

Balancing and Synthesis of the Opposites

Roberto Assagioli

Summary

Polarities exist at all levels of reality, from the physical to the human and beyond. Tension between opposites can be neutralized, statically or dynamically. Alternatively—and preferably—it can be resolved through a process of psychosynthesis. The process is illustrated well by triangular schematics. Examples are presented showing psychological and spiritual synthesis, the conflicts they can cause, and their final resolution.

Polarity and Relationship

Polarity is a universal fact; it is inherent in cosmic manifestation. It is true that the ultimate and Supreme Reality is the One, the Absolute, the Transcendent; but it can only be defined by what it is *not*.

From the very moment that cosmic manifestation begins to unfold, duality is born. The first fundamental duality is precisely that between manifestation and the Unmanifest. In the *Bhagavad Gita* this is expressed in the words: “Having pervaded the whole Universe with a fragment of myself, I remain.” In the process of manifestation the fundamental polarity is that of Spirit and Matter.

It is at once necessary to state that all polarity is a *relationship* between two elements and that, as such, it is never absolute but relative even to a particular pair of opposites. Thus the same element can be positive in its relation to a certain “pole” and negative in its relation to another. An instance of the relativity of the “polar relationships” exists in the fundamental polarity between Spirit and Matter. According to some, Spirit is the free and transcendent Reality that stands above the various pairs of opposites existing in manifested life. Such is the conception of Keyserling, contained in his out-

standing book, *From Suffering to Fulfillment*.¹ According to others, Spirit corresponds to the positive pole, to the dynamic and creative element in all duality. Such is Jung’s idea.

In other words, Keyserling regards the “tension” between Spirit and the various manifestations of life as existing in a “vertical” direction, which he refers to as the “dimension of intensity,” while Jung conceives polarity more as a horizontal relationship.

In the physical world, the most commonly recognized polarity is that between the positive and negative poles in electricity. This polarity is the basis of the constitution of matter since, as is well known, each atom is composed of charges of electricity differentiated into a positive nucleus and a varying number of negative electrons. The more numerous the electrons, the heavier and denser are the atoms of chemical elements. For example, the atom of hydrogen, the lightest element, contains only one electron, while the heavy uranium has 236. Electric polarity manifests itself in various ways that have important practical applications, as in induced and alternating currents. Interesting analogies can be found in various polarities in the field of psychology, such as emotional attraction and repulsion, ambivalence and the compensatory function.

About the Author

Dr. Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), born in Venice, Italy, became a student of the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul and went on to found the discipline of psychosynthesis. He wrote hundreds of articles and books in many languages. He had students in numerous countries, and centers continuing to develop his work have been formed in the United States, Canada, England, Italy, Switzerland, France, Greece and Argentina. This article was written

many years ago and distributed on a limited basis by the Psychosynthesis Research Foundation. We take the opportunity to share Dr. Assagioli's insights, which continue to be relevant today.

Polarities at the Human Level

In the three kingdoms of organic life (vegetable, animal and human), one of the most important and general polarities is the sexual. The positive pole is represented by the masculine element, the negative by the feminine element. This does not mean, however, that only the former is active and the latter passive. Both are active but in a different way, the masculine element being dynamic and positive while the feminine element is receptive and "gestative." This type of polarity extends far beyond the male-female relationship to innumerable manifestations in life. It has been particularly and deeply emphasized by the Chinese who regard these two principles as the foundation both of cosmic evolution and of every aspect of human life. The creative aspect, symbolized by the father and Heaven, they call Yang, while Yin is the receptive aspect, symbolized by the mother and the Earth. The well-being of humanity depends, in the view of Chinese philosophy, on the harmonious accord between humanity and the cyclic evolution of the Universe, woven from the innumerable relationships and interactions of Yang and Yin.²

In living organisms such as the human body, there are various polarities. One of the most important is that between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems; the former stimulates catabolism, and the latter stimulates assimilation or anabolism. Other polarities exist between the different endocrine glands.

In the field of the emotions and feelings we find those dualities that are familiar to all: pleasure-pain, excitement-depression, confidence-fear, attraction-repulsion, love-hate. Such is their prevalence that one might say that the life of the average human being consists mainly of emotional reactions to things, events and people. Within certain limits such reactions have their function and justification. But when we allow ourselves to be dominated by them—as is too often the case—we become their slaves and can know neither peace nor lasting satisfaction. Later we shall consider how liberation from these opposites can be achieved.

In the mental realm there is the polarity between the analytical activity of the concrete mind and the synthetic operation of the higher intelligence, between the inductive process (from the particular to the general) and the deductive process (from the general to the particular).

Consideration of the human personality in its totality discloses various fundamental polarities that have been

extensively investigated by modern psychology. The knowledge about the human being thus acquired has stimulated the development of important psychological, educational and psychotherapeutic techniques. The principal polarities here are: body/psyche; consciousness/the unconscious; the lower unconscious/the superconscious; passivity, sensitivity, receptivity (*pathos*)/activity, dynamism, will (*ethos*); feeling (*eros*)/reason (*logos*).

The fundamental duality in the spiritual realm is that existing between the personality and the Self, a polarity that is the cause of many inner conflicts, until harmonious relationships and an increasing blending or unification (psycho

Psychological life can be regarded as a continual polarization and tension between differing tendencies and functions, and as a continual effort, conscious or not, to establish equilibrium. Among the most important psychological polarities are: impulse-inhibition, feeling-reason, extraversion-introversion.

synthesis) are achieved. In traditional religious language this duality and relationship are described as that between the soul and God.

There are also many “inter-individual” polarities that are of the utmost importance. The first and fundamental one is that existing, on all levels, between Man and Woman. Then there is that between adults and young people, particularly in the interaction between parents and their children. There are, further, the various relationships between individuals and the different groups to which they belong. Among them we find:

The family considered as a unit, as a “psychic entity,” which is made up not only of members who are alive but also of ancestral influences and family traditions. Such influences are sometimes a help to the individual, offering him an ideal and a way of life to which he is encouraged to conform (*noblesse oblige!*); but more often they hem him in and oppress him.³

Then come the social groups of different kinds (castes, social and professional classes, cultural groups, nations, churches) with which the individual may find himself associated, in a condition of passive subordination or of cooperation, as leader and directing agent or in conflict. Similar relationships exist among groups — both among those of the same kind and size (i.e., between families and families, classes and classes, nations and nations, etc.) and between sub- and supra-ordinated groups (i.e., between the family and the state, classes and nations, the masses and the elite, between a state and a federation of states).

At a still more inclusive level there are two kinds of polarity of particular interest, that existing between northern and southern human types (whether these be within a continent or within the same nation) and that between Occidental and Oriental types.

Interplay of Polarities

Each of these numerous polarities confronts us with the problem of their interplay and balancing. It is possible here to present only the following brief survey of the principles and general methods of balancing opposite poles with the object of resolving “polar tensions.”

1. *Fusion of the two poles*, involving the neutralization of their charges of energy.
2. *Creation of a new being*, a new reality.
3. *Adjustment of the opposite poles* by means of an “intermediary center” or of a principle higher than both. A regulating action of this kind can be brought about in two ways:
 - a. By diminishing the amplitude of the oscillations between the two extremes, at times even to vanishing point, thus inducing a more or less complete neutralization (“the happy medium”). An instance of this, of great actual interest, is the oscillation between excessive authority and uncontrolled freedom in education and the search for a balanced attitude.
 - b. By consciously and wisely directing the alternations so that the result is harmonious and constructive and in accord with the cyclic alternations of both individual and general, human and cosmic, conditions. (This is the method taught by Chinese philosophy and particularly by the *I Ching*, to which we have already referred.)
4. *Synthesis*, brought about by a higher element or principle that transforms, sublimates and reabsorbs the two poles into a higher reality.

The different types of polarity require corresponding appropriate solutions. But man often has the liberty — and consequently the responsibility — of choosing between one method of balancing and another. It should, however, be pointed out that the indicated solutions are not always as clear-cut as the above enumeration might lead one to believe. Sometimes, as the following examples will show, they can overlap or be combined in various ways.

In the field of electricity, the simplest outcome is neutralization through the fusion of the positive and negative charges. However, the conditions in which this fusion is effected determine the results, which are thus subject to considerable variation. When, for instance, the poles are brought towards each other, and the voltage with which they are charged overcomes the resistance of the medium that sepa-

rates them, a discharge is produced that manifests as a spark. Lightning is an instance of this phenomenon. When, on the other hand, the poles are kept apart but connected by a conducting wire, a current of electrical energy travels from the positive to the negative pole, gradually establishing a balance and the subsequent neutralization, unless the positive pole is being recharged. But if some “resistance” is introduced at a point along the conducting wire, the electrical energy becomes susceptible to various transformations. This latter process is being utilized with increasing ingenuity in the transformation of electricity into light, into heat, into movement, etc. In these cases the process of neutralization produces creative effects.

In the biological realm, health can be defined as a dynamic equilibrium ever threatened and ever restored between a series of polarities, such as exist between divisions of the nervous system, between various endocrine glands, and in general between the anabolic and catabolic functions. In the same way, psychological life can be regarded as a continual polarization and tension between differing tendencies and functions, and as a continual effort, conscious or not, to establish equilibrium. Among the most important psychological polarities are: impulse-inhibition, feeling-reason, extraversion-introversion.

In sexual polarity, the union of the two physical elements has a creative effect. The dynamism of their fusion brings about the birth of a new organism similar to that of the parents. But in humanity this wonderful physical creative function becomes involved with the *psychological* polarities between the sexes and this produces unhappy conflicts and intricate and delicate problems.⁴

The chief causes of the prevention of the harmonious synthesis and fruitful cooperation

between man and woman are: the difficulty of achieving a satisfactory sexual harmony; the deep-seated dissimilarities in the psychological constitutions of the two sexes (which are much greater than is generally believed) and the lack of understanding that results; the strife and quarrels provoked by the natural egoism of the “normal” human being, for the expression of which everyday family life offers ample opportunity!

From the collective point of view, history reveals the predominance of one sex or the other at various times and in different places. It is well known that there have been civilizations or cycles of culture in which women had a superior status (matriarchy). These have often been followed by periods of conflict for supremacy between the sexes (one finds an echo

of one of these periods in the legend of the war conducted against the Amazons by Hercules). Other civilizations, of which the Roman is a notable example, have exhibited qualities of a clearly masculine character.

Our modern civilization is also markedly

and exaggeratedly masculine and has demonstrated a typically masculine drive, namely the thirst for power and domination, which has contributed to the precipitation of two world wars. However, from the end of the 19th century, women have participated in an increasingly active way in the various aspects of the larger social life. This at first had some unfortunate effects, for it incited many women to “masculinization” (moreover, they often assumed some of the defects of the male more readily than his good qualities!) and gave rise to a regrettable battle between the sexes. But

The fundamental polarity between the human personality as a whole and the spiritual Self can also be resolved into a unity, but this can be realized only through a long process of transmutation, involving a protracted series of conflicts, approaches and contacts producing a partial or more expanded fusion; in short, a process of “spiritual psychosynthesis.”

the positive effects, that is to say, the enrichment and expansion of the feminine personality, and the awakening and maturing of the best specimens, have counterbalanced and will increasingly compensate for that negative aspect. The solution of the problem consists in the development of the conscious and unanimous will, on the part of both sexes, to create a new type of civilization in which the excessive domination by one sex or the other will be replaced by a just and wise distribution of the functions and tasks in family and social life in order to establish a harmonious collaboration, a reciprocal enrichment—in other words, a social and cultural psychosynthesis.

The balancing of opposite qualities in the field of the emotions and feelings requires the intervention of a higher regulating principle of a mental or spiritual nature. The first task is to prevent the emotions from overwhelming and carrying away the reason and will. The best way to achieve this is to refuse to identify oneself with them, to maintain the “I” or self, the center of consciousness, on a higher level above them, in order to be able to observe,

Let us make it clear that to “master” does not mean to “suppress,” and the aim is not to achieve a state of insensibility or aridity. Let us, for example, consider the fundamental polarity, pleasure-pain. As long as we remain slaves of this duality, always greedily seeking pleasure and fearfully fleeing from pain, we shall never find peace or true satisfaction. On the other hand, a forced inhibition, an artificial impassivity, certainly does not constitute a satisfactory solution. This can only be arrived at by means of that clear insight that enables us to understand the causes, the nature and the functions of both pleasure and pain. This insight carries the recognition that, in accepting pleasure without craving for and attachment to it, and in accepting pain, when unavoidable, without fearing it and rebelling against it, one can assimilate precious lessons from both pleasure and pain, and “distill the essence” they contain. Moreover, one can gradually raise the quality and level of these “opposites”; one passes by degrees from the physical pleasures to the joys of feeling and of the mind, finally experiencing spiritual joy. One makes

one’s way from physical suffering to emotional troubles to intellectual turmoil, thence to compassion for the sufferings of others, of the whole human race and of the entire creation.

From all these experiences one gathers the fruits of wisdom and learns to keep the center of consciousness stabilized more and more at a level above the alternations of personal pleasure and pain. Finally we can acquire the ability to identify ourselves with the Universal Life, with the Supra-Individual Self, with the Supreme, which transcends all “opposites” in ineffable bliss.

If we examine more closely the specific polarities of the emotional field, we can clearly distinguish two types of solution. One is realized on the same level; it can be called “the middle way” of compromise, the blending of the two poles. The other solution is achieved at a higher level and is, in its turn, of two kinds:

1. A wise control and utilization of the two opposite forces.
2. The fusion of these into a higher synthesis.

The method of skillfully using the contrary forces is explained in a curious book on magic, which—apart from its specific subject—contains interesting psychological material:

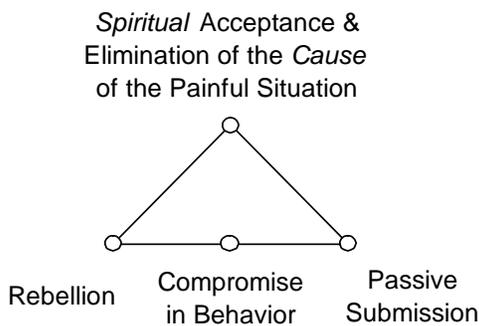
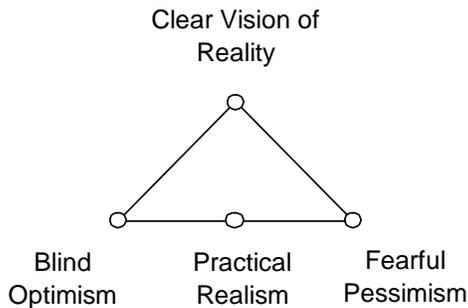
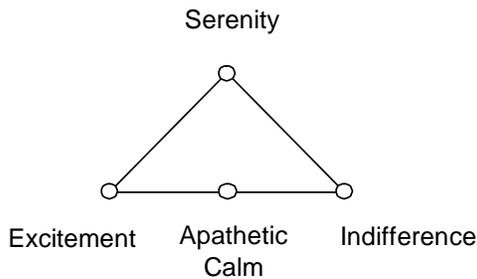
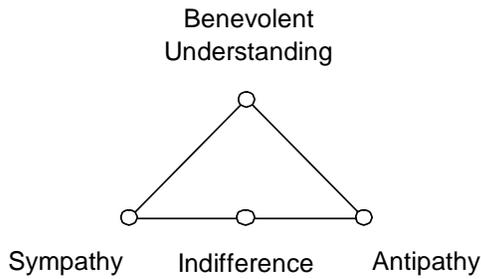
In order to balance the forces, it is necessary to maintain them simultaneously and use them in alternation. The more you are gentle and calm, the more your anger will be effective; the stronger you are, the more your gentleness will be prized ... the more you are indifferent, the easier it is to make others love you.”⁵

Of course, the right and constructive use of this method presupposes good motives and purity of intention.

Examples

The second method, that of synthesis, which is analogous in a certain sense to a chemical combination, reabsorbs the two elements into a higher unity endowed with qualities differing from those of either of them. The difference between the solutions achieved through compromise and those brought about through synthesis can be clearly indicated by a triangular

Figure 1.



lated in the first place by the recognition of their respective functions and of the legitimate field of action of each of the two functions so that neither dominates the other. This can be followed by a mutual and increasing cooperation and interpenetration between the two, finally arriving at the synthesis so well expressed by Dante in the words “intellectual light full of love.”

Figure 2.

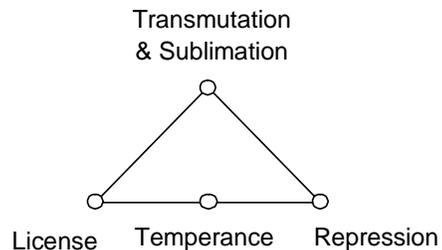
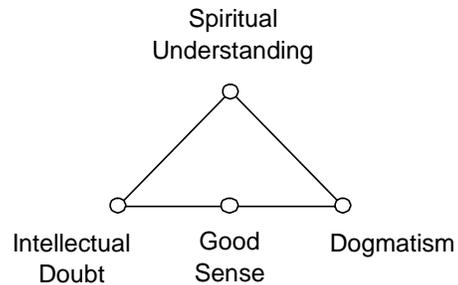
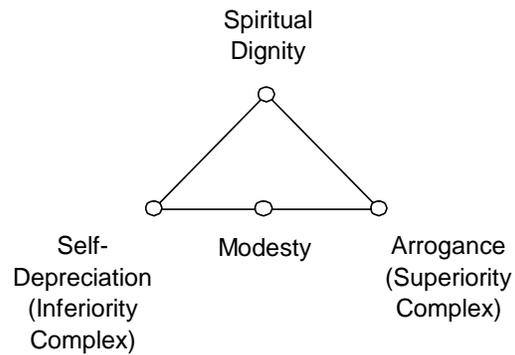


diagram. Some examples are shown in Figure 1.

The polarity between mind and heart, between reason and feeling (*Logos* and *Eros*), is regu-

The polarity between sensitivity and receptivity (*Pathos*) and dynamism or Will (*Ethos*), which in a wider sense corresponds to psychosexual polarity — for the former pole is the

“feminine” and the latter the “masculine” modality—can also at first be controlled by a balanced adjustment, to be superseded by a creative synthesis.

The fundamental polarity between the human personality as a whole and the spiritual Self can also be resolved into a unity, but this can be realized only through a long process of transmutation, involving a protracted series of conflicts, approaches and contacts producing a partial or more expanded fusion; in short, a process of “spiritual psychosynthesis.” This constitutes the noble effort, the central drama of Man who, either consciously or unconsciously, aspires to this high goal, or is pushed towards it by his inability to find lasting satisfaction or a true peace until he has attained it.

The phases and methods of such psychosynthesis have been dealt with in an essay on “Psychoanalysis and Psychosynthesis” and in other writings. Here we will only mention that the interaction between the Self and the personality creates a series of “triangular” relationships similar to those previously indicated. Some of them are shown in Figure 2.

The various equilibrations, adjustments and syntheses can be produced in different ways. In many cases they are preceded by intense crises and conflicts. In other cases they are reached in a more gradual and harmonious way by means of a gradual decrease in the oscillations of the “pendulum.” A clear understanding of this process of psychosynthesis enables one to achieve it more easily and rapidly. The essential requirement, as previously mentioned, is to avoid identifying oneself with either of the two opposite poles and to control, transmute and direct their energies from a higher Center of awareness and power.

dom. Jung, in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, and also Keyserling, expressed great appreciation of it.

³ The problem of ancestral influences and the method of liberation from them have been treated in an original way, although not without exaggeration, by Leon Daudet in his book, *L'Heredité*.

⁴ See our essay on “The Transmutation and Sublimation of the Sexual Energies” in *Psychosynthesis*, p. 267.

⁵ Eliphas Levi. *Ritual of High Magic*, Ch. VIII.

¹ Arnold Keyserling. *From Suffering to Fulfillment*. London; Selwyn and Blount. Cf. also: *Das Buch vom Personlichen Leben*, by the same writer, pp. 505–515.

² Numerous Chinese texts deal with this point. One of the most interesting is the *I Ching* or *The Book of Transformations*, which in the form of a method of divination contains treasures of wis-

