

THE BALANCING AND SYNTHESIS OF THE OPPOSITES by Roberto Assagioli, M.D.

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: 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 which stands above the various pairs of opposites existing in manifested life. Such is the conception of Keyserling, contained in his book, *From Suffering to Fulfillment* (London; Selwyn and Blount) (cf. also *Das Buch vom Personlichen Leben* (Stuttgart: Deutsche VerlagAnstalt, 1936), by the same writer, p. 505-510-515.) 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.

Physical Polarity

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 contains charges of electricity differentiated into a positive nucleus and a varying number of negative electrons. Electric polarity manifests itself in various ways which have many practical applications, as in induced and alternating currents, etc. Interesting analogies can be found in various polarities in the field of psychology, such as emotional attraction and repulsion, ambivalence and the "compensatory" function.

Within 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, the latter assimilation or anabolism. Other polarities exist between the different endocrine glands.

One of the most important and general polarities in the three kingdoms of organic life (vegetable, animal and human) is the sexual. The positive pole is represented by the masculine element, the negative by the feminine element. This does not mean that the former is active and the latter passive. Both are active, but in a different way, the masculine element being the dynamic, initiating pole, while the feminine element is the receptive, "gestative," elaborative pole. This type of polarity extends far beyond the man-woman 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 and elaborative aspect, symbolized by the mother and the Earth. The well-being of Man depends, in the view of Chinese philosophy, on the harmonious accord between Man and the cyclic evolution of the Universe, woven from the innumerable relationships and interactions of Yang and Yin. (1)

Emotional Polarity

In the field of the emotions and feelings we find those dualities which are familiar to all: pleasure-pain; excitement-depression; confidence-fear; attraction-repulsion; love-hate. Such is their extent that one might say

that the life of the average human being is based on his emotional reactions to things, to events and to persons. These reactions have a definite function and purpose, provided they are maintained within appropriate bounds. But if we allow them to take over—as too often is the case—we are apt to become their slaves. Later we shall consider how the limitations of these opposites can be overcome.

Mental Polarity

In the mental realm there is the polarity between the analytical activity of the concrete mind and the synthetic operation of the abstract 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 which have been extensively investigated by modern psychology. The knowledge about the human being acquired in this process 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; Pathos (Receptivity, Sensitivity, Reactivity)Ethos (Activity, Dynamism, Will); Eros (Feeling)-Logos (Reason).

Spiritual Polarity

The fundamental duality in the spiritual realm is that existing between the personality and the Transpersonal Self, a polarity which is the cause of many inner conflicts, until harmonious relationships and an increasing blending or unification (spiritual psychosynthesis) are achieved.

Interindividual Polarity

There are also many “inter-individual” polarities which 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 which he may be encouraged to live by. Other times, and perhaps more often, they may hem him in and even oppress him.

Then come the social groups of different kinds (social and professional classes, cultural and religious groups, nations) 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 the “hierarchical” ones, between the family and the state; classes and nations; between a state and a federation of states.

Two kinds of polarities which are of great importance are that between the northern and southern individuals and groups in each nation and continent and that between Western and Eastern peoples.

Balancing Opposite Poles

Each of these numerous polarities confronts us with the problem of their interplay and balancing. The following is a brief survey of the general principles and 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*, of 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*.)

4. *Synthesis*, brought about by a higher element or principle which transforms, sublimates and reabsorbs the two poles into a higher reality.

The different types of polarity require correspondingly appropriate solutions. Man often has the freedom—and consequently the responsibility—of choosing between different methods of balancing. 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 most simple 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 which separates them, a discharge is produced which 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, with some “resistance” 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, or into movement. In these cases the process of neutralization produces various useful 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 the 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. In humanity this wonderful physical creative function is closely associated with the *psychological* polarities, and this often produces very complex situations and difficult problems.

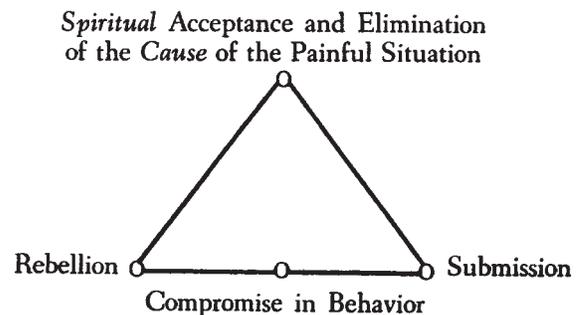
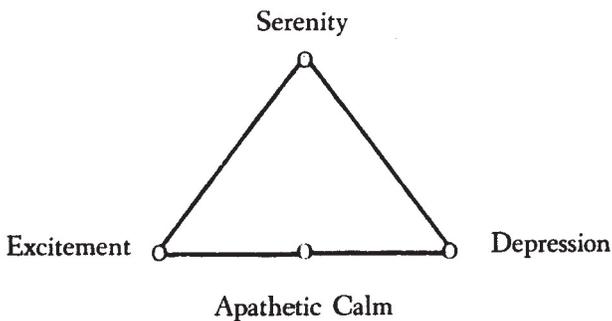
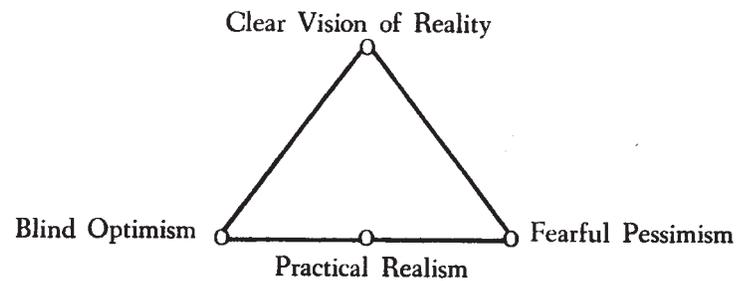
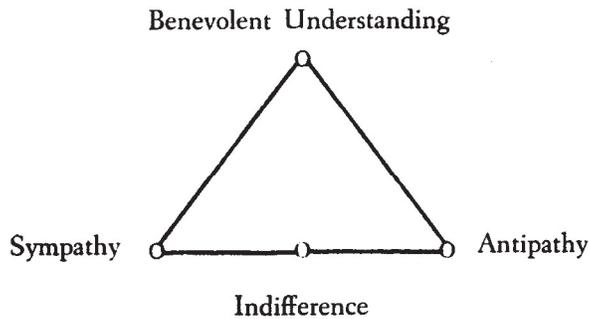
In the fields of drives, emotions and feelings, the balancing of opposite qualities requires the intervention of a higher regulating principle of a mental or transpersonal nature. The first task is to prevent the drives and the emotions from overwhelming and submerging the reason and the will. The best way to achieve this is to learn how to disidentify oneself from them at will, in order to be free at any time to maintain the “I”, the center of consciousness, on a higher level above them, in order to be able to observe and evaluate them, and to wisely regulate them as needed.

Let us make it clear that to regulate does not mean to “suppress,” and that this does not in any way lead to aridity or a lack of sensitivity. Let us, for example, consider a fundamental polarity, pleasure-pain. As long as we remain slaves of this duality, always actively seeking pleasure and fearfully fleeing from pain, we shall not

find lasting peace or permanent 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 which 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 it and attachment to it, and in accepting pain, when unavoidable, without fearing it and rebelling against it, one can learn much from both pleasure and pain, and “distill the essence” which they contain. Moreover, one can gradually raise the quality and level of these “opposites”; one passes by degrees from the physical pleasures in and of themselves 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 turmoils; then to compassion for the sufferings of others and then of the whole human race. 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 main types of solutions. 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: it is the fusion of the poles into a higher *synthesis*.

The method of synthesis which is analogous in a certain sense to a chemical combination, includes and absorbs 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 diagram. Here are a few examples:

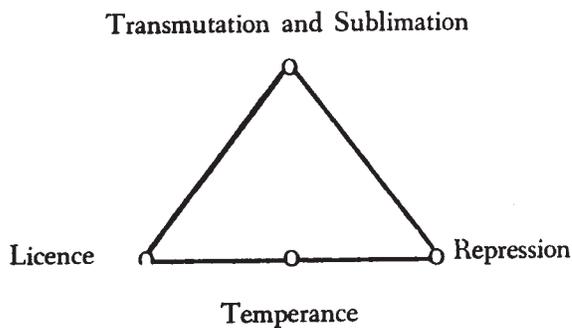
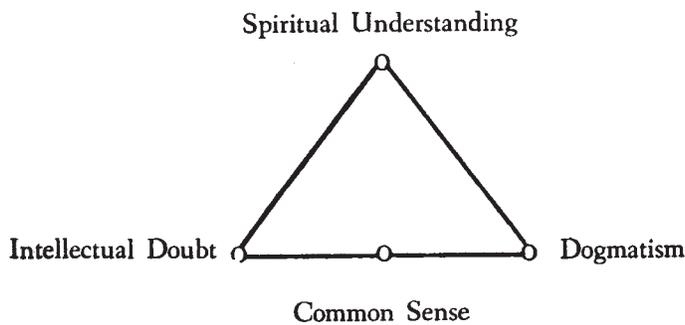
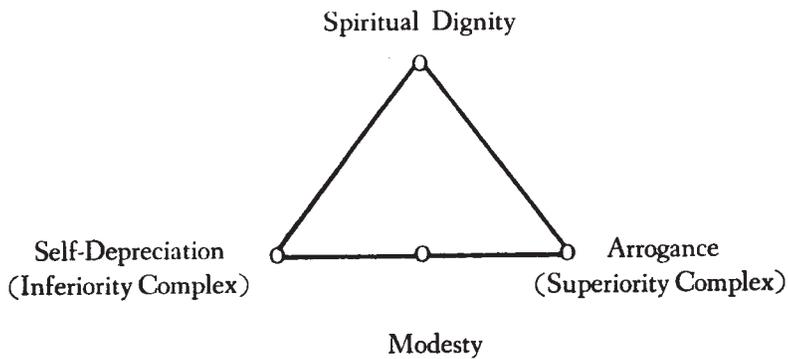


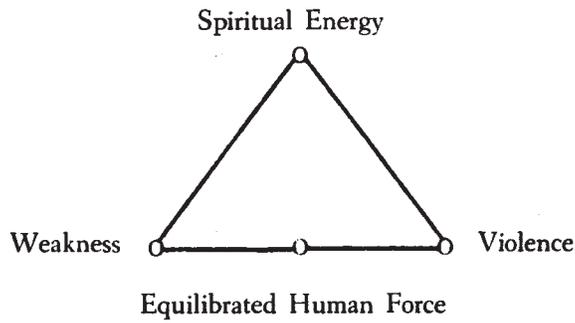
The polarity between ‘mind’ and ‘heart’, between reason and feeling (*Logos* and *Eros*), is regulated in the first place by the recognition of their respective functions and of the legitimate field of action of each of the two functions, so that neither dominates the other. This can be followed by a 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.”

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. This is the aim of the process of harmonization and transmutation involving a protracted series of conflicts, approaches, and contacts, each producing partial, increasingly expanded fusions. In short, this is the process of spiritual psychosynthesis. It 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 interaction between the Self and the personality creates a series of “triangular” relationships similar to those previously indicated. Here are some of them:





The various equilibrations, adjustments and syntheses can be produced in different ways. At times, 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 progressive decrease in the oscillations of the “pendulum”. A clear understanding of this process of synthesis 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.

(1) Numerous Chinese texts deal with this point. One of the most interesting is the *I Ching* or *The Book of Transformations*, which, disguised under the form of a method of divination, contains treasures of wisdom. Jung, in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, and also Keyserling, expressed great appreciation of it.