

Bipolarity

Embracing Opposition

by Todd F. Eklof (2-24-02)

Paradoxical Reasoning

When I entered college many years ago, the first big college-type word thrown at me was the word *bipolarity*. To this day the spell-check on my word processing program, based on binary *either/or* logic, keeps insisting there is no such word. In recent years it has also become the clinical name for people who often experience extreme shifts between elation and depression, *bipolar disorder*, formally called *manic-depression*. It seems evident in our culture, influenced strongly by Aristotelian logic, that we are uncomfortable with contradiction, that is, with opposites presenting themselves as one. People who display opposite character traits are called hypocrites, two-faced, or else diagnosed with a mental disorder, as if to suggest, even within our complex bodies, comprised of trillions of individual cells, there is no room for conflict. Within the multiplicity of our personalities, we are expected to remain monotone and monotonous.

To better understand where our opposition to opposition comes from, it might help to recall Aristotle's three basic rules of logic. The first is referred to as *the law of identity*, which, simply stated, means "whatever is, is." The second is called *the law of contradiction*, "nothing can both be and not be." And the third is *the law of the excluded middle*, which states, "Everything must either be or not be." Aristotle viewed these three fundamentals of thought as self evident. Indeed, who can argue with the idea that *whatever is, is*, or *nothing can both be and not be*, or, *everything must either be or not be*? Yet if we accept these laws unconditionally, then we are left with a reality that is extremely polarized, i.e., north/south, east/west, hot/cold, black/white, right/wrong, etc., etc.

In college, however, my professor did not use the word *bipolarity* in reference to any sort of intellectual fallacy, nor to describe a mental or emotional disorder. Rather, he defined bipolarity as a gauge for determining truth. In his understanding, truth contains opposites, it is both/and, not either/or. The strict logician would find this definition of truth impossible. North is North, it cannot be both North and South, it must be either North or South. Right is right, it cannot be both right and wrong, it must be either right or wrong. Truth is truth, it cannot be both true and false, it must be either true or false. Yet bipolar reasoning suggests North and South, right and wrong, truth and falsehood are somehow connected, two sides of one coin, and reality exists and fluctuates between their extremes.

Erich Fromm referred to this as *paradoxical reasoning*.¹ The word *paradox* comes from the Latin, *paradoxum* and the Greek, *paradoxos*, meaning "contrary to opinion." Fromm suggests this type of reasoning, more typical of Eastern thought, is necessary if we are to recognize truth beyond our expectations of it, beyond our opinions of it. "The general principle of paradoxical logic has been clearly described by Lao-tse. 'Words that

are strictly true seem to be paradoxical.' And by Chuang-tse: 'That which is one is one. That which is not-one, is also one.'"2

Paradoxical reasoning, however, is not exclusive to the East. The German philosopher Hegel developed his dialectic philosophy based on the idea that opposites meet and create a new truth; thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Karl Marx used this same dialectic approach in his understanding of society—through conflict something new emerges. This principle is also important in the theory of evolution. Namely, when an organism is met with conflict, or opposition, it either perishes, or survives because of certain traits it has. Through this survival of the fittest, those traits are passed on to its progeny and the species continually changes into something new over time, thus allowing lemurs to become apes and apes, humans.

Spiritual Reasoning

It seems important that we learn to validate and trust bipolar truth if we are to develop spiritually. I say this because paradox seems indicative of spirituality. Although religion itself, though full of contradictions, is all too often one-sided, there is ample evidence to suggest the basis of genuine spirituality, divine transcendence, mystic experience, whatever you choose to call it, is contrary to expectation.

For example, in attempting the difficult task of defining religion itself, we might expect it has something to do with the belief in a god or gods. Thus we might further conclude, *religion begins with a belief in God*. This makes sense to us, but the opposite statement, *religion begins with a disbelief in God*, seems a bit of a paradox. Yet, if we define religion as an attempt to obtain a connection to the divine, or to reconnect with something we have lost, or something lost in us, then religion is a form of belief and ritual meant to provide us with something we don't have, a relation with the divine. In this way, religion begins with our disbelief in God. As the *Tao Te Ching* states, "When they lose their sense of awe, people turn to religion."[# 72]

Yet this argument is still way too logical to fully comprehend the beauty and spiritual significance of contradiction. When I was a child I loved watching the TV show, *Kung Fu*. For those who remember, the opening of the show always began with the words of the wise Master Po telling his young pupil, Kwai Chang Caine, "It is said a Shaolin priest can walk through walls. Looked for, he cannot be seen. Listened for, he cannot be heard. Touched, he cannot be felt." This description comes right out of the *Tao Te Ching's* description of the *divine*, for lack of a better word:

Look, and it can't be seen.
Listen, and it can't be heard.
Reach, and it can't be grasped.

Above, it isn't bright.
Below, it isn't dark.
Seamless, unnamable,

it returns to the realm of nothing.
Form that includes all forms,
image without an image,
subtle, beyond all conception.

Approach it and there is no beginning;
follow it and there is no end.
You can't know it, but you can be it,
at ease in your own life.
Just realize where you come from:
this is the essence of wisdom. [# 14]

This ancient book of wisdom is replete with examples of paradoxical reasoning, that seem at first illogical, yet also seem to resonate with something deep inside us.

When they know that they don't know, people can find their own way. [# 65]

Trying to grasp things, you lose them. [# 64]

The more you know, the less you understand. [#47]

True perfection seems imperfect... True fullness
seems empty.... True straightness seems crooked. True wisdom seems foolish. [# 45]

Failure is an opportunity. [# 79]

Act without doing; work without effort. Think of
the small as large and the few as many. [# 63]

The more prohibitions you have, the less virtuous
people will be. The more weapons you have, the less secure people will be. [# 57]

The rules of Aristotelian logic prohibit us from finding value and meaning in any of these statements. For how can something we hold be lost to us? According to the *law of identity*, whatever is lost is lost. According to the *law of contradiction* it cannot be both lost and found. According to the *law of the excluded middle*, it must be either lost or found. Aristotelian logic asks, how is it possible for us to find our way if we are lost? How can knowledge lead to less understanding? How can perfection be imperfect? How can fullness seem empty? Small seem large? Few be as many? How can maximum security makes us less secure? Yet, in letting go of our logic, we grasp the meaning of these profound statements.

When my dear friend Mary Brosky recently had her home broken into by students from a nearby high school, only to have those same students mock her while repairing the damaged door, she chose not to retaliate. Her son, naturally concerned for her safety, logically replaced the old door with a stronger door, with reinforced security locks. But

Mary chose to leave her door unlocked, with a note on it, "Welcome, the door is unlocked, there's milk and cookies on the table." Mary didn't do this because she wants her home to be violated again, but because she doesn't. Mary holds to the paradoxical maxim, *if you don't want your home broken into, leave you door unlocked*. Welcome your enemies. Leave them milk and cookies! Again, as the Tao Te Ching puts it, "The Tao doesn't take sides; it gives birth to both good and evil. The Master doesn't take sides; she welcomes both saints and sinners." [#5]

It would be well if our Western religion, Christianity, could discover and embrace the paradox within its own tradition. As we all know, Christianity is far too often one-sided, insisting on only one aspect of truth, which has often led to horrible acts of intolerance and cruelty. Yet, there is plenty within Christianity that is reminiscent of the Eastern Masters. We might even conclude that Mary Brosky practices Christianity by welcoming her enemies. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." Our logic, if not our instinct, is to strike back, but Jesus instructs us to "turn the other cheek."

To add paradox to paradox, this man of peace contradicts himself by saying things like, "I've not come to bring peace, but a sword." Or, "One's enemies will be the members of one's own household." "Let the dead bury the dead." "Everyone who is exalted will be humiliated." "The one who is humbled will be praised." Of course, we're all familiar with the paradoxical nature of the beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs' is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst... for they shall be filled."

Becoming Our Opposites

Erich Fromm also recognizes the ancient philosopher/mystic, Heraclitus as an example of bipolar thinking. He reminds us that Heraclitus assumed, "the conflict between opposites is the basis of all existence."

They do not understand... that the all-One, conflicting in itself, is identical with itself: *conflicting harmony* as in the bow and the lyre... We go into the same river, and yet not in the same; *it is we and it is not we.*"³

Carl Jung was also greatly impressed by Heraclitus and provides us with several of his paradoxical statements in his volume on *Psychological Types*:

Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre.

The bow (*bios*) is called life (*bios*), but its work is death.

Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, the one living the others' death and the others' life.

For souls it is death to become water, for water death to become earth. But from earth comes water, and from water, soul.

All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things, like goods for gold and gold for goods.

The way up and the way down are the same.⁴

Jung often referred to Heraclitus' idea of *enantiadromia*, the Greek word meaning, everything changes into its opposite. According to Jung, the human psyche itself is comprised of opposites. For example, the word he liked to use to define the male psyche is the Greek word for soul, *anima*. This, however, is the feminine form of the word. He used the masculine version of the same word, *animus*, to describe the female psyche. For Jung, the inside of a male is female, and the inside of a female is male. The law of enantiadromia maintains that we all change into our opposites, that men will feminize and women will masculinize.

I use the term enantiadromia for the emergence of the unconscious opposite in the course of time. This characteristic phenomenon practically always occurs when an extreme, one-sided tendency dominates conscious life; in time an equally powerful counterposition is built up, which first inhibits the conscious performance and subsequently breaks through the conscious control.⁵

According to Jung we must eventually face Life's contradictions because they dwell within us. Love/hate, rage/tranquility, reason/passion, thought/feeling, male/female—all of these bipolar relationships are part of what it means to be human. So, we must learn to embrace the contradictions around us, in us, and in others.

The first and last card of the Tarot is the Fool. Unlike any other card, the Fool is without a number because it includes all the cards within itself. We are born out of contradiction, foolishness, and to foolishness we must return. Embracing all truth, all realities, and, at the same time no realities, may seem like foolishness, but it is this bipolar thinking that leads us to realize, foolishness is the beginning of wisdom.

1 Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, 1956, p. 62.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Jung, C.G., *Psychological Types*, CW VI, Bollingen Series XX, p. 426.

5 Ibid.