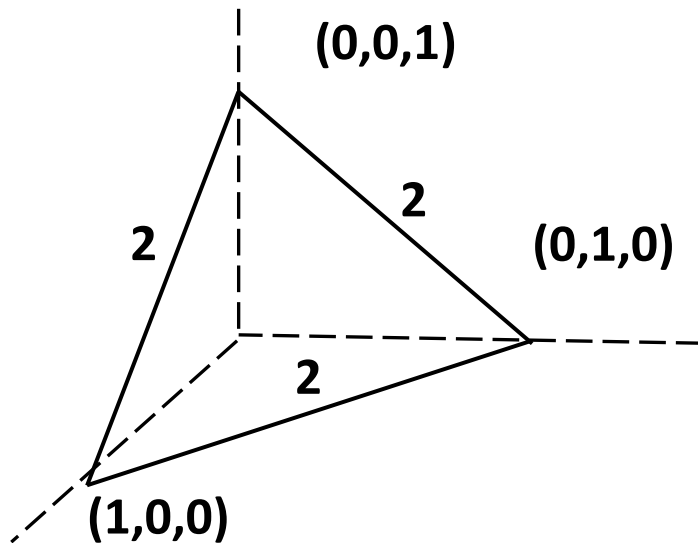
Upper case vs. lower case
(e.g., moderate vs.
extreme)

Conspiracies, intersectionality, & pathological holism

Nonlinear triadic positions

Here macro position, e.g., $(0,0,1)$, = vector of 3 binary micro choices.

The 3 macro positions are *equidistant* (Hamming distance between each pair of macro positions is 2) but not on a line.



Acknowledgments

- I thank Bob Liebman, Stephen Jolin, and Hunter Jin for helpful comments.

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Thank you

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Further thoughts on the Tetralemma

A philosophical meta-structure applicable to

Logic (contradictories)	THE TRUE	traditional application
Axiology (contraries)	THE GOOD	<i>this paper</i> : political application
Aesthetics (either)	THE BEAUTIFUL	here also added below

Aesthetic Tetralemma

Contradictories

Neither beautiful nor not-beautiful
Both beautiful & not-beautiful
Not-beautiful
Beautiful

Contraries

Neither beautiful nor ugly
Both beautiful & ugly
Ugly
Beautiful

Rebundling by center → structural realignment

