
In Theory

Transcending Dualistic Thinking in Conflict Resolution

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Dualism, a doctrine espousing that everything in the universe is divided into polar opposites, is a defining characteristic of social discourse around the world. This article examines this phenomenon and suggests that dualism's centrality in language, thought, and action produces divisiveness and limits conflict resolution options. This essay proposes that more dynamical systems of interpretation originating from a broad range of disciplines including linguistics, the physical sciences, and Eastern religions can be useful in a variety of conflict resolution situations because they encourage more complex and creative thinking.

Dualism and Conflict

We assume that destructive conflict is inevitable, but is it? Would it exist at all if our way of communication were based on a more complex, multi-faceted perspective? Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, an American philosopher and intellectual historian, argued for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of philosophy, history, literature, and science. In his book *The Revolt against Dualism*, he defines *dualism* as a system where there are only two points of view, one being *absolute truth* and the other *not* (1930). *Webster's New World College Dictionary*¹ defines *dualism* as "the doctrine

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that there are two mutually antagonistic principles in the universe, good and evil.” Zygmunt Bauman (1991) describes dualism as a component of modernity² in which the human brain differentiates between order (not chaos) and chaos (not order). Dualism fails to recognize that reality consists of intermediate degrees, flexible borders, and ever-changing vistas. It is a socially constructed belief system that nonetheless remains the bedrock upon which much human social reality is grounded, and it plays a decisive role in the shaping of philosophy, theology, social values, and gender identity in most human cultures. As a doctrine, dualism can, in fact, encourage conflict. Understanding this relationship is essential to transcending dualism.

Because dualism permeates all forms of social discourse, it will be referred to as a dominant frame of reference. How we frame an issue foreshadows its outcome (Lakoff 2001). The frame in this case becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is further compounded by the fact that it is used across different realms of social interaction. As a result of both persuasiveness and self-perpetuation, it generally becomes difficult to see beyond this one frame to consider any other perspective (Bloch 2003).

The dynamical systems of interpretation discussed in this essay include theories that span a range of disciplines. The theories about how the world works embodied in these systems offer alternatives to dualism. Many arise from scientific discoveries of the last two centuries. Dynamical systems of interpretation reflect a paradigm shift toward the realization that conflict resolution is complex. The philosopher, Thomas Kuhn, argues that scientists build their conception of reality around certain specific paradigms. When the time comes to change a paradigm, to renounce old bedrock truth for something new, the shift occurs across fields of study, cultures, and ideologies. At certain break points in time, a shift occurs in the basic paradigm of understanding and shaping reality. Not only do theories change but also our perceptions of the world (Davies and Gribbin 1992). Many current paradigm shifts in negotiation models are focused on underlying processes. Models of more complex dynamical systems could be “potential source[s] of practical insight for how to survive, even thrive in fundamentally unpredictable [negotiating] environments” (Wheeler and Morris 2002: 1).

Dynamical systems of interpretation, for the purpose of this essay, are an integrated complex of theories, models, methodologies, and descriptions that “study the nature of reality in general, and of consciousness in particular, as a coherent whole, which is never static or complete but which is in an unending process of unfoldment” (Bohm and Peat 1987: 218). These systems can be applied to negotiation theory because they reveal, and are reflective of, the complex holistic interactivity of process — negotiation toward conflict resolution often relies on adaptation and experimentation as well as information gathering (Wheeler and Morris

2002). Furthermore, the application of these systems can enhance efforts to achieve *principled negotiation*³ aimed at transcending a limited either/or frame of reference in favor of achieving mutual gains (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991).

“Dynamical” suggests wholeness, “systems” suggest all-encompassing, and “interpretation” implies the constant moving and organic unfolding of hypotheses. These systems include general semantics, the unifying principle of transformation, chaos theory, quantum mechanics, field theory, the fuzzy principle, and Zen Buddhism. Dynamical systems of interpretation are reflective of postmodernist thinking in that they assist the human mind to transcend dualism.

Dynamical systems of interpretation can (1) metaphorically, theoretically, and literally reveal multiple ways of approaching negotiation and resolution; (2) create an atmosphere of flexibility, reminding us that reality is in a constant state of flux toward evolution, pluralism, and holism; (3) transcend ideology and hierarchical structures; (4) encapsulate interconnectedness; and (5) encourage cooperative and interconnecting models of multidisciplinary inquiry (Korzybski 1933). Each system itself merits a lengthy discussion. The purpose here, however, is to provide a broad menu of alternative options to dualism and to discuss how each can be applied in challenging conflict situations.

Historical Perspectives

How old is the idea of dualism? It is difficult to date a concept so intricately woven into long-held views of reality. The semanticist, Alfred Korzybski (1933), suggests that most human societies have a two-valued system because that is how, on a gross level, the world appears to be organized. For instance, we deal with day *or* night, land *or* water, man *or* woman, and so on. On the living level we have life *or* death, our heart beats *or* not, we breathe *or* suffocate, we are hot *or* cold. Similar relationships occur on higher (abstract) levels. Thus, we have induction *or* deduction, materialism *or* idealism, capitalism *or* communism, Democrat *or* Republican.

Dichotomous thought probably emerged early in human history as the primitive human brain focused on dissimilarities in order to compartmentalize an unpredictable world. But it is a misconception that dualism is a *fixed* phenomenon originating in nature and therefore beyond conscious manipulation or alteration. Dualistic thinking may have originated from nature’s binaries, but it is also a conceptualized and socially constructed reality arising from our ancestors’ pervasive need to create order in a seemingly disorderly universe. Dualistic thinking, then, can indeed be consciously altered or expanded upon (Bohm and Peat 1987).

Early humans constructed an ancient map to maintain control over nature and mythologize the unexplainable. Our ancestors preferred to

think they were at the center of the universe with the sun circling the earth, until scientific observations demanded a second explanation, that the earth was spinning while the sun stood still (Myers 2002). In the fifth century, Parmenides divided the world into being and not being. Democritus followed with the separation of atom and the void. Plato and Aristotle validated either/or logic, and Christianity incorporated duality in the doctrines of good and evil, and heaven and hell (Shlain 1991).

Later, René Descartes influenced subsequent philosophers by dividing “there” from “in here,” matter from mind (Shlain 1991). With this map, philosophers expressed the idea that humanity is not only at the center of the universe but creates order, which is good, while nature creates chaos, which is evil. But this map is inaccurate and outdated. It no longer describes the landscape of our emerging post-modern era, nor does it accurately reflect the complexity of contemporary conflict. As borders disappear, merge, and reconfigure in our complex world community, conflicts require a frame of reference that recognizes pluralism and interconnectedness. We need a map that reflects a more holistic perspective that acknowledges multiplicity, complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness in our increasingly globalized world⁴ with its *global* economy, *global* technology, and *global* environmental concerns.

How can we better map this complexity as it pertains to conflict? Interestingly, some answers may be found in systems of interpretation that not only transcend the boundaries of traditional fields of study but are seemingly unrelated to standard conflict resolution pedagogy. Bauman (1991) suggests that either/or thinking originated with humanity’s desire to control the seemingly chaotic world of nature for the purpose of survival. The struggle for order is not a fight of one definition against another, but rather a fight against ambiguity, a battle of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, of clarity against fuzziness (Bauman 1991: 6–7). But the world of nature is not necessarily either/or. Nature, Bauman argues, is ambivalent.

Ancient Greek philosophers not only recorded the history of humanity in a dualistic way; they psychologically and metaphorically shaped it and set a sociopolitical agenda based on it. Aristotle was one of the first widely read philosophers to codify and record dualistic thinking to be absorbed and repeated by posterity as a universal truth, the natural order of things. Wendell Johnson (1946) in *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment* suggests that if Aristotle were alive today, he would have been horrified to know that we mistook his laws of identity for the laws of nature. Johnson argues that Aristotle simply described what he observed, that he macroscopically perceived the world: if I do not see it, it is not there. His ideas overpowered the mathematical philosopher, Plato, who suggested the presence of unseen submicroscopic structures in nature and in human culture (Korzybski 1933).

Aristotelian logic was concerned with the schematic properties of an argument, not its factual accuracy. It was intent on compartmentalizing. In its various applications, dualistic thinking is required to make Aristotle's *Laws of Identity* seem plausible: (1) *A* is *A*, man is man, truth is truth; (2) *A* is either *A* or non-*A*, something is either a man or it is not a man, something is either true or it is not true; (3) *A* cannot be *A* and non-*A* at the same time, something cannot be both a man and not a man, something cannot be true and not true (Johnson 1946).

The specifics change, but the binary remains. For example, many believe that emotional desires interfere with logic or reason. In this dualistic way of thinking, emotion and logic are considered opposites, and logic is considered superior. Logic creates order, while emotion creates chaos. Pure logic is assumed to be void of emotion, but Korzybski (1933) argues that there is no such thing as *pure logic* but rather *emotional logic* because all so-called logic is colored by the social and emotional makeup of the logician. Antonio R. Damasio (1994: 139) suggests that "emotion is the combination of a mental evaluative process, with dispositional responses to that process, mostly toward the body proper, resulting in an emotional body state, but also toward the brain itself (neurotransmitter nuclei in brain stem), resulting in additional mental changes." More recently, physicist David Bohm has argued that powerful emotions very strongly affect the course of thought; indeed, without some emotional arousal, we would think very little at all (Bohm and Peat 1987).

Dualism and Hierarchy

Aristotle also believed in the hierarchical order of nature. In *Politics*, he is explicit about the basis for this ranking and the differing functions of the high and low ranks. In the world of both nature and art, the inferior always exists for the sake of the better or superior, and the better or superior is that which has a rational principle (Bem 1993).

Arguably, hierarchical social structuring arose from dualistic thinking because such dichotomies lend themselves to a socially constructed moral overlay, and dualism not only divides everything into opposites but judges them as either *inferior* or *superior*. Graphically, opposites create a linear horizontal line that when turned vertically creates the superior-versus-inferior dichotomy, as illustrated in Figure One. There is little or no room for divergence, and this imagined dichotomy creates divisiveness and perpetuates conflict.

If this chart is read vertically, words will create and reflect polarization as constructed through dualistic thinking. If you turn this chart horizontally, these words will reflect the judgmental overlay found in a hierarchical social structure which assumes that something is always superior or inferior to something else.

1991). Language works in tandem with thought to shape our reality. Grammar, vocabulary, syntax, lexicons, and engendered nouns and pronouns originate in dualistic thought constructs. Language reflects our dualistic thinking in that it is designed to include or exclude, take in or take out, accept or reject that which does not fit a class or category. Language mediates the orderly either/or world that our thoughts create and the world of randomness outside our linguistically structured reality (Bauman 1991).

Most words are shadowed by their opposites: conflict versus resolution, manage versus mismanage, chaos versus order, man versus woman, etc. In fact, it is difficult to imagine or describe anything as both different and similar at the same time without resorting to specific words that identify exceptions to Aristotle's *Laws of Identity*. Those which cannot be categorized dichotomously are referred to as *paradoxical*, *contrary*, *enigmatic*, *atypical*, *ambivalent*, *ambiguous*, and *oxymoronic*, to name a few.

Dualism and Gender

Our language attempts to categorize everything, including gender identity. Thus, gender segregation is one outward manifestation of dualistic thinking, and sexism plays a major role in language construction (Lakoff 1975). Dividing words along gender lines is common among cultures around the world. (As society, however, becomes more aware of gender bias in language, new, more androgynous terms are developed or rediscovered. The *stewardess* becomes the *flight attendant*, the *fireman* becomes the *firefighter*, etc.)

The hierarchical component of gender dualism is referred to as *androcentrism*, or the doctrine of male superiority, "which is embedded in human discourse, social institutions, and individual psyche . . . [and] contributes to the shaping of gender identity or gender personality. Within this culturally and socially determined view, man is treated as the human 'norm' and woman as 'other'" (Bem 1993: 19).

Androcentrism is a *primary* dualism so fundamental it must be addressed in a historical context. An early-recorded example describing male superiority is the myth of Zeus. The story of this warlike god was actually brought to Greece by an invading patriarchal people and was integrated into Greek mythology (Highwater 1990). Plato and Aristotle defined *woman* (as did early Judeo-Christian tradition) as an inferior departure from the male standard and, second, as a subordinate within the male-dominated family, whose specialized functions were to provide legitimate male heirs, rear young children, and perform various domestic chores (Bem 1993). In *Timaeus*, Plato wrote: "As human nature was of two kinds, the superior race would hereafter be called man." "The final position is not that all women are inferior to all men, but rather that within any specified class, its women are inferior to its men . . . the inferior race is woman" (Tuana 1992: 14, 15).

The Dragonfly/Fish Conundrum

Underlying the *process* of solving conflict is the desire to grow, not die (Land and Jarman 1992). Opposing parties must eventually substitute dualistic thinking — my position versus your position, my victory and your defeat — for alternative or divergent ways of thinking in order to thrive. But dualism is thousands of years old and not easily erased. To steadfast dualistic thinkers, like intransigent opponents in a conflict, it seems easier to fight, to shout that it is “this way or it is that way!” But this is, in fact, a digression toward entropy. As with all habits, it takes multiple attempts to transcend dualism and think beyond the either/or conundrum.

For purposes of illustration, I have created the metaphor of the dragonfly and the fish, which represents any adversarial group caught up in a self-imposed conundrum that atrophies into destructive conflict. Imagine one day looking out your window and seeing a newly erected billboard that reads:

There are fish; and there are dragonflies.
The fish knows only the pond; the dragonfly knows the universe.
Which would you rather be at the dawn of the twenty-first
century?

It is an official decree demanding everyone to answer the question didactically. So, which *would* you rather be? How would you respond to such a demand, and what would be the result? The dragonfly/fish question illustrates the dilemma created by dualistic thinking. Both dragonfly and fish are trapped in dichotomy. Within the narrow perimeters of the question lurks an ultimatum, a potential for conflict, and just enough general information to trigger divisiveness if not out-and-out war between the fish and the dragonflies. It exhibits dualism on a number of social and ideological levels:

1. *It limits options to one of two choices.* Either you can be fish or dragonfly, nothing more, nothing less. You cannot vie to be both or neither, or sometimes one and sometimes the other. “Which would you rather be in the twenty-first century?” begs a single-choice answer.
2. *It creates artificial perimeters in time and space* that pressure you to *actively* make a choice between the two. You cannot decline the choice without somehow becoming perceived as an outsider and risking social opprobrium or worse. The choice must be made in a timely fashion, or society will make the choice for you. The ultimatum leaves little room to think, question, or consider alternative options.
3. *It establishes a hierarchy* by implying that one is superior over the other. The question suggests it is more advantageous to be a dragonfly than a fish because dragonflies have the broader view and, therefore,

more control over their destiny, more wealth, and more power. They can see the wonders of the universe, while the fish is confined to its own pond. You can *either* languish in the pond with the *inferior* fish or thrive in the universe with the *superior* dragonfly.

4. *It sets up moral dichotomies* by imposing an either/or good-versus-evil dichotomy and the illusion of a linear top (superior) versus bottom (inferior). These culturally constructed moral overlays deem dragonflies superior, hence *good*, and the inferior fish as *evil*. The fish might easily be annihilated by self-righteous dragonflies wishing to rid the world of fishy evil.
5. *It encourages discrimination* along this same hierarchical structuring. Dragonflies as a group are deemed superior to fish, encouraging discrimination against fish.
6. *It confuses human-made laws for the laws of nature*. The dragonfly, the statement implies, is *biologically* superior because it can survive both on land and in water, while the fish is strictly aquatic. Nothing is mentioned about the “bigger picture,” the interconnecting roles each play in sustaining a balanced ecosystem.
7. *It metaphorically expresses ideological dichotomies*. The fish and dragonfly could represent opposing ideologies. The fish could conjure up partisan images of conservatism, tradition, stasis, and resistance, while dragonflies could connote etherealness, change, dynamic capitalism, globalism, and flexibility. On a political level, fish and dragonflies might represent a two-party system that divides people into two political types, for example, Democrats versus Republicans, Red States versus Blue States, and so forth.
8. *Dualistic thinking does not recognize ambiguity*. According to the limitations of this either/or logic, it is impossible to possess the attributes of both creatures at the same time, or the attributes of neither, or the attributes of both and neither, or the ever-evolving attributes of both. The choice is reduced to either/or — you can *either* be fish *or* dragonfly.

Dynamical Systems of Interpretation

Let us consider the possibility that opposites are human constructs. What we once considered to be opposites, such as art and science, are but aspects of the same continuous and ever-changing whole. Alfred Appel (1967: 141) quotes the famed novelist, critic, and lepidopterist, Vladimir Nabokov, as having said, “There is no science without fancy and no art without fact.” Revolutionary art and visionary physics, for example, are both investigations into the nature of reality (Shlain 1991). Dynamical systems of interpretation expand our perception of reality to include complexity. They help us to transcend limitations imposed by a dualistic frame of reference. Adversaries who

are unaware of their tendency to think in dualities often fail to appreciate the complexities, intricacies, details, history, time, place, etiquette, protocol, ideology, personal taste, and varying sensitivities that surround any conflict scenario. Understanding a confrontation in its total complexity requires flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to imagine the long-term as well as the immediate consequences of a decision.

Any effort to combine theories from diverse disciplines is risky; it is easy to become bogged down in their unique terminologies. Physics and art, for example, each have a distinct lexicon. Often, however, the terms of one can be applied to the concepts of the other. *Volume, space, mass, force, light, color, tension, relationship, and density* are words that both a physicist and an artist might use to describe their particular realities (Shlain 1991). Because I am not a scientist but a human communication specialist, I define each dynamical system discussed in this essay specifically as it applies to human communication, in general, and to conflict resolution, in particular. The systems described in this essay can be used to broaden viewpoints limited by traditional dualistic thinking, to create “states of mind” that can help transcend dualism, its limitations, and its impact on conflict before, during, and after the negotiation process.

General Semantics

Korzybski (1933), the originator of the theory of general semantics, maintained that Aristotelian logic inhibits human social development and impedes productive human communication. In his treatise, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, he suggests that humanity’s creative potential and problem-solving capabilities were undermined by the academically revered and ubiquitously exercised Aristotelian formulations of logic.

Johnson (1946) described Aristotelian logic as either/or thinking. He suggested that everyday issues, conflicts, and experiences are not as sharply defined as either/or, nor can they be evaluated with a two-valued system of thought. Statements involving abstract generalizations can harbor contradiction. For instance, there are as many interpretations of a highly abstract term such as *family values* as there are families.

The first questions one should ask in attempting to deconstruct a simple dichotomous statement are “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” These two questions break down abstract generalizations into subtextual details that reveal the hidden agenda of the speaker (Johnson 1946). Another way of softening the potential for conflict is to recognize how language is constructed. Avoiding the use of words that evoke dualism (see Figure One), in favor of words that describe a given conflict in its true complexity, can reduce tension and lead to solutions. For instance, one could say that terrorists are *desperate, enraged, or mentally deranged*, rather than saying that they are *evil*. More complex descriptions highlight the many possible reasons that individuals become terrorists. The term *evil*

does not lend itself to such examination. It is abstract and absolute, and does not encourage the examination of multiple options.

The Unifying Principle of Transformation

This theory originates in anthroponomics,⁵ which documents the laws of human development in relationship to the environment and to other organisms. According to this theory, transformation (chaos/break point) is a necessary part of the natural bifurcating process by which cells, organisms, humans, and human societies flourish, multiply, and strive toward complex levels of adaptation. Periods of transformation between developmental phases enable the organism to change direction, sometimes radically, in order to survive.

The unifying principle of transformation helps us to understand dualism in the context of biology and human social development. This theory suggests that dualistic thinking, which manifests as a compulsion to categorize and control nature, is characteristic of a single “norming” phase in human social development, which parallels the same linear incremental process toward growth and renewal (caterpillar into butterfly, embryo into fetus) that occurs in all living things (Land and Jarman 1992). Three distinct phases (forming, norming, and fulfilling) of cell evolution are described in this theory and can be applied to human social development. The first is the *forming phase* (prehistoric) when the organism (or human society) searches for initial patterns. This is followed by a period of transformation sometimes referred to as “chaos” or “break point” — without chaos, growth toward stability would be impossible. A break point creates a paradigm shift that propels the organism to the next phase — the *norming phase* (modernity). Here, the organism finds systems that seem to work, and then organizes, repeats, and improves upon already-established linear patterns. Another transformation or break point leads to the third phase — the *fulfilling phase* (postmodernism) — which can only occur after successful forming and norming phases have taken place. The organism then begins to integrate what worked in the first two phases with new information, weaving it all into innovative and interconnecting patterns of mutualism (cooperation, collaboration, interdependency with nature, pluralism, complexity, multifaceted thinking, self-responsibility, and self-governance).

The unifying principle of transformation identifies dualistic thinking as a characteristic of the norming or linear phase in human social development. If combativeness reflects a phase in human social development from which we may soon emerge, then our tendency toward combativeness may not be a fixed human trait at all. We are, according to this theory, constantly evolving toward our fullest potential, which is complexity.

In their book *The Art of Facilitation*, Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey, and Bill Taylor (1995) suggest that democracy is an aspect of the norming or linear phase in governing, an outgrowth of autocracy originating in the

more primitive forming phase. The next, more complex phase in human self-governance, they argue, will be a paradigm shift from a democracy to a “cooperacy,”⁶ a word that describes a government where no authoritative figure, such as a president, is required because each individual is self-governed and adept at integrative collaboration. This may seem unimaginable now, but this integrative collaboration does occur on occasion, especially in times of disaster when established authority vanishes or fails to function. For example, during the most recent New York City blackout in 2003, looting was almost nonexistent. There are many possible explanations as to why New Yorkers chose to govern themselves, but the fact that they were *capable* of governing themselves is most relevant here. Another example is that when traffic lights go out at an intersection, collaboration and self-governance often ensue as individual drivers negotiate how cars will pass and at what intervals. When cooperation supercedes divisiveness for the good of the whole, dualism as we know it, ceases to be.

Fuzzy Thinking Principle

Fuzzy logic breaks down either/or into degrees, eliminating a dichotomy in favor of a continuum. According to this principle, there is no such thing as “true” or “false” because all facts are “fuzzy,” vague, or inexact to some degree (Kosko 1993). Breaking down absolutes allows for an open end, rather than a closed loop (Bohm 1994). In essence, fuzzy logicians argue that it is impossible to state a fact that is completely true or completely false, which contrasts sharply with Aristotelian logic in which if one thing is true, then the other must be false (Kosko 1993).

As a negotiating tactic, the use of fuzzy logic can enable one to back out of a confrontation. It creates space and time to think of alternative options. The language used in negotiation, particularly in diplomacy, can reflect a fuzzy (complex) approach. For example, when discussing why Muslim women wear veils, one could argue that “mandatory veiling curtails a woman’s right to be her own person.” But it might be more effective to use “fuzzier,” more diplomatic speech by saying, “It is possible that . . . ,” “It could be that . . . ,” “I wonder if . . . ,” or “I believe that . . . mandatory veiling curtails a woman’s right to be her own person.”

The acknowledgment that no one can possibly know all the facts regarding a given subject can reduce the potential for conflict by giving the parties more room to maneuver among opposing adversarial positions. This can be especially useful when, for example, attempting to defuse conflict with representatives of another cultural group. If we wish to change another’s cultural practice, for instance, we must first learn about that practice and then accept the possibility that through the learning process our views may change or expand. (For instance, when I learned that the *bijab*, the traditional head scarf that many Muslim women wear, has as many symbolic meanings as there are watershed events in Islamic history, the issue of veiling became more complex for me and less of an either/or.)

Chaos Theory

Chaos theory challenges the idea that order is the opposite of chaos and instead suggests that chaos is one aspect of a *complex kind of order*. But chaos can equal a state of confusion, which, in Western culture at least, is undesirable. Laws are designed to prevent disorder, and disturbance is considered a sign of trouble rather than of growth. Chaos, in fact, is a state of nonequilibrium that plays a critical role in giving birth to higher forms of order (Wheatley 1992).

Chaos theory suggests that there is not only a hidden order in chaos but that chaos and order are interactive and one in the same, and that they catalyze change and growth.⁷ Avoiding conflict may not always facilitate resolution. Disputes or hostilities may indefinitely stagnate. Sometimes it is necessary to *safely* express anger, hurt, and confusion before negotiations can begin.

Field Theory

This theory calls into question the notion that reality is entirely finite and suggests instead that invisible fields of energy unite us all. Field theorists explore the concept of invisible forces that structure space or behavior (Wheatley 1992). Advances in field theory came about when nineteenth-century scientists Michael Faraday and James Maxwell decided to concentrate not on particles but on space. Space, they suspected, was not empty but a “cornucopia of invisible but powerfully effective structures” (Wilczek and Devine 1988: 156). Bohm’s (1994) work on wholeness and implicate order suggests that, at a level we cannot discern, there is an unbroken wholeness, an energy that connects everything with everything else, where the actions of one can influence that of another. The fact that particles can appear and disappear at will is a result of their continual interactions among and between different fields. We may not be able to see these fields, but we do observe their effects. They create action at a distance. One molecule’s movement affects the movement of another.

So too, the actions, cultural traditions, values, vision, and ethics of one individual, organization, or nation can affect many others. Unlike dualistic thinking, which emphasizes otherness, field theory emphasizes interconnections, which inhibit combativeness. It is much easier to attack a stranger than to attack someone you perceive as cosmically connected to you.

Quantum Mechanics

In 1905, Albert Einstein proposed that light could exist in the form of a particle. For more than two hundred years, however, light had been experimentally proven to be a wave. Einstein’s new proposal suggested that light can have two distinct and seemingly opposing natures: one *wave*-like and one *particle*-like. Niels Bohr further developed this idea. He declared “. . . the opposite of a great truth is also true” (Myers 2002: 4). In 1926, Bohr presented his theory of complementarity in which he hypothesized that

light was neither just a wave nor just a particle (photon), but *both* (Shlain 1991). The vocabulary to describe this phenomenon, that something can be both a particle *and* not a particle at the same time, is nonexistent in our Aristotelian dualistic view that categorizes light as either a particle *or* not a particle.

Quantum mechanics opened wide the possibility that nothing stays the same or is what it appears to be, and that something only becomes a reality if we imagine it as such. A photon knows what a scientist is testing for and will adjust its behavior accordingly, the theory goes, revealing itself as a particle or as a wave depending on what the scientist hopes to see. If the scientist's recording apparatus is not on, the photon behaves differently than if it is being recorded. The observer cannot see anything without participating in its creation (Wheatley 1992). This has profound philosophical implications because it means that *we play a role in creating reality*.

When former President Richard M. Nixon toured the People's Republic of China in 1972, representatives of both nations were able to sidestep the either/or conundrum in their negotiations. Fearing that his Secretary of State, William Rogers, would not support his diplomatic agenda, Nixon did not include him in his first historic meeting with Chairman Mao Tsetung. In his place, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger had invited Winston Lord, a young member of his personal entourage. But both Nixon and Kissinger feared political repercussions if Rogers were to be offended or humiliated. The Chinese solved the problem by sidestepping the given reality: they cropped Winston Lord from the photo, "changing history" in the process. Sidestepping the given reality in order to get beyond the immediate conflict can accelerate the negotiation process (*The American Experience: Nixon's China Game* 1999).

Metaphorically, field theory also operates here. Rogers later expressed outrage that he and the members of his State Department had not been privy to the contents of a communiqué Nixon had covertly negotiated with China's Premier Chou En-lai. It would have effectively eliminated U.S. treaty obligations with Taiwan, a policy change that Rogers opposed. The American delegation could not appear split before the international press. Realizing that Nixon had acted on his own at the risk of losing the support of American conservatives in the next election, Chou broke with diplomatic protocol by arriving at Roger's private living quarters unannounced for a discussion between equals. (A premier entering the private quarters of a foreign diplomat was unheard of, especially in the middle of the night.) Rogers was both stunned and pleased. By eliminating the either/or, superior versus inferior ranking of individuals, Chou established a new and more equitable reality. By the end of their meeting, the communiqué had been approved, and the rest is history (*The American Experience: Nixon's China Game* 1999). To a dualistic thinker there is only one, fixed reality. But thinking of a given reality as having multiple facets or interchangeable

parts, or being only one of many realities can enable a negotiator to “invent options for mutual gain” (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991: 56-57).

Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism was brought to China by Bodhidharma (the Buddha), who came from India in the sixth century. It was carried eastward into Japan by the twelfth century. The term *Zen* has taken on a wider meaning in recent years. Beyond a formalized religion, for many it also describes a philosophical perspective “applied to a certain way of thinking, of aesthetics, of living” (Reps 1994: 9) to create a whole, a balance, an equilibrium.

Because we live in a world of words and inherent beliefs, says Zen, we directly lose touch with reality. We live instead in our own *conceptualized* reality. Musician and science writer David Darling (1996) suggests that our minds are so overloaded with notions of cause and effect, subject and object, and life and death that we feel detached and alienated from the world as it is and from the solutions of problems that arise from our own misconceptions. If we think of Western logic and systems of thought as Aristotelian, then Zen can be thought of as post-Aristotelian thinking that encourages the experience of what reality is, without the need to control or resist. Zen is also an important dynamical system of interpretation because it encourages self-reflection. Introspection is a way of knowing others, by knowing one’s self. Rules that are too rigid and precise limit flexibility, leaving no room to change or grow — in life or in a negotiation.

Arguably, one of former President John F. Kennedy’s actions in response to the Cuban missile crisis in October 1961 offers examples of a number of dynamical systems of interpretation, including Zen-like thinking, in an effort to resolve conflict. Before they would negotiate the removal of their missiles from Cuba, the Soviets had requested that the United States remove its nuclear weapons from Turkey, which was unacceptable to Kennedy. His joint chiefs-of-staff suggested an air strike against Cuba, and Kennedy drafted an aggressive response to former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, stating that the U.S. could not remove the missiles from Turkey. What else could the Soviets do but respond in kind? An either/or dynamic had been established, both parties were focused on defending their positions, and the world seemed headed for disaster.

In his book *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Robert Kennedy (1969) writes that Ted Sorensen, one of the president’s aides, suggested that he simply ignore the most recent Soviet letter and the reality of its either/or positioning as if it had never been received — in effect rolling back time by answering a previous letter, which contained less posturing and indicated a greater willingness to negotiate. This gave both parties a chance to step back from the either/or positions they had taken. Khrushchev responded with an impassioned letter about saving the world from nuclear catastrophe, and an agreement was reached.

Zen thinking or “mindfulness” is becoming more popular in the legal profession and has many adherents among conflict resolution experts. Leonard Riskin (2002) writes that meditation can help lawyers, law students, and clients. Most lawyers and arbitrators, Riskin writes, have been schooled in either/or “adversarial” approaches that rest on a belief in scarcity and separation, supported by the assumption that parties’ interests are strictly opposed, which means that whatever one gains, the other loses. In such “win-lose” approaches, negotiators tend to assert positions based on legal or moral entitlements, or power. Practicing Zen meditation can weaken the adversarial mind-set, enabling lawyers to widen their frame of reference to include broader and deeper perspectives, strengthening their listening and negotiation skills for the benefit of their clients.

Conclusion

Advances in science and technology are changing the way we view the world. So, too is globalization, which puts people around the world in greater contact with those from distant places and different cultures. These changes may create conflict, but they also create opportunities to resolve conflicts in new ways. The Internet and other new media facilitate communication, just as efforts to create equality for women, and previously disempowered minority groups give “voice” to the concerns and ideas of people who were previously silent. This rich diversity,⁸ some argue, will encourage complex systems like world economies to self-organize⁹ and interconnect in unimaginable ways (Sardar and Abrams 1998).

These developments catapult us across dualism’s synthetic borders, which have shaped our prejudices, beliefs, and ideologies for thousands of years toward frameworks that instead encourage pluralism, mutualism, and complexity. We are becoming members of a global community that will demand a more complex approach toward collaboration, cooperation, and thinking beyond the false dichotomy of either/or.

To advance communication beyond the either/or, we need to: (1) be cognizant of our propensity to think in dualities, (2) recognize dualistic thinking as a transient phase in the context of human social development, (3) learn to recognize and deconstruct the dualisms embedded in our language and cultural traditions, (4) realize the role dualism plays in creating irresolvable conflict, and (5) become familiar with dynamical systems of interpretation that can assist not only in resolving conflict, but in preventing it.

Noting the difficulties that humans face in adjusting to a more complex, multifaceted worldview, Albert Einstein wrote:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The delusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free

ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is, in itself, a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security (Darling 1996: 156).

Although speaking specifically of physics, Einstein could well have been making a case for the need to transcend dualism and think more dynamically in the pursuit of solutions to difficult conflicts.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, s.v. "Dualism."
2. *Modernity* in this context is not to be confused with modernity as modernism. Modernity as modernism describes a historical shift in Western European social structure and intellectual transformation beginning in the seventeenth century. Here, modernity defines a phase in human social development that can only take us so far before self-awareness and clear-sightedness discloses its impossibility, thus paving the way toward another more integrated phase in human social development, a postmodern reassessment or postmodernism.
3. The method of *principled negotiation* consists of four areas of focus: separate the people from the problem; focus on interests, not positions; invent options for mutual gain; and insist on using objective criteria (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991: 15).
4. Peter Russell (1982: 10) has scrutinized global communication as a technological breakthrough in which the individual or group is able to create new data by putting old pieces of information together in new configurations of alternatives so that they may contribute to a larger group. "Rather than simply developing 'himself,' man is contributing toward the group that is developing itself. This is a pattern of generative order."
5. The unifying principle of transformation, as it applies to human social development, is anthropomorphic (Land 1973).
6. "The shift from democracy to cooperacy is of the same magnitude as the historical shift from feudalism to democracy and will be as big a cultural shift . . . in personal development terms as the shift from dependency through independency to interdependency" (Hunter, Bailey, and Taylor 1995: 3).
7. Chaos theory encompasses a wide range of interdisciplinary research that includes work in such fields as nonlinear dynamics, irreversible thermodynamics, meteorology, and epidemiology. It is generally understood as the study of complex systems where two general emphases exist: (1) Chaos is seen as order's precursor and partner, rather than its opposite. There is a spontaneous self-organization from chaos and a ". . . realization that entropy-rich systems facilitate rather than impede self-organization. . . . [This] was an important turning point in the contemporary reevaluation of chaos" (Hayles 1990: 9). (2) The second branch emphasizes the hidden order that exists within chaotic systems (Hayles 1990). Chaos can also be described in the unifying principle as "break-points," or periods of transformation moving an organism (human society), from one phase of development to another (Land and Jarman 1992).
8. Diversity creates an open loop providing the organism (human society) with a plentiful variety of creative possibilities (the infusion of subtle orders), hence ensuring many options for survival (Bohm 1994).
9. Self-organization occurs throughout nature, allowing us to spontaneously self-organize on a global scale as would any group of atoms, molecules, cells, or flock of birds (Sardar and Abrams 1998).

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