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Abstract: In times of political polarization, we are well-advised to heed Spinoza's injunction, "Not to lament, not to curse, but to understand." Understanding can be facilitated by ideas about the archetypal structures of political choice. The primary question is whether available or desirable political positions are dyadic or triadic, and if dyadic, whether they are good versus bad or complementary. Various modes of polarization are illustrated by locating two or more positions on a line, horseshoe, or circle. It behooves us to grasp the structure of the political situation we face to avoid making intellectual and/or moral mistakes.

Key words: polarization, dyad, triad, Manichean dyad, Daoist dyad, horseshoe political structure, left vs right, moderate vs extreme, pathological holism, intersectionality

1 Introduction	2
2 Manichean and Daoist dyads.....	2
3 Dialectics and topology.....	3
4 Holism and intersectionality	6
5 References	8

1 Introduction

This is a time of intense political polarization in the U.S. and elsewhere. In troubling times like the present, one might descend into the fray and fight the good fight. Or one might flee from the political turmoil. Or one might try to understand the political situation more deeply. This third response would follow Spinoza (1677) who advised, “Not to curse, not to lament, but to understand.” And by understanding to avoid intellectual and moral error and also to sublimate!

Spinoza’s injunction motivates this talk. I think that understanding the current political situation needs to be informed by ideas about the basic archetypes of such situations. What is offered in this paper is such a set of archetypes, a meta-analysis that does not consider specific political choices but only abstracts their possible structures. Examples of political issues in the background will guide analysis, but I will not take positions on any issues. The analysis draws on systems theoretic ideas (Zwick 2023) but there is no time here to discuss them.

The primary distinction that needs to be made is between political situations that are dyadic and those that are triadic. By a dyadic situation I mean one in which we must choose between two viewpoints or political alignments or actions. Call these alternatives “positions,” and for convenience “left” and “right.” By a triadic situation I mean a situation in which there is also a third position, often but not always a “center.” So one of the first meta-political questions one should ask oneself is whether the situation is dyadic or triadic. Dyadic situations are more common, so I’ll focus mainly on them, but I’ll also say a little about triadic ones. It is a big mistake to take a situation as dyadic when it is really triadic, or triadic when it is really dyadic. We should also distinguish between the actual situation and what we would like. The actual situation might be dyadic, but we might wish it were triadic, or vice versa.

2 Manichean and Daoist dyads

There are at least two kinds of dyads. In “Manichean” dyads we regard our side as right or good and the other side as wrong or bad. Those who hold the opposite position also regard the situation as Manichean, with *their* side being right or good and our side being wrong or bad. Alternatively, we might judge the two positions to be roughly equally right or good. We can call such a dyad “Daoist.” In Daoism the alternatives are yin and yang, but let’s still call them Left and Right. In this type of dyad the positions are complementary and need to be integrated or brought into balance. Daoist dyads are symmetric; Manichean dyads are asymmetric. The relationship between these two types of dyad *resembles* the relationship between contraries and contradictories in the Greimas square (Chandler 2002), shown in Figure 1, but the alternatives of both Daoist and Manichean dyads are generally contraries, not contradictories.

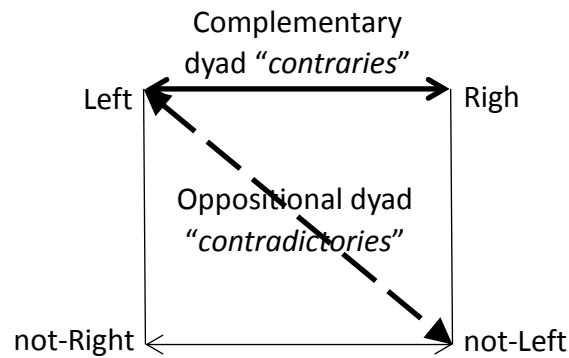


Figure 1 Greimas square

So if our situation is dyadic we must ask: Is the dyad Manichean or Daoist? It's a big mistake to see a Daoist situation as a Manichean one or to see a Manichean situation as a Daoist one. In today's intense political polarization this is a fundamental question that we need to face. If we assess the situation as Manichean, might it be that the position that we endorse isn't the result of critical evidence-based thinking and just reflects what everyone around us thinks? If we see some truth or value in the position we oppose, do we have the courage to admit it? But if we acknowledge truth or value in the other side, will this paralyze our capacity to promote our side? If we assess the situation as Daoist, are we sure we haven't succumbed to a mindless and spineless both-sides-ism? Do we have the courage to unambiguously affirm what we truly believe if we truly believe that the other side is wrong, perhaps even terribly wrong? It is a big mistake to refuse to acknowledge any truth or good that we see in the other side. It is also a big mistake to fail to assert the position that we truly believe is true or good.

3 Dialectics and topology

If we see the dyad as Daoist, we need to integrate or balance the alternatives which are inevitably also opposed. A Daoist dyad is "dialectical," manifesting the Hegelian principle of the "unity and struggle of opposites." Yin and yang unite in the Dao, but also oppose one another. They also "contaminate" one another. Contamination is acceptable, even desirable, in Daoist dyads. It is anathema in Manichean dyads, but even in Manichean dyads each position is often tainted by a little bit of the other.

The two positions not only contaminate one another; they stimulate one another in a relation of co-dependence. Action engenders reaction, so the left provokes and enables the right and the right provokes and enables the left. Such phenomena especially occur in Manichean dyads, but also in Daoist ones. Promotion of any position entails the risk of unanticipated and undesired effects. It is a big mistake to promote a position if doing so has the counter-intuitive outcome of promoting its opposite.

Paradoxically, similarity and difference may simultaneously exist between positions of a dyad. We normally see them as opposites far from one another, as shown in Figure 2(a). Yet when positions are extreme they may surprisingly resemble one another in some respects, hence the metaphor of a horseshoe, where lineally the L and R ends are far apart, but spatially they are close together, as shown in Figure 2(b). Because of this proximity people once aligned with one extreme may easily shift to the other (Taub 2025).

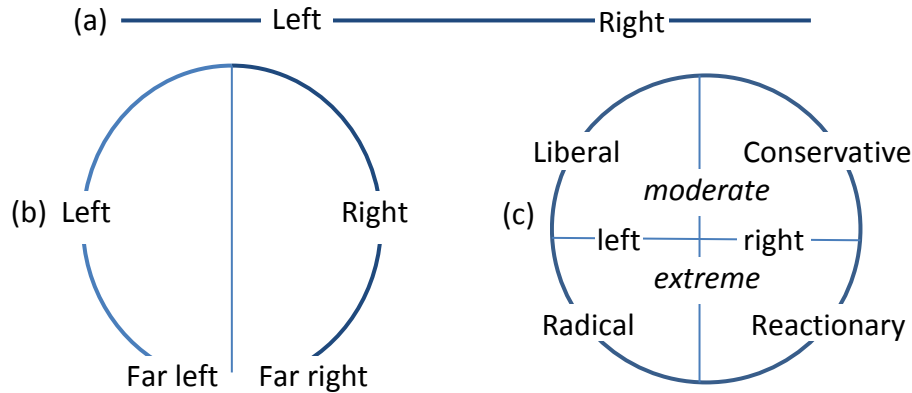


Figure 2 Representations of the political spectrum

(a) Simple lineal spectrum; (b) Horseshoe; (c) Circle (Thompson 1971)

The far left and far right might even be continuous without any gap, yielding a circle with no lineal order at all, shown in Figure 2(c). With this topology the horizontal choice of left versus right is supplemented by a vertical choice of moderate versus extreme. It's a big mistake to allow the Left-Right dyad to govern our choices when we should push for the opportunity to choose between the moderate and the extreme, and vice versa.

The available positions may be either closer or further away from one another than their distance shown in Figure 2(a). If the positions are close to one another, as in Figure 3(a), the dyad is likely to be Daoist. We may feel that they are so close so there is no point in or even no possibility of choosing either and no compelling need to integrate or balance them. But it's still a mistake to decline to make a choice between them.

The situation becomes more complicated if in addition to the position on the other side close to our own there exists another alternative on the other side far from our own, as shown in Figure 3(b1&b2) where our position is shown in bold, the close alternative is in italics, and the far alternative is primed in an ordinary and smaller font. The Left-Right dyad is now a triad, but the third position is not a Center. The choice now lies between forging a coalition with the nearby position on the other side or opposing both alternatives and maintaining the Left-Right polarization. Rejecting the nearby position exemplifies the "narcissism of small differences" in which we feel antipathy towards a position close to but not identical to our own. It is a big mistake to succumb to such narcissism if it facilitates a coalition of near and far alternatives that gives an outcome far from our position. It is also a big mistake to give up our Left or Right position just because there are both moderates and extremists on the other side.

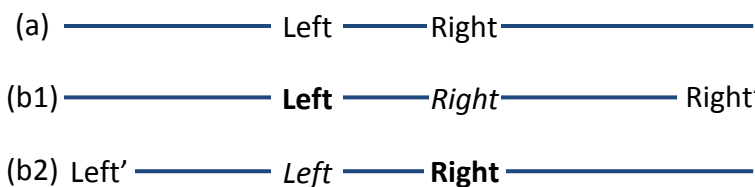


Figure 3 Modes of polarization

This figure (Figure 3b1&b2) can also diagram a completely different dilemma, where our position is shown in italics, the nearby alternative on the other side is shown in bold, and the alternative position is on *our* side. We are again faced with a choice between a coalition with the nearby position or sticking with our side in the Left-Right polarization, but this choice is difficult in a different way. If we incline to a coalition with the nearby position on the other side we are accused by those more extreme on our side of accommodating or appeasing the other side. If we stick with our own side on the principle of “no enemies to our left/right,” we ally ourselves with those with whom we have even stronger disagreement. It is a mistake to abandon our own side in the hope of pacifying the opposition. It is also a mistake to let extremists on our side undermine the moral and intellectual credibility of our moderate position. The extreme alternative on our side might also diminish our support and give victory to the other side.

If the two positions are far from one another, as in Figure 4, polarization is intense. It may not be the case, however, that we endorse either position. We may hate both. We might curse “A plague on both your houses” (Shakespeare 1599) or ironically observe that “only the extremes are logical, but they are absurd” (Samuel Butler 1872).

(c) — Left ————— Right —

Figure 4 Modes of polarization, continued: extremes

Taking a positive view, however, of this situation we might note that by opposing both positions we are at the highest level of a version, using contraries, not contradictories, of the Buddhist Tetralemma, shown in Figure 5, whose levels are (i) the assertion of a position, (ii) the assertion of an alternative, (iii) the assertion of both the position and its alternative, and (iv) the denial of both the position and its alternative.

- (iv) Neither Left nor Right *Freedom or... irrelevance?*
- (iii) Both Left and Right
- (ii) Right (or Left)
- (i) Left (or Right)

Figure 5 Political Tetralemma

In attaining this fourth level, we may gain a kind of freedom but perhaps we secure only our irrelevance. In the real world, asserting neither-Left-nor-Right does not put us in a happy place. As long as the situation is really dyadic, a Center will be unstable and have few advocates. We will be attacked by both sides. We will still need to choose. In the worst case of equally bad alternatives, we may find ourselves hopelessly conflicted. But it's rare for two alternatives to be exactly equally bad; usually some symmetry-breaking factor breaks the tie. We choose the lesser of two evils. Odysseus was faced with the choice between Scylla and Charybdis (Figure 6), but the former was less dangerous than the latter, so he steered a course closer to Scylla. But we need to ask ourselves: Is a choice between the two bad positions unavoidable? It's a big mistake to take the situation as a severe Manichean dyad if it could be transformed into a triadic situation with a desirable Center. And if it is necessarily dyadic, can I be sure about which position is actually the lesser of the two evils?

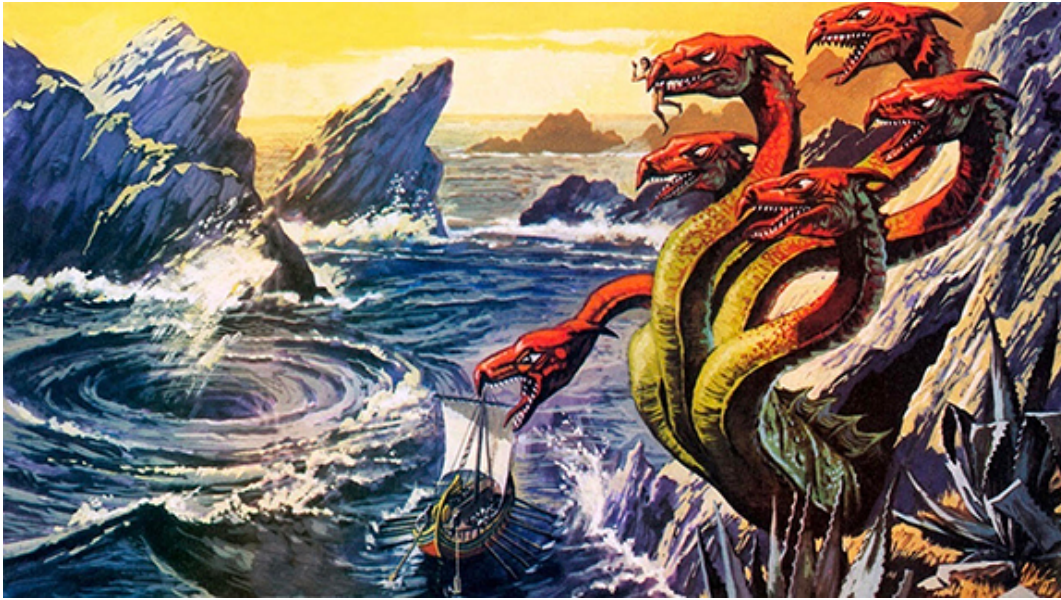


Figure 6 Scylla and Charybdis (Kirkpatrick 2024)

We could also have a situation of asymmetry where one position was near a center while the other is at an extreme, such as is shown in Figure 7(d1&d2). In such situations, do we view the position near the center as more reasonable -- or as unprincipled? Do we view the position far from the center as having integrity -- or as extremist? It is a mistake to assume that positions close to the center are more likely to prevail because they are acceptable to a larger part of the political spectrum or to assume that hot positions are more likely to prevail over lukewarm positions. We need also to remember that if the outcome of a conflict splits the difference between the two sides adopting a moderate position benefits the other side.

(d1) ————— Left ————— Right —

(d2) — Left ————— Right —————

Figure 7 Modes of polarization, continued: asymmetry

If the extreme alternatives of Figure 4(c) are both unsatisfactory, there may be the third alternative of a Center, shown in Figure 8(e). The Center needs to separate itself from both its alternatives, which will respond by attacking it. If the Center is not sufficiently established the triad may devolve back into a dyad.

(e) — Left ————— Center ————— Right —

Figure 8 Modes of polarization, continued: triad

Both this situation of an unstable center and the asymmetric situation (Figure 7) where a moderate position battles an extreme one are captured in the Yeats (1919) poem, *The Second Coming*, which begins as follows:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

4 Holism and intersectionality

Most complex political situations are not choices between two positions on one political issue. Usually there are multiple micro issues on which people have opposing positions, and what is available to us is only a macro choice that is a particular bundling of micro alternatives. We may be forced to accept the macro choice that is presented to us, but there may in principle be more than one way to do such a bundling.

To represent abstractly a macro choice that is actually available and an alternative way of bundling the micro choices, consider a situation in which there are micro dyadic choices A vs b and C vs e, bundled into two macro dyadic choices, as shown in Figure 9.

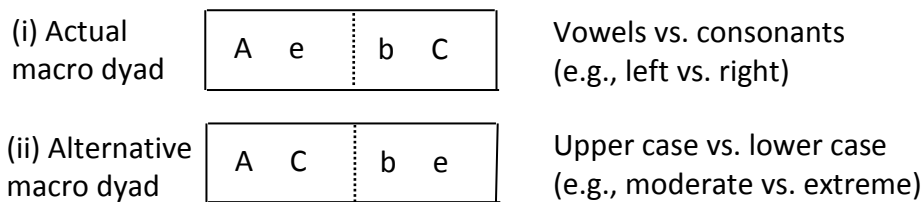


Figure 9 Two possible macro dyad bundles

Note that the first micro choice is not between the *contradictories* A vs not-A but between the *contraries*, A vs b, where b is not simply not-A. Figure 9 shows two ways to define macro dyadic positions composed of two micro dyadic positions. Assume that (i) shows the macro positions that are actually available, a Left position of {A, e} and a Right position of {b, C}, and that (ii) shows an alternative choice that might also be available or should be available, an L position of {A, C} and an R position of {b, e}.

Given the metaphor used here to symbolize the micro positions, bundling (i) presents a macro choice between “vowel positions” {A, e} on the left and “consonant positions” {b, C} on the right. Members of the Vowel Party view members of the Consonant Party as irrational and immoral, and vice versa. In alternative bundling (ii) the choice is between “upper case positions” and “lower case positions.” Members of the Upper Case Party view members of the Lower Case Party as irrational and immoral, and vice versa. The existing situation may be (i), but there will be people who feel that the real “issue of our time” is (ii), but case fundamentalists will never convince speech-sound fundamentalists to adopt their political ontology; and vice versa. Many people will find themselves distressed at being forced to make a macro decision based on one bundling, feeling strongly that the proper choice should be based on the other bundling.

No bundling is inherently natural or set in stone. Two party systems often realign based on a new organizing principle that bundles micro positions in a different way. We may want such realignment, but are powerless to bring it about. What do you do if the actual choice possible to you has structure (i), but you love A and despise e? We should be cautious about making our preferences known. If bundling (i) reflects the positions of most of our friends and associates, our favoring A over b will be taken for granted, but our favoring C over e will dismay, even appall, our friends or, worse, our parents or our children. Intersectionality, understood as positing intrinsic associations of political issues, might require that A and e be linked. If we dissent from this assumed holistic association we will be labeled an enemy. We will lose friends and alienate family members. But it will be hard to deny our deep commitments or what reason tells us is a fact.

Not every claimed holistic association is sound; many are false, even harmful, being instances of a “pathological holism.” Conspiracy theories exemplify this and appeal because of their simplicity and because Ockham’s Razor is hard coded in our mental firmware. Intersectionality that posits two bundles of political positions, one totally good, the other totally bad, is another example of such deficiency of thought.

Also, once choices are not one-dimensional, bundles of three micro-positions need not be on a line, as in Figure 10. Such triadic situations are problematic because (i) coalitions are unstable, and (ii) there’s no way to aggregate preferences among three choices that is always rational, decisive, and fair.

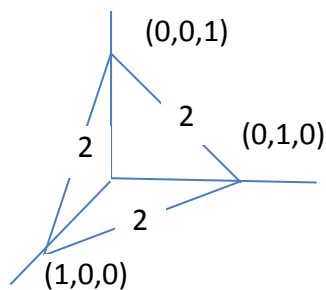


Figure 10 Nonlinear triadic positions

A macro position, e.g., $(0,0,1)$, is a vector of three binary micro choices. The (Hamming) distance between each pair of macro positions is 2.

In sum, to make sound political choices and hopefully to avoid intellectual and moral mistakes, it behooves us to try to accurately understand the situation we are in and the alternatives that exist. This intellectual effort will help us clarify our choices, and sublimate our reactions in this time of political troubles.

Acknowledgments

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