

Reflections on Duality, Unity and Threefolding

By Raphael Knauf

The division of our communities and society at large into polarizing camps has become a theme that is experienced by more and more people in ever-increasing intensity. The general public narrative has been to cast society as split into two groups, largely along political lines, with viewpoints on a wide array of primarily non-political issues being quickly tied into this. COVID has further highlighted and intensified this process of division and duality. We have become intensely aware of our interconnectedness, our commonalities and especially our differences.

Out of this experience of duality and polarization, many people have called for unity. However, for many of us, what we often mean by unity is that our counterparts, the people “in the other camp” recognize the “error” in their thinking, have insight into why my thinking is “correct” and join me in the “right view” of things. We often understand unity to be homogeneity, which comes about by taking away one of the two, by taking away the side that we do not feel part of. The issue with this approach is that it evidently does not work. Almost any standpoint can be proven by a purely intellectual logic and one’s chosen statistics. Trying to convince the other of their “errors” so that they join me on the “right” side usually leads to more division.

As we look at this social dilemma, we can pause and turn to the human organism. The human organism contains systems of polar opposite function, namely the nerve-sense system, especially concentrated in the head, and the metabolic-limb system, especially concentrated in the digestive tract and limbs. As archetypal spatial forms we find the sphere in the nerve-sense system (e. g. skull, brain, eye) and the line in the metabolic-limb system (bones of the limbs, intestine etc.). Their respective function is to consciously take in and reflect the world as it is through the senses and thinking versus to deeply change the world through digestion and our willful actions, which are largely unconscious. Nerve cells live our whole life, while the cells lining our intestine die after 3-5 days; an injury to our brain is largely permanent, while an injury to a muscle heals relatively quickly.

The human organism bridges this polarity of systems through the rhythmic system, especially concentrated in the chest and its main organs of heart and lung. In the ribs we find bones that are curved lines. We take in the world and at the same time change it through our breathing, which is a partially conscious activity, reflected in our soul through feeling. Healing an injury takes longer than in the intestine but it does occur. Thus, the human organism establishes its unified yet diverse wholeness not by taking away one of the polar opposites – the consequence of which would be death – but by adding a unifying, integrating third element.

We can bring this principle to our social interactions. However, striving for threefold unity, which is given to us as a gift in our human organism, requires hard work in the social realm. It is much clearer and easier to be on one relatively fixed side of things than to be engaged in the process of constantly striving for balance. Essential for the unifying third to arise in the social realm is the striving for true human encounters. As we enter these, it is important that we remind ourselves over and over again that each one of us as an individual has prejudices and is one-sided. We are called upon to meet each other with open listening, with respect for the other’s opinions and decisions, with quiet attention,

while deferring personal judgement. This does not mean to just change our viewpoints and agree with what the other is saying; it means striving to see the other's perspective and experience the other's higher self, the core of their being human, which may be hidden behind strong judgements and language. Through such striving, the unifying, bridging third element can start to emerge in the space between us; healthy interpersonal relationships as the basis for healthy communities can arise.

This process also calls for active thinking that is aware of its tendency to fall into duality, to constantly see binary choices, "a or b". Our culture has cultivated this habit of seeing the world as sequential binary choices for centuries and, if we look, we can constantly find it in and around us. As we notice this habitual tendency in our thinking, we can ask again and again: "What is the c, that makes "a or b" into abc, representing the wholeness of the alphabet? What is the unifying, integrating third element?" This active, willful thinking sees the limits of purely intellectual logic and integrates itself with our feeling, which feels the light and shade of our thoughts. Such active thinking enlightens our will to freely do the good out of love.

These kinds of human encounters and accompanying inner activities are not something most of us are used to or good at, we are only at the beginning of developing the capacities and skills for them. Like learning anything new and engaging with processes that we are not yet skilled at, this is hard, uncomfortable and requires us to constantly strive to lift our consciousness beyond our everyday consciousness to our higher self. We will fail and need to ask for forgiveness from others and ourselves over and over again. We may often feel that we lack the resources and abilities to bring about the significant societal changes that we feel are needed, yet I believe each one of us can make a significant difference through this striving; this social issue is one each one of us can address. I am convinced this is the only way forward, the only way to bring about the bridging third, which integrates duality into diverse threefold unity and leads to healing, individually and in community with each other. This is not something we arrive at, it remains a constantly dynamic process.

Already in 1965, Karl Koenig, an anthroposophic physician and the founder of Camphill (a worldwide social initiative to create communities including people with and without intellectual disabilities) addressed this beautifully, writing about a broadly understood concept of "curative education", which we perhaps can understand as an ongoing healing education in our inner development and with each other: *"Only support from person to person - the encounter of a self with another self - the awareness of another individuality without questioning the other's religion, convictions and political background – just the gaze from eye to eye between two personalities, creates this kind of curative education which can, in a healing way, counteract the threat to the core of humanity. However, this can only work on the strength of profound heart-knowledge."*

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