

POLARIZED THINKING

Polarized thinking is 'black and white' thinking, where we look at something in absolute terms or a dualistic view. For example, something is either good or bad, this or that, right or wrong.

ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND

1. The Evolution and Development of the Human Species

Survival and safety are the greatest basic needs of all lives, including for the human species. It is through millions of years of effort to survive and keep safe that we humans have developed to where we are today. In order to survive under the rule of the jungle, our ancestors needed to develop many abilities, including being able to promptly assess and determine whether the environment was safe or not. For example, when encountering a tiger, they had to immediately decide what to do - fight the tiger or run away. When a group of very hungry people found a small amount of food, each member of the group would have to quickly decide if they wanted to go for the food or not. Humans went through many generations of learning to survive in harsh environments and this trained them to be able to make quick judgments and decisions. This ability gradually became an instinct.

This information of life has been passed down in various ways, including through genes and human culture, and imparted to every human being. For example, it is very common for young children to judge people or things as categorically good or bad, and this polarized thinking of childhood often continues through adulthood to old age, as though it were a complete version of human evolution and development.

2. Basic Instincts and Needs on the Level of Human Nature

If the ten qualities of human nature (in the Theory of Shen and Yi) were summed up as a single thing, it would be the instinct to 'seek benefit (interest) and avoid harm; seek simplicity (easy solution) and avoid complexity (extra work)'. This instinct is at the root of the

pattern of polarized thinking as well as the other nine fundamental patterns.

3. Social and Cultural Environment

As mentioned previously, the impact of the social and cultural environment on human life is both comprehensive and profound. The information of culture, including the information of polarized thinking, is ubiquitous and has permeated every aspect of human life and society. This black and white thinking can be found in everyday life, including in economic, religious, political and military realms.

For example, politicians or those in power are often very good at using polarization to manipulate people to get what they want – whether to seize power or eliminate rivals. It is evident how huge the influence on human life can be.

This way of thinking is especially important when people are engaged in fighting a war. The opponent's side, of course, is always seen as the evil side while one's own side always represents justice. The interesting thing is that both sides think this way. The victors, the side that is more effective in killing their enemies, is seen as heroes who deserve endless glory and benefit. In reality, wars are simply cruel games which humans kill one another in.

Similarly, religious extremists can also become deeply trapped in this way of thinking. It's either black or white, heaven or hell, believers or nonbelievers. The believers and nonbelievers can engage in war and believe that the war they fight is holy.

4. Family Environment

It is generally fairly well understood that the family environment plays a huge role in the formation and development of ideas, notions and patterns. The influence of close family members, especially parents, is far-reaching.

5. Education

Education can shape and reinforce the way people think, including polarized thinking. Education can be received in many different ways, although nowadays most people receive their main education through the education system. Even though education is delivered in many different ways through a system, modern education is still more or less characterized by fragmented, polarized, over-

simplified, 'programmed' and standardized thinking. Children are taught to judge things and people as good or bad. Bad people should be punished. Good people should destroy the bad people. Bad people are the enemy, while good people are the heroes.

6. Personal Factor

This refers to your own personal involvement in the formation and development of a pattern. Shen and consciousness not being the master of life is ultimately at the core of all the unhealthy patterns we develop, despite the involvement of all the other factors. Let's use an example to see how the personal factor plays out in the development of polarized thinking.

Example: Ascribing the cause in an unfair or incorrect way

When someone else is often late, we ascribe the cause to be personal such, as being 'lazy' or 'poor at time management'. When we ourselves are late, we ascribe the cause to external factors such as 'heavy traffic' or 'bad luck with traffic lights'.

We tend to associate something 'negative' we see in another with a personal trait such as character, integrity or moral disposition and develop a narrow and unfair view of the person. We can adopt this narrow and flawed view when we receive and process any information related to them. It is therefore very common that after we have judged someone in a negative way, the person's 'negative' quality appears more noticeable. Often it will be magnified to confirm our flawed perception or judgment. This way of viewing someone can show in the way we interact with them and will most likely provoke a negative response. The negative response can once again affirm our unfair perception or judgment and further reinforce it. A vicious cycle can be created this way.

What if we take the opposite approach? We can create a totally different cycle – a virtuous cycle. For example, when we see something we find hard to appreciate or like, instead of harshly judging the person, try to understand or forgive and not allow this particular experience to affect our ability to see their positive qualities. From there, we can continue to find more positive qualities and reasons to appreciate them. They will appreciate your acceptance and goodwill, and be inspired to not repeat the 'negative' thing you have been willing to overlook. The positive change further reinforces your appreciation of them. A virtuous cycle can keep developing this way. The point to make here is: we

often only see what we want to see and we don't see what we don't want to see. This example demonstrates that our own ideas and intentions play a crucial role in shaping our patterns and whether they are healthy or not.

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC MANIFESTATIONS

Due to all the influences above, polarized thinking has become a very common pattern which is still prevalent and active in society. However, reality is not 'black and white'. Rather, it is a rich totality that is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. It is a continuum with infinite shades of gray that fall between black and white; reality is more like a spectrum. The black and white thinking simply does not reflect truth. A 'good' person cannot possibly have weakness, flaws or do 'evil' things; a 'bad' person is evil through and through and cannot possibly have any positive qualities. As in a Chinese saying, it's 'a person with a boil on top of his head and pus coming out from his feet'. This 'having/being/taking all or nothing' way of thinking can still be found in almost everyone's thinking, to a degree.

Let's look at some examples:

- An ambitious, competent young man competes for a job he sees as the opportunity of a lifetime, and loses. He is extremely disappointed and thinks that the loss of this great opportunity means the end of any hope to do better in life. He sees no future. He feels a deep sense of despair and frustration and sees himself as a failure. His confidence is badly shaken and he can't see the worth of his life.
- Examinations are usually not welcome by students. Take the case of a straight-A student who always performs very well at exams. His marks are usually 100 or very close to it. One time, however, he only scores 90. This makes him feel extremely despondent and like a total failure. He starts to feel unbearable pressure around examinations and constantly worries about the marks he will get for every exam. This is a typical example of a 'failure' triggering a person to go from one extreme to the other – adopting a polarized view of things. It is evident how harmful to life this way of thinking can be.

Polarized thinking can lead to conflict and problems in a relationship or family situation. For example, a wife has a set of standards for what makes a 'good' husband and uses these to

'evaluate' her husband. With polarized thinking, if the husband has not met one of these standards, then he is not a good partner or he does not love her. When the relationship is not a perfectly happy one, then it is not a good one. This way of thinking can obviously cause dissatisfaction and pain.

THE VALIDITY AND ADVANTAGE

Is polarized thinking all negative? Perhaps we should be careful to avoid using polarized thinking when we examine polarized thinking. Although by and large it is not a healthy pattern, like everything it should be taken in relative terms. Under certain circumstances, polarized thinking can be reasonable and beneficial. The example of encountering a tiger demonstrates the benefit of thinking in absolutes, as is safety education for children, such as teaching children that playing with fire at home or going into a stranger's car is categorically forbidden.

Polarized thinking can sometimes make our intention and goal simple and clear, which facilitates our effort to achieve. For example, when a person has found someone he thinks is a perfect future partner and really wants to be with that person, he naturally does his best to win that person's heart. In this situation, polarized thinking seems quite appropriate.

Another advantage of polarized thinking is making things clearer, and this is one of the reasons why this way of thinking is so deeply rooted in human consciousness. Reality is often too complicated and too changeable to manage. Polarized thinking simplifies everything and finds everything a place so we do not have to be bothered by a sense of helplessness, loss of control or uncertainty. This is good and that is evil; this is a good guy and that is a bad guy; this is success and that is failure; this person is a friend and that person is a foe. It is a simple system that everything fits into. Reality becomes much easier to sort through and life becomes more manageable this way.

POSSIBLE NEGATIVE EFFECTS

It is evident that the negative effect of polarized thinking can be comprehensive and far-reaching. For example, when things turn out to be different from our expectations, we can lose trust or even confidence in ourselves. A small slipup or setback can lead to great

disappointment and fear. We can easily feel a sense of failure and diminish the value of our lives.

When an expectation or a goal is not met, we can fall into a state of depression, despair, anger, resentment, disappointment, frustration and suspicion, which can sometimes lead to extreme decisions or behaviour. People who have a strong pattern of polarized thinking are more likely to take extreme measures, such as harming or even killing themselves or the other person if a relationship ends.

Polarized thinking makes it difficult to see things objectively, fairly and accurately, which can prime the soil for conflict. If conflict is not resolved properly, and especially when it stirs up unhealthy emotions, conflict can escalate and become harmful to all who are involved and to their relationships. Examples like this are not hard to find.

POSSIBLE REPLACEMENT PATTERNS

It should be getting increasingly clear that the pattern of polarized thinking needs to change. An incremental approach probably suits most people when it comes to changing this pattern.

We can start with training ourselves to be tolerant or to accept 'less than perfect'. There is a range of less-than-perfect possibilities that can be acceptable too, such as great, good, not bad and okay. We can learn to accept and live with these possible situations and make the most of them.

For example, we can adjust the way we define success. Does it have to be 100% perfect to be successful? How can something be absolutely perfect? What is perfect? Can we take a more balanced and objective view of success and failure? Can success take any form other than so-called perfect or all goals achieved? Yes, it can. For example, we can look at all the goals and objectively evaluate how many of them have been achieved and to what extent. We may find that we have achieved much in some areas and not as much in others. This should give us a fairer view of success.

Another way to not fall into the trap of polarized thinking is to consider that the process is as important as the outcome. Even if a plan has completely fallen through and nothing has been achieved, the 'failure' can still be seen as something valuable because it has given us the opportunity to learn and grow. In a sense, it is still part of a success because it paves the way for it. A principle that could

be useful at this time is: 'Do your best whenever doing something worth the effort, and at the same time, have a natural attitude towards both the process and the outcome.'

Another way to replace polarized thinking is to look at things from the perspective of development. Everything is changing and evolving all the time. Everything goes through stages or phases in the process of development. If something is in a downward phase and we take it as the whole story, we are likely to conclude that it is negative, a failure or hopeless. This is obviously not a sound judgment. If this is something personal and a setback is taken as the end of the story, not only the opportunity for further development can be taken away but problems can develop. Nothing is absolutely good or bad. If we can see things from the perspective of change and development, we can avoid polarized thinking. The story of 'The Man Who Lost His Horse' is a perfect example of this.

In a village near the border of the country lived a man who was conversant with philosophy and 'reading' life through various techniques. One day his horse crossed the border and went into the neighbouring country. His fellow villagers came to comfort him for his loss. He responded, 'How do you know it is not a good thing?' Several months later, his horse came back and brought a beautiful horse with him. Everyone congratulated him on this. His response was, 'How do you know it is not the beginning of something unfortunate?' His son loved riding the horses and one day fell off and broke his leg. Everybody came to comfort him. He responded, 'How do you know this is not a fortunate thing?' A year later, the neighbouring country invaded China. All the young men had to be drafted to fight in the war. Nine out of ten of them died and those who managed to stay alive were mostly seriously injured. His son had a broken leg so he didn't have to go to war. His life was therefore spared.

Another way to change the pattern of polarized thinking is to avoid wasting energy making judgments. Instead, focus on actively searching for ways to solve or improve the situation. For example:

1. When encountering a tiger, apart from running away or fighting the tiger, is there a better solution? For example, is it possible to use the food we carry to distract the tiger; or have we come prepared to tranquilize it? Could there be a safer way to withdraw?

2. When catching children playing with fire, apart from seeing it as a bad thing and telling them off, is it possible to make an effort to teach them how to use fire and related equipment safely?
3. Your friend promises to do something for you, but later you discover she didn't do it even though she told you she did. Polarized thinking would conclude that this friend is not a real friend and is untrustworthy. Following this way of thinking, you naturally feel angry, sad and betrayed, and decide to discontinue this friendship. Is there a more constructive way to deal with it? How about communicating with her and finding out why she didn't do it? Was there something bothering her? Perhaps you can give her an opportunity to apologise and give yourself an opportunity to forgive.

We can also learn to accept that even if someone does not want to be as close to us as we wish, we don't have to see this person as our enemy. There can still be many choices in between. We can also learn to accept that our loved ones are allowed to make mistakes; they are allowed to be imperfect. Respect others' choices, views and thoughts and accept the fact that they don't have to meet your expectations. Be more accepting and receptive and keep trust and curiosity in your heart. Total acceptance is especially important towards family and close ones. This does not mean that you don't care about right from wrong; rather, it is the manifestation of openness and unconditional love from the heart. This way your Xin Ling will become broader and richer, and you will be able to gradually shift away from 'black or white' thinking. Your view towards life and reality will become more mature and balanced. This transition may not be easy and can take some time. It requires consistent effort to revise the way you look at things.

CONCLUSION

Polarized thinking can potentially bring about complex and far-reaching negative influences to your own life and society as a whole, so there is no reason not to change this pattern. To do so, adopt a new framework of thinking: Be objective, fair, balanced, accepting, accommodating, receptive and rational.

It is important to bear in mind that everything, including your own life, is a totality and is constantly changing and moving. The dualistic view of reality doesn't reflect this law and the truth of

P O L A R I Z E D T H I N K I N G

reality. Make these better, healthier ways of thinking the main way of viewing and relating to the world.