

The Six Activities of Man

Ouspensky's favoured approach in teaching triads was to make his students give examples of different activities in human life – specifically human activities like working or building – and then put these activities in one of six different categories corresponding to different triads. The idea behind this was to give a flavour of the different triads which would hold true for their application in the ray of creation and the food table. Everything we know about his approach comes from reports of his meetings (published in *Fourth Way, A Record of Meetings* and *A Further Record of Meetings*), which at times appear to be contradictory, so several points in this paper are uncertain.

The teaching on triads starts with the idea that every action involves three kinds of force (active, passive, neutralising; C, O, N; 1, 2, 3). The order in which these forces act produces different effects such as making something (active-passive-neutralising) and destruction (neutralising-active-passive). There are just six possible combinations¹ of the three forces. However, in considering Six Activities we will start the process the other way round – looking for examples of activities first, and categorising them. We can worry about the combination of forces later.

We start by considering the following six categories of activities:

Art
Invention
Professional work
Physical work
Destruction
Crime

The titles are just a convenient shorthand, and each category includes a range of related activities.

Art	The highest form of art. Highest level of human creativity.
Invention	Includes scientific discovery, highest level of research in general. Also craft, design.
Professional work	Doing a job (e.g. tailor, solicitor) effectively, often following a set of rules, involving refinement.
Physical work	Includes building, involving continuous effort.
Destruction	E.g. burning a house down accidentally.
Crime	E.g. arson.

¹ Strictly speaking these are permutations not combinations

In any real activity there may be a number of the Six Activities. For example In scientific research there is the invention of equipment and the discovery itself resulting from the research, but much professional work in doing experiments and some physical work. But without the invention and discovery activity there would be nothing new.

Similarly creating a work of art involves some design and certainly some professional skill, but there is an essential creative ingredient without which the resulting work will be routine. It is also interesting to compare the work of different great artists: in some there seems to be a completely realised concept and the painting itself is “painting by numbers”, though at a high level; in others creativity seems to be integral with the brush strokes.

Many activities seem the same but are different. What’s the difference between a Rembrandt and something that is for sale on Hyde Park Corner railings? They are both paintings and may even be equally skilled in execution, but the Rembrandt has an essential ingredient missing in the other. There is a clue here to understanding the difference between activities.

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To connect these human activities to ‘internal’ triads involved in self-realisation, here is a table, partly with concrete examples and partly some suggestions which need some critical input.

Name of human activity	Self-realisation	System examples
Art	Conscious work	Enneagram: ‘grace’
Invention	Self-remembering	Interval in ascending octave (food table)
Professional work	Discrimination	Main triad in ascending octave (food table)
Physical work	Mechanicalness	Main triad in descending octave (ray of creation)
Destruction	Getting rid of bad attitudes ?	?
Crime	Deliberate Self-destruction	Anti-school activity