

The Law of Opposites in the Ontopoiesis of Life and in Language

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Abstract The article considers the law of opposites as present in the philosophical ideas, cognition and language. In the Western philosophical tradition it has become accepted to draw a sharp distinction between the man as the subject and the world as the object. It is the philosophy of the ontopoiesis of life advanced by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka where the Heraclitean intrinsic law of opposites is shown as the dynamic unfolding of forces in the self-individualizing process of life. Disparate elements are differentiated bringing about extreme points that oppose each other, namely cosmos and human world and human condition. For Tymieniecka, these two ultimate opposite ends of the developmental process are united in the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive. Language is the medium through which the human mind categorizes and conceptualizes the entirety of the world. Following Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralists hold binary oppositions to be one of the most important principles governing the language. The cognition of the world through binary oppositions seems to be characteristic of human psyche (e.g. subject – object, self – other). The principles of contrasting concepts: abstract – concrete and literal – metaphorical lie at the basis of shaping and understanding of the cognitive metaphor.

Philosophers throughout centuries have considered such opposites as cause and effect, essence and appearance, necessity and contingency, the particular and the general, differentiation and unity, being and non-being, subject and object, sameness and otherness, etc.

It is characteristic of the European mode of thinking to grasp the world through oppositions. First of all a notion of these oppositions can be learned from the phenomena of our everyday life experience. From our experience we get to know such oppositions as: day – night, dark – light, dead – alive, here – there, right – left.

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We find the same opposing notions in mutual relationships, for instance, *love – hate*, *pleasant – disgusting*, *light – shadow*, etc.

People have believed in the fundamental character of binary oppositions since at least classical times. For instance, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle advanced the following binary oppositions: form – matter, natural – unnatural, active – passive, whole – part, before – after, being – non-being. The semiotician Daniel Chandler admits that in Aristotle's *Physics* the four elements of earth, air, fire and water were said to be opposed in pairs. For more than 2,000 years oppositional patterns based on these four elements were widely accepted as the fundamental structure underlying surface reality (Chandler 2003: 102).

The dualism of mental and material was given its first definitive expression in the seventeenth century by the French philosopher René Descartes. He divided reality into two distinct ontological substances – mind and body. These substances represented for him internal or 'mental' world and external or 'real' world. The theory of Descartes originated a number of associated dichotomies, such as reason – emotion, male – female, true – false, public – private, self – other and human – animal. The philosopher Nancy Mardas states that "Dichotomies that have plagued Western philosophy at least since Descartes are, for instance, the split between reason and passion, between the mind and the body, between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, between subject and object, between freedom and necessity, between noumenal and the phenomenal" (Mardas 2004a: XXI).

The ideas of Descartes contributed to the beginning of the elevation of humankind above nature, resulting in the split between the human realm and nature. In the Western philosophical tradition it has become accepted to draw a sharp distinction between man as the subject and the world as the object.

The philosophy of ontopoiesis of life as being propagated by Professor Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and The World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research and Learning for more than 40 years has been trying to bridge the gap between the human realm and the kingdom of nature. When considering phenomenology of life and its inner workings, Tymieniecka discusses the role of the intrinsic law of opposites as held by Heraclitus. Reflecting on forces in nature and the being in general, Heraclitus has stated that all is in a perpetual flux; all things are in a process of a perpetual change. According to Heraclitian vision, the differentiation of things occurs through the play of opposites. Tymieniecka sees the action of the law of opposites as the dynamic unfolding and construction of forces in "the self-individualizing progress that projects itself in a process" (Tymieniecka 1998: 13). Tymieniecka demonstrates how inner forces of life are governed by the law of opposites. Tymieniecka discusses such opposites as the flux versus stasis, differentiation versus unity. Tymieniecka shows the principle of unity and the principle of differentiation that brings forth the self-individualizing progress. This progress is a continuous process, this process being: "the constructive vehicle of order within the flux".

She explains that "a process, indeed, remains in flux while its phases differentiate from each other. Each phase performs a distinctive segment of operations ... Each actual phase, just now in performance, already anticipates the next, the one into which it passes ..." (op. cit.: 13).

Tymieniecka concludes that the essence of the self-individualizing life is being- in-process. It is the human mind with its logics that cuts into this incessant flux and tries to insert points of stability and order. She asserts:

The human creative mind in its creative manifestation of life cuts into this incessant flux, and by establishing correspondences with its “logic of contradiction” it establishes objectified reality according to a logic of its own, the logic of structures and essences... In the rhythm of taking, processing, absorbing, and radiating and rejecting [within life’s poiesis] the rational principles of “sameness” and “otherness”, of “inwardness” and “outwardness”... are projected and installed. (*op. cit.*: 14)

As stated by Tymieniecka, the advent of life occurs in the bringing forth of opposites in forces, qualities, tensions, etc. She holds that such opposites as “useful and noxious, hot and cold, light and dark, moist and dry, strength and weakness, etc., differentiated in the operations of the life-process ... are, in fact, opposites in transition: they acquire their gradation of “opposition” in the play of vital forces that transforms substances” (*op. cit.*: 15).

Tymieniecka shows how the web of life is actually woven through opposing forces that ensure self-individualization of entities. Tymieniecka has widely discussed such opposites as differentiation and unity, namely, differentiation as self individualizing process within the unity-of-everything-there-is-alive. Considering the entirety of life’s expansion (the world in its universality, according to Kant), Tymieniecka argues that within a common line of successive stages of development disparate elements are differentiated into an infinite gradation bringing about extreme points that oppose each other at the “opposite” ends of a common line. She explains:

The game of life consisting in the play of trial and error, in the confluence and transformation of otherwise disparate elements unfolds the entire gamut of opposed tensions, and ... they are differentiated into an infinite gradation of qualitative or operational intensities, forcefulness, etc. bringing about extreme points that oppose each other at the “opposite” ends of a common line ... This differentiation flows, indeed, from the heart of the logos of life initiated with the cosmos on the one end and culminating in the Human Condition at the other. (*op.cit.*: 15)

To conceive Tymieniecka’s notion of the coexistence of these two ultimate opposite ends of a line, i.e. the bios at the one end and human condition at the other, there might serve the presentation of the Chinese traditional concepts of yin and yang, when they are presented in colours as white and black and forming a unity within a circle. Likewise the opposing elements described by Tymieniecka could be visualized as not posited on a line, however, but situated within a circle and thus representing the entire flux of being around us in its differentiation and its unity.

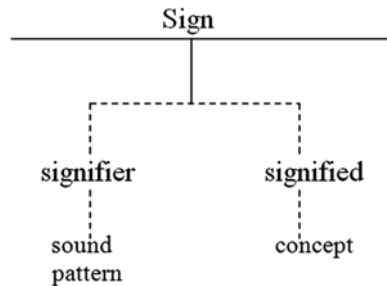
The law of opposites governs different spheres of human life and one of those spheres is language.

Language as a means of expressing one’s ideas was the object of philosophical interest since Aristotelian times in European philosophy. Language has been considered as a theoretical discipline beginning with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Saussure is considered to be the predecessor of structuralism in linguistics.

Language for Saussure was a system of signs. For him, it is a system of functional differences and oppositions. In order to recognize a sign one has to differentiate it from the others to which it is related. According to Saussure, two signs are in

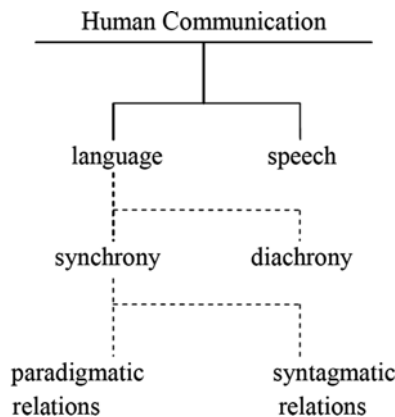
opposition to each other. The entire mechanism of language is based on oppositions of this kind and upon the phonic and conceptual differences they involve. Saussure particularly emphasized negative, oppositional differences between signs. He argued that “concepts ... are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items of the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is being whatever the others are not” (Saussure 1992: 115).

For Saussure, the sign involves two different notions, i.e. the sound pattern and the concept it signifies. He presents them as two facets of one system. Graphically it may be represented as:



Likewise Saussure has contrasted two domains of language: the actual phenomenon of language or data of linguistics (as *langue*), and the actual use of language (as *parole*). He has also contrasted two planes of investigation of language, i.e. synchronic and diachronic aspects of research. Analyzing language as a system and as a structure, Saussure introduced the notion of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of linguistic units. The notion of paradigmatic relations is grounded upon the existing associative relations between linguistic units in a language system, whereas syntagmatic relations are simultaneously present in a structure and manifest the various ways in which linguistic units within the same text are structurally related to each other. Investigating human communication, he outlined the following distinctions: synchronic approach to investigations as opposed to that of diachronic and paradigmatic relationships among linguistic units as opposed to syntagmatic.

Thus, according to Saussure, in the analysis of language the following oppositions can be discerned which graphically may be shown as:



Poststructural theorist, literary philosopher Jacques Derrida followed in the footsteps of structuralists in regard to binary oppositions. For Derrida, the world is constructed in sets of binary opposites. Such an understanding echoes through Derrida's writings on the meaning as the play of differences. The philosopher Nancy Mardas points out:

As well known, in Derrida's theory, the world is constructed in sets of binary opposites, each struggling to achieve the dominance of a central position, and against marginalization, striving for actualization and identity. In each case, what is present is privileged over what is absent. In the realm of language, in Derrida's classic formulation of the binary opposition of signifier to signified, the signified is internal, and the signifier external. The only way that the signifier gains identity is in its difference from other signifiers. (Mardas 2004b: 20–21)

Saussure's views helped to shape structuralism and make it the dominant approach in European linguistics. Following Saussure, structuralists emphasized the importance of relations of binary oppositions. Daniel Chandler notes that Roman Jakobson proposed that linguistic units are bound together by a system of binary oppositions. As to Jakobson, such oppositions are essential to the generating of meaning, e.g. the meaning of "dark" is relative to the meaning of "light"; we consider "form" in relation to "content". Largely through the influence of Jakobson, the primary analytical method employed by many structuralist semioticians involves the identification of binary or polar semantic oppositions (e.g. *us – them, public – private*) in texts or signifying practices. (Chandler 2003: 101)

As marked by Chandler, "binary oppositions for structuralists are considered to be pairs of mutually exclusive signifiers in a paradigm set representing categories which are logically opposed, e.g. *alive – not-alive*" (op. cit.: 224).

In respect to oppositions it should be noted that both in linguistics and semiotics they are grouped into mutually exclusive oppositions (e.g. *alive – dead*), which are termed "binary oppositions", and the ones representing categories with comparative grading on the same implicit dimension, e.g. *good – bad* where "not good" is not necessarily "bad" and vice versa. The latter are termed "analogue oppositions" (see Chandler, op. cit.: 223). A similar observation is made by the linguist John Lyons. Considering binary oppositions to be one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages (Lyons 1977: 271), he claims that certain distinctions can be made between the types of oppositions. He classifies them accordingly into *logical contradictories* and *logical contraries*:

- Oppositions (logical contradictories: mutually exclusive terms (e.g. *alive – dead*, where 'not alive' can only be 'dead'));
- Antonyms (logical 'contraries'): terms which are comparatively graded on the same implicit dimension (e.g. *good – bad*, where "not good" is not necessarily "bad") (Lyons 1977: 270ff.).

Contrasting and dualism seem to be deeply rooted in the development of the human categorization of the world and mode of thinking. As noted by Chandler, Jakobson and Halle observe that "the binary opposition is a child's first logical operation" (Jakobson and Halle 1956: 60, cited in Chandler 2003: 101).

Contemporary psychologists hold that the cognition of the world through binary oppositions is characteristic of human psyche. As pointed out by Chandler "the opposition *subject – object* in human psyche is manifested as apprehension of *self – other*. The opposition of *self – other* (or *subject – object*) is psychologically fundamental. The mind imposes some degree of constancy on the dynamic flux of

experience by defining “the self” in relation to “the other”” (Chandler 2003: 105). Chandler notes that the neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has argued that initially in the realm of “the Real” ... the infant has no centre of identity and experiences, no clear boundaries between itself and the external world. Lacan describes a defining moment in the imaginary which he calls “the mirror phase”, when seeing one’s mirror image (and being told by one’s mother, “That’s you!”) it induces a strongly defined illusion of a coherent and self-governing personal identity. Chandler stresses that this marks the child’s emergence from a matriarchal state of “nature” into the patriarchal order of “culture”. As the child gains mastery within the pre-existing “symbolic order” (the public domain of verbal language), language (which can be mentally manipulated) helps to foster the individual’s sense of conscious “self” residing in an “internal world” which is distinct from “the world outside” (Chandler 2003: 105). Chandler marks that “self – individualization process is realized with the help of language. It is our life experience manifested in our language that makes the individual, differentiating it from others. Subjectivity is dynamically constructed through discourse” (op. cit.: 105).

The opposition self – other can be expressed as the opposition us – them. To illustrate this common feature of the psyche to perceive the world in dichotomies and demonstrate how common for us it is to oppose “us” to “them”, the latter being alien or even dangerous, there is an excerpt from a contemporary thriller:

The tale of Eden itself had probably begun not far from here, somewhere in the parallel valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates that emptied into the Persian Gulf. Yes, if humanity were all one cast tree, then the oldest roots were right here, virtually in the center of the country he had just created.

The ancients would have the same sense of centrality, he was sure. Here we are, they would have thought, and out there were ... *they* [author’s emphasis], the universal appellation for those who were not part of one’s own community. They were dangerous. At first they would have been nomadic travellers for whom the idea of a city was incomprehensible. How could one stay in one place and live? Didn’t the grass for the goats and sheep run out? On the other hand, what a fine place to raid, they would have thought. That was why the city has sprouted defensive walls, further emphasizing the primacy of place and the dichotomy of *we* and *they* [author’s emphasis], the civilized and the uncivilized.

And so it was today Daryaei knew, Faithful and Infidel. (Clancy 1997: 721)

The intrinsic law of opposition manifests itself also in the cognition process, which then finds its realization in language structures. There are two different ways of deciphering reality, i.e. literal as contrasted to figurative or metaphorical.

Carl Gustav Jung, when investigating archetypes as reflecting universal human thought found in all cultures, turned his attention to symbols thus stressing the significance of figurative or metaphorical thinking. Ernst Cassirer in the investigation of symbolic forms in language and culture distinguished two forms of mental action, i.e. metaphorical (lingual and mythical) and discursive logical (Арутюнова 1990: 13).

Cassirer speaks of two ways of forming a concept as two different tendencies or modes of thinking. These are logico-discursive, and lingual and mythological. He explains that in the first case when forming a concept one can speak of widening of the range of notions and concepts referring to it. In the second case, however, we meet a different process, namely, the range of notions is not widened, but vice versa, they are squeezed together to focus in one point (Касирер 1990: 37).

As concerns linguistics, nowadays it is cognitive linguistics where a number of linguists have turned their attention to elucidation of the ways in which linguistic structures reflect the manner in which human beings perceive, categorize and conceptualize the world. One of the topics of their investigation is the theory of cognitive metaphor.

Cognitive science views metaphor as a principle of thinking, as a key to understanding the basis of thinking. The theory of cognitive metaphor discloses the pattern how human beings arrange and structure their experience and knowledge. This process is determined by the ability to perceive abstract concepts metaphorically, i.e. by being able to compare them to something real. It is characteristic of human mode of thinking to compare and make contrasts. In order to comprehend and grasp the meaning of a new or abstract notion the mind tends to compare it with something familiar. The thinking process is organized in the way that the mind moves from the known to the unknown, from the concrete to the more abstract, for instance, some abstract notion is compared metaphorically to something well known from human everyday life. One notion is compared to another resulting in creation of an image schema. This is the way cognitive metaphors appear. The understanding about an abstract concept may exist in a form of a cognitive metaphor, which then is transformed into linguistic metaphor in communicative situations. The shaping of cognitive metaphor is being realized not in the verbal, but in the cognitive domain (Richards 1932). Metaphor expresses an abstraction (target domain) making use of more familiar concepts (source domain) pertaining to everyday life, for instance, in the well-known example LOVE IS A JOURNEY by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) which they employ to illustrate the conception of cognitive metaphors, where the concept of love is target domain and the concept of journey is source domain.

In conclusion, opposing ideas can be found in the history of the development of the philosophical thought, modes of thinking and everyday life experience. Language is the media through which the human mind categorizes and conceptualizes the entirety of the world around us. Language reflects the law of opposites in its linguistic structures.

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