

## **Polarities and Ego Development:**

### **Polarity Thinking In Ego Development Theory And Developmental Coaching**

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This paper explores the relationship between how people mature and how they navigate the phenomenon of polarities as they develop. We look at how adults make meaning of their experience through opposites.

Thinking in opposites is pervasive and deeply embedded in how we make sense of experience. How we become aware of this tendency and how this relates to human development is the issue we are going to explore. We posit that movement towards integrating and transcending interdependent opposites is a core aspect of enacting an Integral perspective.

The questions we raise here are the following: First, how and to what degree do opposites and polarities play a role in meaning making? Second, are there stage-specific polarities in ego development theory that adults must navigate; and if so, what are they? Third, is there a relationship between a stage of development and how individuals deal with opposites and polarities? Below, we explore these questions.

In addition, we thought it fascinating to see how our understanding of the concept of opposites evolves along the developmental path. To conclude, we will advocate the value of intentionally working with polarities as a developmental lever, in service of a more integral enactment and unfolding.

### **Introduction**

Most people are not aware of the fact that mental growth without the intermediary of a shared language has never been observed. We can only navigate experience and

communicate with each other by reducing the infinite number of stimuli we receive into nameable objects. Whenever we pull something out of the undivided phenomenological continuum we automatically create the object (A) and its opposite (not-A). Describing experience in dualistic terms is inevitable in the everyday discursive realm. In one of his earlier books, *No boundary*, Ken Wilber (1979) has elucidated in detail our tendency to frame reality in terms of opposites.

That much of human suffering is caused by the mental mechanism that splits experience into discernable opposites such as good and bad, light and dark, pleasure and pain has been known since ancient times. Inherent in our meaning making is the ascribing of value to desirable and undesirable aspects of experience, as we become socialized members of a human community. Our tendency to have preferences along with moral judgments creates the situation where we prefer one aspect of experience over its opposite. This privileging is a deeply rooted aspect of human meaning making.

Suffering, the Buddha explained, is caused by our attachments. These are often framed in terms of opposites, and our attachment for one or the other. We hope to eliminate evil by striving to be perfectly good. We hope to avoid death by trying to extend the human life span ever further. As we mature, we learn that our framing of experience in 'either-or' terms is limiting of our understanding of life, that sometimes joy and sorrow reside in our hearts simultaneously. We begin to notice that what we hitherto separated as mutually exclusive choices are interdependent dimensions of one reality in which one concept can only be known through the other. Eventually some of us learn to embrace an unfiltered experience of reality beyond our constructions and symbolic representations.

### **Symbolic representation, meaning and development**

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

And God *called the light Day*, and the darkness he *called Night*. [Emphasis ours]

These are the first words from the *Book of Genesis*. We notice that with creation comes the naming of what is created. After the initial creation, God tells Adam to go out and name all the animals and plants in his domain and thus gain dominion over them. This move of distinguishing one thing from another, and naming it is a fundamental move in development, one especially emphasized in ego-development theory. It looks at continuing growth as (a) making progressively finer distinctions and differentiations, and (b) as making into a named object what was previously undifferentiated and unconscious. The theory postulates that the later the development, the more subtle distinctions a person can make and the more of his external and internal world can be described and shared. Indeed, the story of Genesis itself is a demonstration of progressive differentiation. The mandate given to Adam of naming of the denizens of the Garden of Eden continues the process of differentiation. Starting from a simple dualistic split of the underlying continuum – such as light & dark, day and night, positive & negative -- progressive differentiation and elaboration lead us away from the undifferentiated beginnings to ever greater knowledge and control over the world.

Overall, progressive differentiation is part of acquiring a shared language and learning to describe what is seen as real and important (and what is not) in any given speech community. Every child gets initiated into language within the first two years of life. Within a few years language becomes the primary means for comprehending experience and describing what we can differentiate and hold as object. An observer recognizes that a child has grown when s/he uses new words to distinguish what was undifferentiated before. The move of making into an object that which was subject is fundamental in developmental theory.

Meaning making also relies on the process of comparing and contrasting by noticing similarities and differences. As we grow, we learn to distinguish what is similar from what is different in order to construct a mental or symbolic map of reality. In other words, our primary task as meaning makers is to construct a coherent self and world map. As we develop, we see and describe more, and with ever greater subtlety. Ego development theory postulates that the more complex and integrated a map of reality we have internalized, the more developed we are. However, the mechanism of progressive differentiation and elaboration inevitably approximates a limit beyond which further differentiations become absurdly complex or experientially meaningless.

So we see that the journey of growth and understanding starts with learning to name things according to the language of our surround. This understanding can culminate with the recognition that we have been relying on representational maps, labels and constructs as a substitute for a direct experience of what is.

### **Basics of Ego-Development Theory**

Ego-development theory is a theory about the recognizable stories human beings tell about who they are, what is important to them, where they are going and what they

conceive the world and reality to be. It explores how people make different meaning of the lives they live. The construct of ego is seen to be at the heart of the human meaning making drive. According to ego development theory, the ego has two functions (Funk, 2000). 1. The *ego as processor* perceives, mediates, orchestrates, metabolizes, and digests both outer and inner experience throughout development up to the subtlest distinctions in the transcendent realm. The ego is thus seen as the tireless story teller, the essential meaning maker. 2. The *ego as representation*, on the other hand, integrates all strands of experience in order to tell a coherent self story. It does so to create a permanent and solid self-identity to stave off the fear of non-being and impermanence.

Observation has shown that there is a pattern to the stories the ego tells across the developmental trajectory. The depth, complexity and scope of our perspectives, of what we know and are aware of can evolve through out life. As one matures, the ego tells a new story about who 'I am' and how 'reality works'. Ego-development theory charts this path of changing self-representations or self-stories. It distinguishes nine different stages of adult development, each a discrete level of self-identification. People at each stage make meaning in unique ways that are qualitatively different from the stages before. Each later stage constitutes a transformation of the previous perspective, that is, it includes and transcends the earlier view.

This is what we see when we analyze responses to the SCTi-MAP (Sentence Completion Test Integral - Maturity Assessment Profile –MAP for short), an instrument that measures the stages of adult development. The MAP is based on the premise that our language reflects the complexity of our map of reality and the level of differentiation and integration we have attained. Loevinger (1970) first charted many of the stages of

development from responses to the Washington Sentence completion Test (WUSCT) by noticing the patterns of increasing cognitive and verbal differentiation and integration.

One of the tenets of ego development theory is that we cannot make meaning without symbolic representations, the most powerful and ubiquitous of which is natural language. Natural language is the most complete of all symbolic representations and is used to explain all other systems of symbolic notation from dance to mathematics. Natural Language is our irreducible primary means of conceptualizing and giving name to our experience and our way of comprehending what we experience. In summary, we posit that language, progressive differentiation and integration are inextricably linked to human development.

### **Definitions of terms**

As is custom in scientific discourse, we define<sup>1</sup> in the following the most salient related terms we will use. 1. Opposites 2. Different kinds of opposites: (a) Value-neutral and (b) Value-laden. 3. Polarities and Multarities.

#### **1. Opposites**

*Definition of opposite:* The Merriam-Webster dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) gives us the following definition for “opposite”: “Being the other of a pair that are corresponding or complementary in position, function, or nature”. We could add: different in qualities, direction, result, or significance. The two elements that comprise an opposite, are often called its poles.

Opposites can be: (a) ‘Value-neutral’ and (b) ‘Value-laden’.

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<sup>1</sup> Notice how all the words that are synonymous with definition contain roots relating to boundaries: de-finition (= Latin ‘fines’ (boundary); demarcation (= mark stone, separating territories); delineate (putting in a line)

(a) Value-neutral opposites are descriptive, without an evaluative component, such as long – short, big – small, wet – dry, inside – outside, up - down, boy - girl. Children learn these distinctions very early. Neither of the poles has an intrinsic positive or negative meaning. Neither pole is better or worse, more or less desirable than the other<sup>2</sup>.

(b) ‘Value-laden opposites’ are those that apply to any apparently opposing, adverse, contradictory or tension producing value pairs that each have a positive or negative value ascribed to them. Children absorb these value-laden distinctions as part of socialization and acculturation from the beginning. They are to be “nice” and not “naughty”; “clean” and not “dirty”. They learn that exhibiting one pole gets rewarded while its opposite earns disapproval or punishment. Soon we cannot help but overlay the ‘good-bad’ distinction on all of our experiences.

In general, once socialized via language into a value system, one feels naturally drawn to those values that are sanctioned as desirable or morally superior. Some of these values may be common or shared across cultures, others differ from culture to culture. For example, in most societies we give meaning to the word ‘strong’ or ‘firm’ as being good, desirable, positive. What is not strong or firm then becomes seen as weak – which is associated with being bad, undesirable, and negative. When one pole within a pair of opposites has a positive value, and its opposite pole has a negative value or vice versa, we have a value-laden opposite that we call ‘mixed’ opposite. Other examples are:

Ordered (positive value) - chaotic (negative value)

Flexible (positive value) – rigid (negative value)

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<sup>2</sup> However, because meaning is em’bodied’ in metaphor, even seemingly neutral opposites can quickly become value-laden as we associate, for instance, ‘up’ with the gesture of ‘thumbs up’ and approval, and its opposite ‘thumbs-down’ and disapproval.

These distinctions become part of our repertoire of preferences. Whenever the undesirable pole is felt, we try to eliminate it, to ignore it so as not to experience the tension it creates or the feelings of being inadequate or unworthy.

## **2. Polarities and Multarities.**

*Definition of Polarity:* When both poles within a pair of opposites have a positive or neutral value, we call it a polarity. In this case, both poles are seen to be desirable, and necessary for a system to thrive over time. Thus we can refine the definition for a polarity to mean: “An interdependent pair of two poles that are both desirable and required over time for a sustainable self and system.”<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we will use the symbol ‘&’ between poles we name in a polarity to indicate that the pair we speak of is a pair of interdependent positive or neutral opposites. For example:

Firm (positive pole) & Yielding (positive opposite)

Ordered (positive pole) & Flexible, Organic (positive opposite)

This is important because it is polarities as defined here, that we are investigating in this context of human meaning making and development. When we work with polarities, we are working deeply with meaning making and our preferences and values.

*Definition of multarity:* While a polarity refers to two interdependent poles, we call it a multarity when multiple poles or polarities are interlaced. We often notice multarities in theories and frameworks which include interdependencies of more than two elements or poles, where all of the multiple elements are needed for a healthy, balanced self/system. For example, it is important to pay attention to body & heart & mind & spirit in order to understand human beings. Another example of a multarity is the structure of AQAL. The

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<sup>3</sup> We credit this part of the definition of polarities and the polarity dynamics to Barry Johnson (1996).

integral framework is rooted in two fundamental polarities that characterize human consciousness: Interior & exterior, individual & collective.

### **Working with and integrating polarities**

Polarities, as we have argued above, emerge from the very basic function of language and how we create meaning and value. Working with polarities is therefore a “language and values clarification” process (Johnson, 1996). Since ego development theory is about meaning making, how we deal and work with polarities becomes a significant dimension to focus on in the context of enhancing our self-awareness and facilitating development. Below we explain the nature and dynamics of polarities briefly for the reader not familiar with this approach. Next we will examine the relationship between polarities and ego-development, and attempt to respond to the questions we raised at the beginning.

We claim that polarities are infinite in number.<sup>4</sup> To reiterate, polarities are interdependent essentially positive pairs – of values, strengths, concepts or constructs. These pairs often get set up as competing with each other for ‘rightness’ or ‘bitterness’. All of us acquire and express pole-preferences – i.e. we begin to value one pole of a polarity over the other. Until we have matured beyond a certain stage, we cannot yet see the dynamic or interdependent relationship part and whole - that conceptually they define each other.

Our preferences can become crystallized into patterns we recognize as personality attributes or types as measured for example by the MBTI (1980), the Enneagram, (1996),

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<sup>4</sup> Here are some further well-known examples of polarities: thinking & feeling; masculine & feminine; individual & collective; agency & communion; activity & rest; detail & big picture; centralized & autonomous; stability & change, vision & reality, objective & subjective.

the Big Five (1992). In addition, to personality types our pole preferences are influenced by all aspects that contribute to the variability of human beings: historical, geographical, cultural and linguistic context, family history, biological differences, individual orientations, preferred sensory modalities as well as special gifts and talents. Since the Renaissance, humans in the West have been encouraged to develop strong values and preferences and to know their likes and dislikes. This was seen as a necessary part of gaining self-knowledge and a well-defined self-identity to become independent agents and participants in modern society.

To clarify further what we mean by polarities, a specific example can serve to describe their general structure and nature.

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Figure 1  
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Each pole in a polarity carries a wisdom or value (upside). In the polarity of firm & yielding, being assertive and strong are upsides of being firm, being cooperative and flexible are upsides of being yielding. When we overfocus on being firm to the exclusion of being yielding, we get a downside: we are seen as rigid and unbending. By the same token, if we overfocus on being yielding to the exclusion of being firm, we get a downside: we may be judged as being irresolute and push-overs.

When one pole of a pair becomes a preferred pole, its interdependent opposite gets excluded, neglected or rejected. We tend to describe the opposite pole in terms of the downsides - of what would result if we overfocused on it to the exclusion of the pole we prefer. It thus tends to be seen in negative terms only and its value or wisdom remains hidden or overlooked. We begin to avoid the opposite for fear of its downside. This is a

manifestation of the either-or mindset we absorbed as part of our acculturation. We automatically assume that to pay attention to the opposite pole means we have to neglect the pole we value. This polarization prevents us from seeing the inherent wisdom and value of the excluded opposite. When we believe that being firm is ‘better’ than being yielding, we fail to see adequately the positive aspects of the latter. When we encounter others who value the opposite pole of our own preferred pole, we disagree with them. We can sometimes even recognize our own preferences by our reaction of disagreement, disbelief, or disdain for those who value the opposite pole. Over time, our either-or judgments and preferences get anchored in subtle ways in how we describe experience and can thus be detected by careful listening or by language-based instruments like the MAP.

When we observe polarities at play over time or between different constituents, we see an oscillation between the two poles in a dynamic that looks like an infinity loop.

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Figure 2

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The infinity loop illustrates the nature of all polarities. The stronger we value one pole, the more we fear its loss and reject its opposite. This tendency is symptomatic of an either-or mindset. An either-or mindset carries the belief that we have to choose one or the other pole. We fear we will lose our current identity if we allow for alternative perspectives. This kind of fear of loss of what we identified with and hold precious is re-experienced in different forms at every stage transition.

Often, as one focuses on one pole, one reaches the limits (downside) of that pole, making the upside of the interdependent opposite pole *temporarily* attractive and looking

as the natural solution to the current experience. However, what prevents us from embracing the opposite value is the very same tendency – that is, to believe that to do so would mean a loss of our long-preferred and valued pole. Thus we feel the internal resistance that prevents us from exploring the opposite as we remain attached to the wisdom of our own pole.

Taking one pole or one point of view as the complete picture or ‘the whole truth’ translates into an inability to transcend our current position and limits further growth. This inability to re-view and find what may be valuable in what we exclude, can lead to developmental arrest. Therefore, we advocate that supporting individuals to move towards more inclusive, ‘both-and’ thinking can facilitate development.

Moreover, practicing ‘both-and’ thinking is another way of introducing alternative perspectives. Expanding one’s perspectives is advocated by Wilber as one of the most effective and reliable ways of supporting personal growth (personal communication, June 15, 2010). We will later show how ‘both-and’ thinking is also often a marker of postconventional development.

In summary, all polarities contain two equally important points of view in which each point of view has inherent wisdom, but neither tells the whole story.

### **Polarities and Ego Development Theory**

As human beings, we are all subject to ‘the polarity dynamic’ regardless of our stage of development. We interpret our experiences in value-laden terms and are subject to the tensions we generate with our preferences. And yet, how tightly we hold on to them, how we judge others’ preferences, how strongly we invest in either-or perspectives and how attached we are to one pole or the other– these can all be indicators of a particular

stage of development. Tracking a person's stated or implicit preferences in their responses to the MAP is one criteria we use to assess their level of ego maturity.

In the central part of this paper we will investigate three ways of how polarities can be salient in ego development. 1. We examine an overarching polarity that at the heart of the entire developmental trajectory. 2. We show how the move from an either-or perspective at the conventional stages expands to include a both-and perspective at the postconventional stages. 3. At the most granular level, we will also suggest some stage-specific pole preferences *within* each stage of development.

Finally, in addition to the above inquiry, we take a further perspective. We explore how the development of the concept of polarities itself can be traced along the developmental trajectory. We outline this movement in figure 5. We will conclude by making a case for working with polarities in order to gain developmental leverage in the coaching process.

Although we point to polarities that manifest at both a meta level, and at the level of each stage, we would like to emphasize that polarities are fractal in nature and show up at all levels of meaning making.

### **1. An Overarching Polarity – Differentiation & Integration**

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Figure 3

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Ego development theory postulates that human beings develop through phases of differentiation & integration. As figure 3 shows<sup>5</sup>, human beings develop from the

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<sup>5</sup> Different figures to illustrate aspects of development must also be seen as different mappings of reality that vary according to the emphasis we want to make. They are also part of the symbolic representations that serve us for orientation.

unconscious symbiotic union with the mother at birth via progressive differentiation and self-delineation towards the highest of the conventional stages, the Conscientious<sup>6</sup>. Thus the first five adult stages of development, from Impulsive to Conscientious, show an overall trend of differentiation between self and other/environment. The Conscientious stage is generally considered to be *the* adult stage in Western societies and is assumed to be attained in early adulthood. Research during the last fifty years, however, has shown that adults can grow beyond the conventional stages and that such growth can be classified. In ego development theory this movement after the conventional stages is described as a process of deconstruction of previously held views towards a greater and greater integration. The four postconventional stages, from Pluralist through Unitive, show an overall trend of assimilation and integration towards an ever more conscious sense of belongingness and unity with the ground. Thus, the sequence of differentiation (first part of journey) to integration (second part) characterizes the overall arch of development. We observe that the first half of development represents the differentiation pole, and when the limits of differentiation are reached, a natural move towards Integration occurs, without the wisdom of which the developmental journey is incomplete.

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Figure 4

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The differentiation & integration polarity can also be observed to operate *between* one stage of ego development and the next. We see this manifest as a pattern in figure 4, where every other stage (Self-protective, Self-conscious, Pluralist, Construct-aware) is

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<sup>6</sup> Piaget (1952) calls the corresponding level of reasoning formal operations, Kegan (1982) calls the parallel stage the self-authoring mind

characterized by the move to differentiate itself from the previously achieved integration.

The Conformist, Conscientious, Autonomous, Unitive stages, in contrast, reflect stages of a new integration. Angyal (1965) and Bakan (1966) identified the integration & differentiation polarity as being at the root of the human need to fulfill the double drive towards autonomy (independence, agency) and homonomy (belonging, communion)<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally, we see that the balance between this basic human need for both autonomy and homonomy is negotiated differently by different people at each stage of development. A greater or lesser need for agency or communion also operate *within each* stage influenced by individual and cultural differences.

## **2. Polarity dynamic between the conventional and postconventional**

What sets apart the conventional from postconventional meaning making is the move from a mostly *either-or* to an *either-or & both-and* mindset. Indeed, increasing capacity to integrate polarities is an aspect of postconventional meaning making. We see some typical and specific polarities at play as well. Looking at these polarities, we see that one pole is attended to predominantly in the conventional realm, and its opposite pole gets integrated in the move to a more expanded and mature perspective in the postconventional realm. We list below the most fundamental of these polarities.

*Part & whole:* Individuals at conventional stages tend to orient towards a ‘part’ of the system, rather than the ‘whole’. Meaning is derived by breaking down reality into manageable units. Analysis (Greek ‘ana-lysis’ = cutting apart) is the primary mechanism to achieve this separation into parts. We begin to see expanding perspectives and greater

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<sup>7</sup> Ego development theory tends to describe this dynamic in terms of what one is separating or differentiation from and what one is integrating toward (Cook-Greuter, 1990).

whole-orientation at the postconventional stages, when individuals begin to understand how they are not only separate and ‘apart’, but also ‘a part’ of a larger whole.

Once the move towards the whole is made at the Pluralist stage, we can often see a rejection of the ‘part’ orientation and a preference for only looking at the whole. This is again symptomatic of an either-or mindset that was absorbed at the conventional stages of meaning making. People with a recently acquired post-conventional perspective may initially resist any ‘atomistic’ or ‘reductionist’ view of reality. Only with further development can the former perspective be integrated and made use of as one discovers that there is no inherent ‘wrongness’ of focusing on the part. Instead there is value in paying attention to it, just not exclusively. Seeing the relevance of both part and whole helps us understand reality and is a necessary step in the journey of ego development.

*Self & other:* This same part-whole orientation can be seen in the conventional stages as an attention on one’s own needs and self (part) or the needs of one’s tribe, nation (whole). In each case, the embrace of others is a limited one that excludes others that do not belong to *my* group. At the conventional stages, this also manifests as an ‘us-versus-them’ mindset where the boundaries are clearly specified. Integration at the post-conventional level occurs with the realization that we are more interdependent than we assumed, and that we exist in relationship and communion with others as an intrinsic aspect of who we are. This includes an ever greater awareness that we could not make sense of experience without a shared language and culture. The Autonomous stage is the first of the postconventional stages that is fully aware of the complex interdependence of self-others and parts-wholes.

*Outer & inner, objective & subjective:* In the early conventional stages expression is more concrete and action-based. Emphasis is on what is outside, what is observable. At

the Self-conscious and Conscientious stages, a belief in scientific objectivity becomes increasingly important. The Self-conscious stage focuses on expertise and skills rather than inner life. Truth resides outside and is invested in external authorities. Although a serious interest in objective self-knowledge is seen at the Conscientious mindset, the inward search truly begins with the Pluralist. Here one can become aware of one's cultural conditioning. With this, one realizes the impossibility of being objective. At the later postconventional stages, a growing awareness of contradiction and paradox within the self parallels a recognition of contradictions in the external systems and between internal and external realities. It must be noted that at each stage, whether conventional or postconventional, we may also see stylistic or typological orientations that favor the outer or the inner (for example: extrovert, introvert). However, looking at ego-development overall, there is a profound turn towards one's inner life and a need to tell a story about it beginning with the Pluralist stage.

*Short-term & long-term; linear & non-linear:* A short-term view dominates the conventional realm, and results in reactive problem-solving. Longer term consequences and systemic impact are not attended to. With this preference of short-term problem solving, comes a reliance on pure reason and a focus on linear causality. The postconventional perspective, on the other hand, allows the discovery of non-linear relationships and circular causality. The need for closure, definite action and predictability loosens its hold. At the Autonomous stage and beyond, belief in permanent fixes diminishes while considerations of both long-term historical influences and impact on the well-being of future generations become important. Moreover, mindful action can be taken with due consideration of multiple time frames, levels of impact and various contexts.

*Absolute & relative:* People at the Conscientious stage begin to be able to hold multiple views and conceive of complex systems. Nonetheless, the focus is on objective descriptions and the discovery of the underlying absolute laws of nature and regularities in people's behavior. At the postconventional stages, there is a new sense of the freedom from absolutistic thinking. Now the emphasis shifts to noticing the differences and the relativity in experience, perspectives, and the multitudes of ways to be a human being. When taken to an extreme, the conclusion is that no point of view is more valid or better than any other. "It's all relative," is a quintessentially postmodern stance. An integration beyond "absolute" relativism occurs at the Autonomous and later stages. Now, despite the recognition of general uncertainty, one can and must make informed choices and be able to justify them based on multiple criteria. These include, but are not limited to, ethical principles and clarity about what is needed for the system as well as consideration of short- and long-term impacts of a given course of action.

All of the above polarities also play out within each stage, yet the broader pattern is significant in helping us define and characterize what is essentially more conventional or more postconventional meaning making. Of course, any one of the basic pole preferences above cannot singularly define where an individual is in terms of stage development. We require evidence of a number of other indices that collectively contribute to an assessment of someone having a specific worldview.

### **3. Polarities at play within each stage of development**

At each stage of development, we can again discern how human beings navigate the phenomenon of polarities and their dynamic.

Whatever the stage we are at, we might consciously or unconsciously hold on to one pole, unaware of what we exclude. The current perspective provides us with a sense

of self and certainty and with a set of clear values. When we grow beyond the confines of the current stage, we can begin to sense the value of a pole that becomes salient at the next stage of development. Once we have entered a new stage, we often consciously reject the pole we embraced at the previous stage because we are now aware of its limits and downsides. We are naturally drawn to the benefits of exploring the newly discovered perspective and to privilege the new insights into what is important.

We list below a few ‘typical’ polarities that are in the foreground of experience for each stage. In each case, we identify the pole that is embraced and unconsciously or consciously preferred. We indicate the opposite pole that is neglected or rejected either because of our current inability to recognize its potential benefit or because of the fear of its downside.

Table 1. Embraced and neglected poles at different ego stages

	<i>Embraced Pole</i>	<i>Neglected Pole</i>
<i>Self-protective</i>	Self-interest/needs	Others'-interests/needs
	Doing	Thinking/Reflecting
	Acting	Planning
	Externalizing responsibility	Taking responsibility
<i>Conformist:</i>	Other (care)	Self (care)
	‘Us’	‘Them’
	External features	Internal qualities
	Compliance	Assertion
	Standards/Rules	Context/flexibility
<i>Self-Conscious:</i>	Received knowledge	Examined knowledge
	Knowing	Reflecting
	Advocacy	Inquiry
	Unilateral/My way	Collaborative/Others' way
	Efficiency	Effectiveness
<i>Conscientious:</i>	Planned	Emergent
	Linear causality	Non-linear interrelationships
	Future-oriented	Here and now

Discernment	Intuition
Objective	Subjective

With the transition from conventional to postconventional, the capacity to see ‘both-and’ and to integrate polarities increases significantly.

Table 2. Postconventional polarities

<i>Pluralist:</i>	<i>Embraced pole</i>	<i>Less preferred pole</i>
	Horizontal	Vertical
	Consensus decision making	Directive decision making
	Being	Doing
	Appreciative	Evaluative
	Personal/subjective	Objective/analytical
	Contextual	Standardized

Integrating many polarities is part of the capacity of the Autonomous level.

Nonetheless, subtle preferences persist because of the value given to an integrated perspective and a recognition of the limitations of the earlier, partial view. This may translate into a reluctance or inability to tap the wisdom of earlier views. The list below identifies some polarities that people at the Autonomous stage might still subtly prefer even though they may have the mental maturity and capacity to integrate them. The last two polarities in the table below are those that individuals at this stage are often blind to.

	<i>Embraced Pole</i>	<i>Less preferred Pole</i>
<i>Autonomous</i>	Overarching system goals	Individual needs/goals
	Dynamic solutions	Linear problem solving
	Principles	Practicality
	Knowing	Mystery
	Seeking	Non-seeking

### The development of one's understanding of the concept of polarities

Having outlined some of the polarities in adult development overall and at individual stages, we now turn our attention to how the concept of opposites itself evolves.

In figure 5 we outline how opposites and polarities are understood, held and transcended at different stages of development. The capacity to deal with opposites evolves from seeing only this or that aspect of experience, to seeing definite either-or possibilities, to more inclusive ways of working with opposites, all the way to dissolving the very definitions and boundaries used to make meaning in our earlier conceptions. With increasing maturity, polarities are consciously embraced and integrated. At the highest levels of ego development individuals, ever alert to paradox, may recognize that the distinction between dualism and non-dualism itself constitutes a dualistic framing.

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Figure 5  
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To illustrate this movement of first increasing complexity of one's understanding of opposites till its eventual transcendence at the Unitive stage, we offer some examples from the MAP.

At the preconventional and early conventional stages (Self-protective & Conformist) people can see only one aspect of reality or its opposite. Attention can only be given to one side of the experience. On MAPs we commonly see descriptions that call out only one or the other of two sides of a situation.

*Raising a family—“is pleasant”. Raising a family—“is a struggle”*

At the next, the Self-conscious stage, we begin to see opposites within the same completion. This shows a beginning recognition and willingness to acknowledge conflicting or opposing aspects within one's mental model of how the self and the world works.

*When I am criticized -- "I feel hurt, but learn"*

At the most differentiated among the conventional stages, the Conscientious, we see evidence of a beginning appreciation of the tension of opposites. Conscientious individuals mention the need to 'juggle' and 'balance' different aspects of their experience. The world is now often described in either/or terms as now at least two contrasting possibilities can be envisioned.

*Raising a family -- "is a juggling act with balancing your work and personal life"*

*When I am criticized – "I try to either disregard it or get back at the person somehow"*

At the Pluralist stage, the underlying investment is in 'multiple' perspectives. People recognize that there are generally more than two possibilities. They may offer lists of ideas including contrasting elements and multiple points of view – each seen as equally important. For the first time, one becomes aware of one's own 'valuing' and interpreting of what is important, and one begins to appreciate both sides of a polarity. Divergent and both/and thinking now seem more adequate than convergent and either/or thinking.

*Raising a family -- "requires that women have many facets: homemaker, confidante, spiritual guide, and the ability to adapt"*

*When I am criticized -- "I sometimes accept it, other times reject it, depending on the person and the nature of the criticism"*

At the Autonomous stage both-and thinking extends to multiple levels of interconnected systems. It is characteristic for this stage to be able to see both parts &

wholes and to choose an either-or framing when needed. For the first time interdependent tensions are understood as inevitable and part of living.

*A good boss -- “knows what needs to be done, gets it done, and is still able to include others to make changes and improvements that impact all levels and parts of the organization”*

At the Construct-aware stage, there is a new awareness of how language itself shapes one's reality and, for the first time, the lines or boundaries one has drawn can be seen for what they are, arbitrary but useful distinctions. Opposites can be embraced because one realizes they necessitate each other. The key to deeper understanding is to find the ground that encompasses and unifies them both. People at the Construct-aware stage can intuit that the need to manipulate opposites to alleviate or solve tensions can be transcended.

*Rules are -- “artificial constructs that we sometimes use to explain (away) reality or to control (the flow of) events – and as our creation, they may thus exist, change or not exist as we wish/need”*

At the Unitive stage, one knows that opposites represent two sides of the same coin, two aspects of one underlying reality. The struggle of opposites is a symptom of our illusion that the boundaries we hold are real; thus the solution to the struggle of the opposites lies in dissolving of all boundaries – even the ultimate one between our map-creating minds and our experience of reality.

*Being with other people—“is not necessarily dependent on proximity (distance) or time for that matter; one could be next to someone and not ‘be’ with them. ‘Being with’ seems more like realizing that an ‘other’ is somehow a part of ‘you’, and ‘you’ are a part of ‘them’ – if only for a moment.”*

For the Unitive person, immediate experience of oneness with the universe and its eternal rhythms of expansion and destruction, birth and death and rebirth, ordinariness and uniqueness, ego awareness and ego-transcendence represents a freedom from the bondage of language and the tensions created by objectifying reality and framing it in dualistic terms.

Summarizing, we see that the conventional mind sees liberation, salvation, or happiness as freedom from the negative whereas the late-stage person sees the futility of the pursuit of freedom from ‘pairs’. The Construct-aware person may also see the performative contradiction in the pursuit of freedom itself, and recognize the imprisonment within that desire. At the highest level of maturity measured by the MAP, one simply witnesses the dance of opposites as one understands their universal nature. One learns to see both poles as two sides of the same experience with an arbitrary boundary between them where neither is positive or negative, more or less valued than the other.

In the words of Ken Wilber (1984) this insight can be described as follows: Reality is “neither One nor Many, neither infinite nor finite, neither whole nor part.” A succinct description of this transcendent understanding of opposites comes from R. D. Laing (1970) “No distinctions, no mind to distinguish.”

### **Developmental leverage using the polarity lens**

Human development is about making sense of our experience in ever more complex and adequate ways. As we name, interpret, ascribe value and meaning to our experience, and as we begin to see what we have not noticed before, we expand our worldview. A continuing capacity to renew the way we see and value, to question our assumptions, to reevaluate our interpretations, and to reframe reality in more comprehensive ways lies at the heart of the developmental process. More specifically,

becoming aware of the wisdom and benefits of the less valued pole of a polarity can be a powerful means to expand one's perspective. The psychodynamic process of owning the disowned releases developmental energy. It allows one to make new meaning by having greater choice and more power to explain a situation than privileging one side of a polarity over the other.

Using the polarity perspective, a coach can help clients make object the preferences that were subject before. This can help them gain a perspective on their identity and the attachments that serve to create that identity. In becoming aware of their preferences, they learn to recognize their fears. Thus using the polarity lens, coaches can help clients to integrate the tensions that result from their preferences. Working with polarities helps both the client and the coach see interdependencies between elements that were held as separate in earlier conceptions. Once one begins to see interdependencies between two elements, one is better able to also recognize them in three, four or more elements and at multiple levels of a system. This facilitates a more systemic understanding of experience.

Thus, at least two developmental tasks at each level can be framed in terms of polarities: (a) to include and integrate what was rejected before and (b) to include and integrate the opposite of what is being currently privileged.

Working with polarities helps people reframe the way they see and how they value what they see. The polarity map is an invitation to:

- examine the wisdom embedded in what may be interpreted as undesirable
- explore the potential downside of what may be interpreted as valuable
- discern the aspects of reality that are excluded, denied or not fully acknowledged when one pole is being privileged

- realize that the downside of the privileged pole is a result of neglecting the opposite pole
- notice that both poles are needed for reaping the full benefits of each in the service of a thriving and sustainable system

As we notice patterns of pole preferences both in people's MAP responses, and in coaching conversations, we can intentionally support greater awareness by working with the client in integrating the particular polarities s/he is consciously or unconsciously expressing. This work can support both horizontal and vertical growth.

When the client is willing, ready and capable, a coach can identify what the *critical pole embrace* for the transition to the next stage might be. To clients at the earlier stages, these are often suggested by the coach. At the later stages, if conscious, these may be worked on in explicit collaboration with the individuals being coached. Or, if deeply hidden, made conscious by the coach. We posit that harmonizing these critical transition polarities provides optimal leverage for vertical development. These may be the polarities that we have identified as typical for various stage transitions, and/or they may be the unique polarities that are salient for a particular individual. It is part of the art of coaching to identify the polarities with the most potential for developmental leverage.

We know from years of research using the MAP that the responses to the sentence beginnings get more and more unique as people move from the early postconventional to the later and higher reaches of maturity. As a consequence, there are fewer and fewer matches with typical responses in the manuals. Similarly, we find that the polarities people grapple with at later stages vary from individual to individual. Thus, at postconventional stages and later, we see that part of the developmental work is to help the individual uncover their unconscious either-or mindsets and make them objects of their awareness.

Explicitly naming and integrating these can be very supportive of fuller integration and can provide great developmental momentum and relief of suffering.

Furthermore, polarity work can help to integrate and heal tensions left undealt with, from previous stages and perspectives. A person at a later stage may need to be working with some polarities from earlier stages at a deeper level of integration than before, one that offers fresh meaning and insight. This can be done intentionally by spotting poles that represent earlier perspectives that continue to be unconsciously rejected. The rejection happens in the belief that including them would be a regression to an earlier stage beyond which one has evolved. For example, the difficulty of Pluralists to be tough with people at the Self-protective stage and directive with those at the Conformist stage reflects a current stage-related pole preference for love, kindness and cooperation that prevents them from being as effective as they could.

In general, working with polarities in developmental coaching can:

- foster the consolidation within a stage
- support transition to the next stage
- serve to re-integrate aspects of earlier stages
- create the awareness and space for potential ongoing transformation

As human beings, we are always subject to blind spots, areas where we don't even realize there is a 'there' there. Subtler and subtler pole-preferences show up even at ego transcendent stages. "My Indian guru is the real deal. She is giving me everything I need. Why would I want to follow anyone else?"

Increasing awareness of how our either-or orientations surface in day to day living, and intentionally integrating opposites is therefore a continuous learning process throughout human development. At the high-end of the growth spectrum, coaching tends

to become a shared exploration of what it means to be a human being. Coach and client engage in an intersubjective dialogue about language, opposites, existential paradox and suffering as these are inherent in meaning making. The coach then mirrors and catalyzes subtler self-exploration. Late stage meaning makers can often embrace, integrate and let go on their own whatever subtle preferences they discover in themselves as unearthing blind spots has become a valued ‘practice.’

### **Conclusion**

We submit that continuously practicing seeing a more ‘complete’ picture of reality is fundamental to being integral. One way of becoming more integral is by learning to identify and integrate polarities within ourselves, in relationship to others, and in whole systems. An understanding of the deeper dynamic within polarities at play, we believe, will inform deeply the practitioners of the Integral model as well as the future of Integral theory.

In this paper we charted multiple views of how opposites and polarities play out in ego development. We started with looking at the overarching movement of differentiation & integration throughout ego development. We then traced the shift that occurs from ‘either-or’ to including ‘both-and’ thinking at the postconventional stages. We also identified stage-specific polarities. Next, we outlined the evolution of the concept of opposites. In the final section, we advocate the use of the polarity perspective in coaching and posit that it can facilitate horizontal and vertical development, both of which are interdependent and germane to human development.

As Wilber wrote in *No boundary* (1979):

When the opposites are realized to be one, discord melts into concord, battles become dances, and old enemies become lovers. We are then in a position to make friends with all of our universe, not just one half of it. (p. 29).

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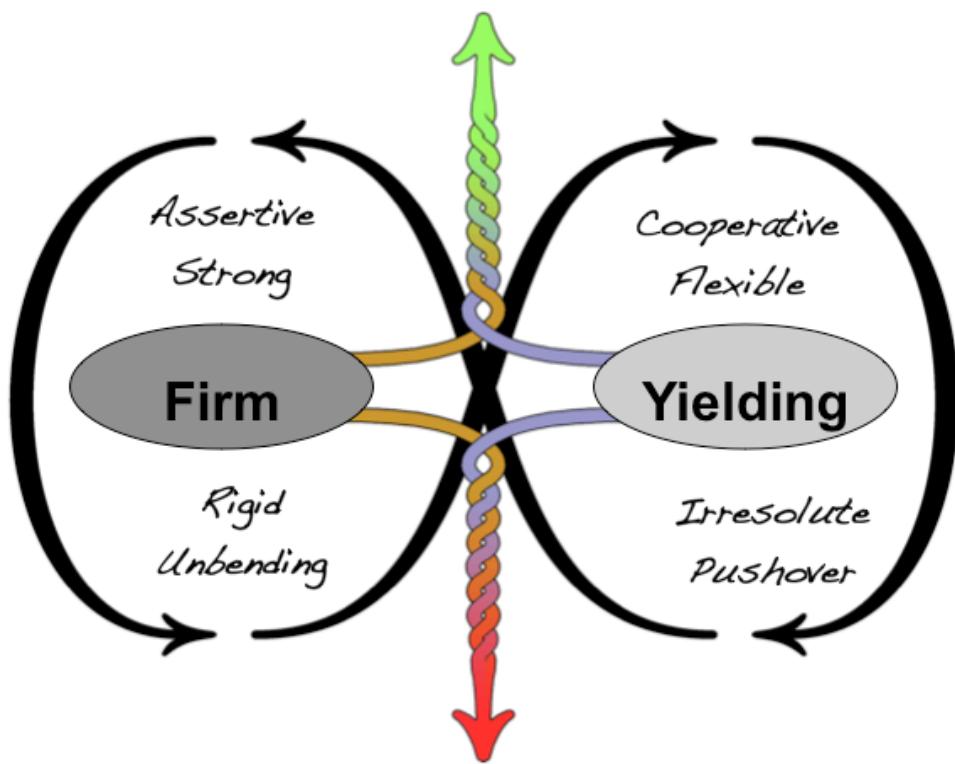


Figure 1 Polarity map (Johnson, 1996) of 'firm' and 'yielding'

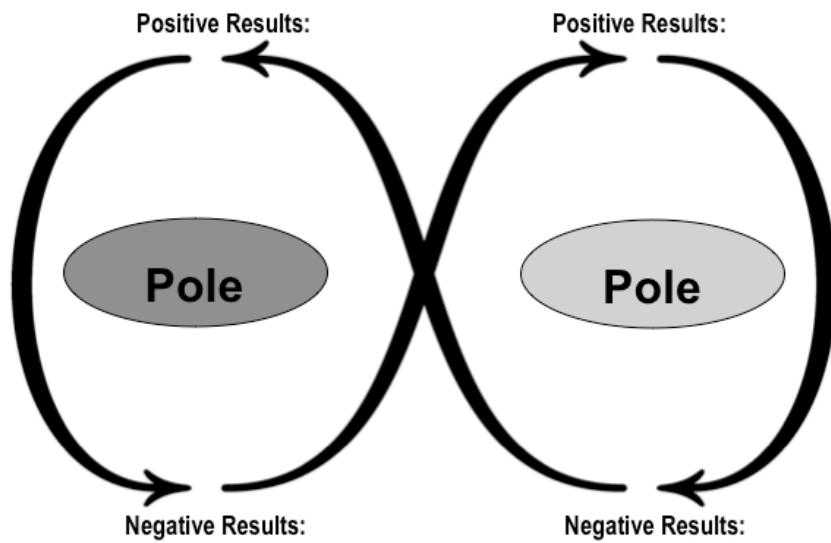


Figure 2. The infinity factor (Johnson, 2009)

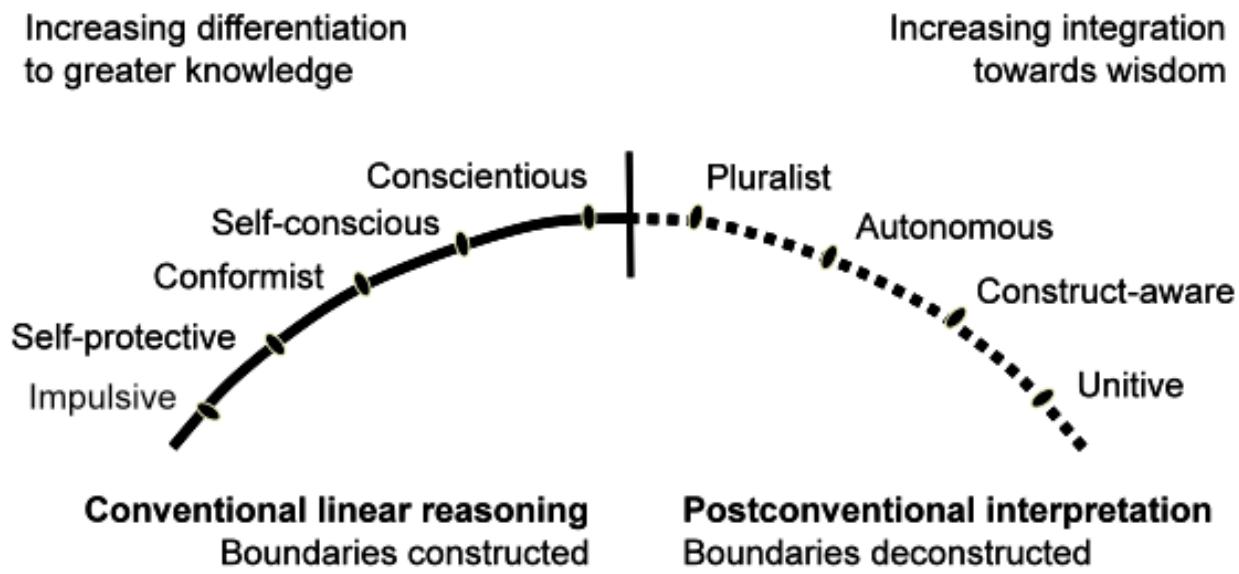


Figure 3: Differentiation & Integration

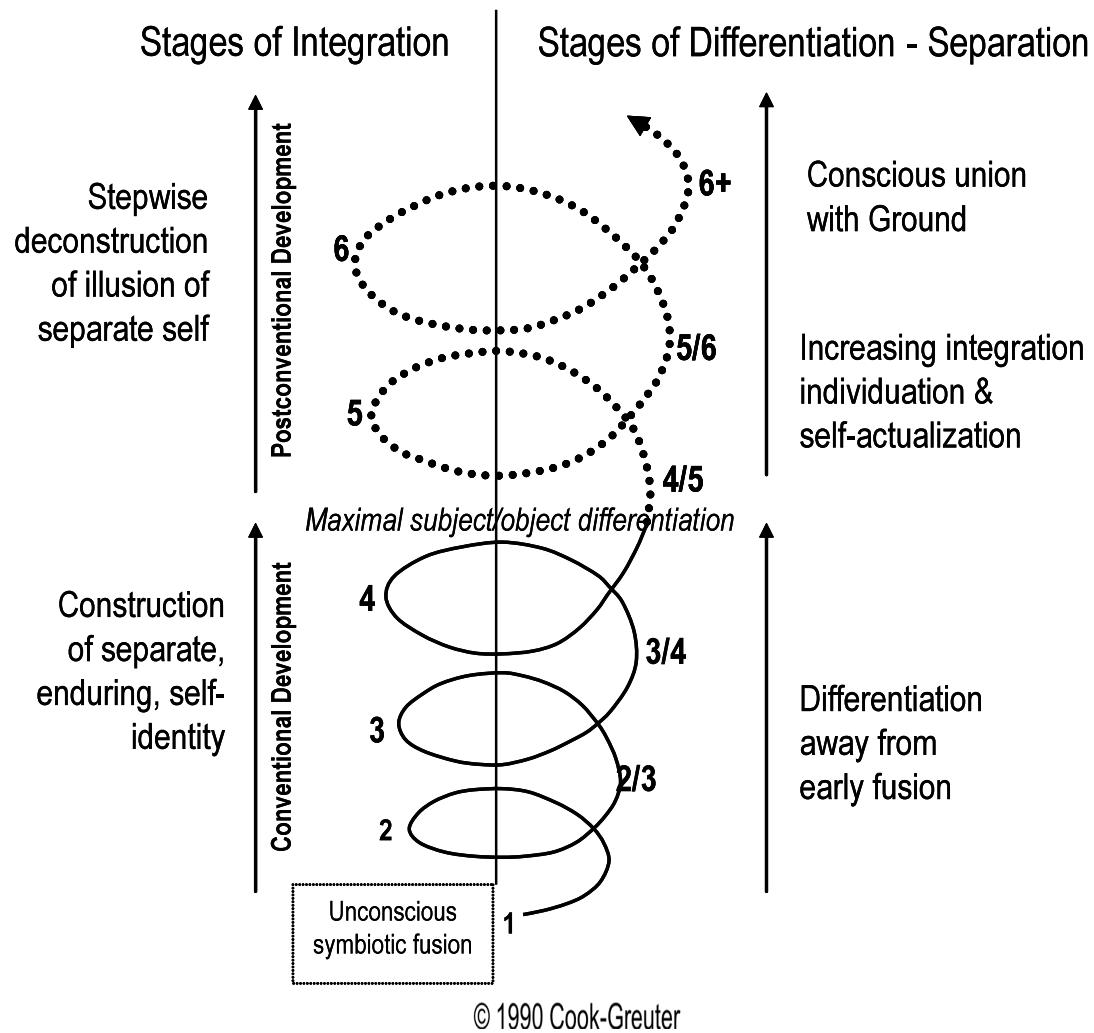
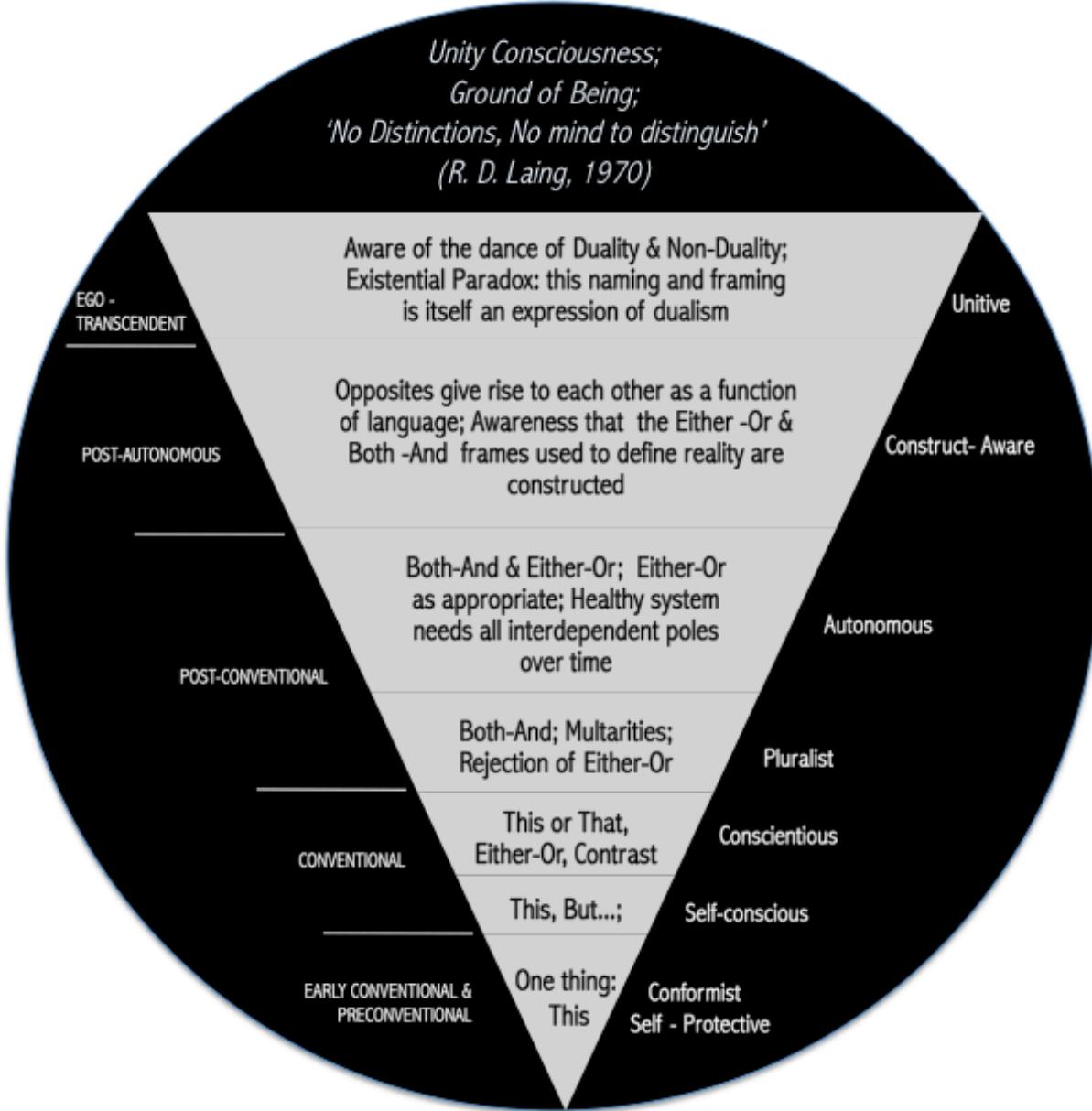


Figure 4. Alternative emphasis on differentiation & integration



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Figure 5. The development of the concept of opposites