

Nothing/Being: Musings on Duality and the Nature of Things

Light is meaningful only in relation to darkness, and truth presupposes error. It is these mingled opposites which people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash. –Louis Aragon

Form/Void

Creation/Destruction

Light/Dark

The nature of perception – of existence – can be seen, in a word, as “Contrast”. What is light without dark to define its edges? What is the core concept of a teacup, the ceramic matter of its form, or the empty space defined by it, into which you put the tea? The Q’ero of Peru refer to this dual nature of things, in balance, as *yanantin-masantin*, or two dissimilar energies complementing in balance. And the *despacho* (a type of offering or communication with Spirit) is constructed with this in mind. The physical ingredients and energetic intentions are selected and placed appropriately to reflect, to celebrate and to enhance this sense of balancing opposites.

These dualities are essential to existence and to perception. It is not possible to have only one, without its complement; is it truly possible to know joy without the contrast of pain or sorrow? Are you sure you have lived if you were not born or do not die? A coin has two sides; having only one is not possible. However, it seems to me that the core truth of this duality is that it doesn’t really exist. There are intermediates in all of these, or places where they occur simultaneously. The simple example, the coin, can be either one face up or the other – but there is such a thing as dim light. Shadows can have blurred edges, there are moments where creation and destruction are commingled, and in a very real and observable way matter is full of void, if you are able to look closely enough.

In considering Form and Void, it becomes evident that the distinction is a lot finer, if there is one at all. When the size of subatomic particles (protons, neutrons and electrons) is considered in relation to their spacing, even in the densest of solids, matter is 99.999999999999% ‘empty space’¹. There is energy in this space, electromagnetic force, gravity, and the strong and weak nuclear forces, for a start. What does that mean in relation to the contrast we were seeing before between Form and Void? Is that space then really empty if it has these energies in it? And if that space is not Void, what is?

Another easily observable duality is Male/Female. But that is not a true duality either: it is a spectrum, observable in the human population and others as well. People can be intersexed, and not just in only one specific way, on the purely physical level (leaving aside gender) there are degrees of intersex, which I don’t necessarily think I need to go into in detail but about which quite a lot of information is available if desired. Biological sex is not a regular lightswitch with the polar opposites, it’s a dimmer switch, albeit one which spends most of its time (most of the human population) closer to one end or the other (for

¹ Sir Arthur Eddington was the originator of this statistic. In the early 20th century, but I don’t have the exact source. Einstein said that Eddington’s *Mathematical Theory of Relativity* (1923) was “the finest presentation of the subject in any language.”

the statistics geek, it's called a 'binomial distribution'). What does that mean in relation to the contrast we were seeing before between Male and Female? Is there really still a contrast when the two sides are not as distinctly divided as they appear on the surface?

There is a perceived duality between Creation and Destruction, which starts down the rough and rocky path towards some religions' perception of Good and Evil. But again, they are inherent, when a tree grows, in an amazing act of creation, the source of materials for this creation is the death, decay, destruction of last year's leaves, and insect bodies, and other detritus, eaten by insects and earthworms, broken down by fungus, with some parts cast out as waste by those beings, and those wastes and breakdown products are ultimately absorbed with the molecules becoming part of the new created leaves or shoots or fruit or bark of the tree. Same with our human bodies: no meal we ever eat – not one! – no sustenance we take in occurs without the death and breaking down of living cells of/from another living being, be that plant, animal, algae, bacteria or fungus. And our physical life, the vast creative engine of our continued corporeal existence, is sustained by this. What does that mean in relation to the contrast we were seeing between Creation and Destruction? Is there really still a contrast when one needs the other so completely?

What I mean to say by all of this is: the first step on the path is to recognize the full scope of the difference, to celebrate it, and to bring it into balance and harmony, making sure each side has its opportunity to express its strengths and to be complemented in its differences. The next step after that is to see that under the surface, it's like two landowners debating about a mountain: they say, 'this side of the mountain is mine and that side is yours'...but in reality it is all one mountain and cannot be divided in spirit.

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Afterword

We don't ever want to diminish something by calling it what it's not; sure, the Q'ero paqos are not "shamans", that's a Tuvan word, a central Asian word. North American First Peoples (Native Americans) also don't prefer that word for the people within their culture who serve the same or similar purpose and role; they instead prefer that we refer to them as "medicine men". But...making a big and elaborate point out of drawing that distinction, using examples that aren't necessarily accurate – hint: not all who identify with the shamanic path use psychotropic plant medicines, or drums – doesn't necessarily serve a worldview in which we share one heart and not two. This...ah, this! This is the key; this is the final duality: the paradox of Self and Other.