

The Fallacy of Dichotomous Conceptions of Reality

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The worldview of “Western Civilization” relies heavily on carving up reality dichotomously. In short, we love oppositions. In its most amorphous expression we use the phrases “This or That” and “Either-Or.” No domain of reality escapes this imposition: life-death; rich-poor; love-hate; up-down; fast-slow; in-out; high-low; good-bad; right-wrong; give-take; you-me; light-dark; sacred-profane; compete-cooperate; conservative-liberal; black-white; part-whole; expansion-contraction; objective-subjective; heaven-earth; right-left; etc. While these distinctions can be useful pragmatically, they greatly simplify and distort reality. And they are dangerous if we actually come to depend upon them and act in terms of this way of conceiving our world.

Reality does not conform even to the singular words we use to describe it. In this regard, at what point does the color blue become the color purple or the color green? There are a lot of shades of gray between black and white; a lot of degrees of like and dislike between love and hate. Reality is not captured by our words, and it is far removed from our simplistic dichotomies. And yet as humans with the need to communicate, we depend so much upon these fundamental impositions – to the point where we cease to question their ability to describe reality accurately. Even in science, we constantly confront the limitations imposed by this underlying problem. In physics, we employ the basic distinction between particle and field. But at the subatomic level we now know that matter [particle] and energy [field/wave] are transforms of one another. Moreover, it is only when we assess many subatomic phenomena from both perspectives that the phenomena are adequately understood. Even in science, we suffer from our predisposition to “believe in” our imposed dichotomies.

While there is no full escape from this problem, we can make a major conceptual adjustment that offers the opportunity for much greater clarity and reliability. We merely have to realize that our dichotomies are really just shortcuts for describing what are in fact continua. And ultimately, the continua are infinite and connect across all distinctions that we make with language. Reality is one infinitely connected and interrelated system at any scale that we adopt to explore or deal with it. And this is as true for our social and emotional reality as it is for our physical reality.

The consequences of adopting the continuum and infinitely interconnected perspective are huge. In fact, a great many of our “battles” are really artificial conflicts generated by the polar perspectives created by our conceptually

informing, dichotomous approach to conceiving and understanding our reality. By contrast, the continuum approach reveals the graduated and integrated connection across the poles of our dichotomies.

Consider one example: we love to separate political ideologies into liberal or conservative and evaluate one position or the other from these poles. But the reality is that there are extreme forms of both conservative and liberal perspectives and many locations on the continuum between them. The best we come up with is to sometimes recognize this enormous “center” domain as moderate conservatism or moderate liberalism. The fact is that there are many socio-political-economic-judicial-ecological-religious variables that inform one or the other of these polar ideological positions. And both individuals and political parties vary considerably across these variables as to how conservative or liberal they are. In fact, it is not unusual for individuals to be conservative in some areas and liberal in others. If we stop applying broad labels and explore the continuum for any one or group of these variables, we may well find a lot more room for respect, discussion and compromise. Maybe we can even get our Congressional representatives to return to a common dining room instead of sequestering themselves by party in separate eating locations!

The character of the current polarized political realm is an easy target for identifying the negative impact of behaving in terms of “absolute” dichotomies. But the problem exists throughout all areas of our worldviews. Labels based on fundamental dichotomies are easy, but they are very rarely accurate, and far too often they are deleterious in the consequences that they can promote.

My academic website, www.dynamic-humanism.com , explores two closely related dichotomies informing the western worldview: the material/objective vs. spiritual/subjective. These dichotomies in turn are illuminated by three other closely related dichotomies: the intellectual/analytic/rational vs. intuitive/synthetic/insightful. When we replace the imposed oppositional view suggested by these dichotomies with the continuum perspective, we discover the very flexible capability that humans possess to understand and to interact within reality. Humans do not simply switch from intellectual to intuitive processing as the dichotomous view suggests. Instead, they rely to different degrees on the overlapping combination of these mental capabilities depending on the task that is before them. The dynamic humanism view suggests that humans are constantly negotiating how they understand themselves and how they behave by adjusting their mental, emotional, perceptual, and instinctual capabilities in terms of their wholly interconnected continua options. In short, humans operate systematically within a reality that at every scale is fully systematic. In terms of accurately “capturing” reality, dichotomies are false conceptual conveniences.