

# The Duality of American Moral Culture

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In a lecture included in his *Essays, Lectures, and Orations* (1848), Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked on a universal pattern of alternation, “The two parties of which divide the state, the party of Conservatism and that of Innovation, are very old, and have disputed the possession of the world ever since it was made. This quarrel is the subject of civil history. . . . The war rages not only in the battlefields, in national councils, and ecclesiastical synods, but agitates in every man’s bosom with opposing advantages every hour. On rolls the whole world meantime, and now one, now the other gets the day and still the fight renews itself as if for the first time, under new names and hot personalities.” The alternation of mutual opposites operates in political, cultural, and religious arenas (Baker 2005). Systems of mutual opposites – dualities – have been observed in cultures around the world (Maybury-Lewis and Almagor 1989) and have ancient roots (e.g., Jaspers 1953, Orrù 1987).

I explore the duality of American moral culture as follows. First, I define the two principles that constitute this moral dynamic: duality and alternation. I offer explanations of why duality occurs and what drives alternation. Second, I illustrate duality in seven domains in American society: moral visions, religion, family, politics, law, environment, and health-care (see Table 14.1 for an overview). I argue that the polar opposites in multiple domains cohere into two consistent sets or “radial categories.” For example, absolutists (moral visions) tend to be conservatives (politics) who believe in an “originalist” interpretation of the US Constitution (law). Relativists (moral visions) tend to be liberals (politics) who believe in a “living Constitution” (law). When sets cohere, the dynamics of alternation involve synchronized shifts of these interconnected domains. I explore duality, coherence, and alternation by examining evidence of the American “culture war.” Third, I argue that, while duality and alternation are not uniquely American, these principles animate moral dynamics in America in an exceptional way. I discuss the unique ideological foundation of the nation, which makes the alternation of mutual opposites central to the moral dynamics of American society.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I conclude with a summary of key points.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter expands and develops arguments first introduced in *America’s Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception* (Baker 2005).

TABLE 14.1. Dualities in Seven Domains

Domain	Examples of mutual opposites	Reference/source
1. Moral visions	Absolutists versus relativists	Hunter 1991; Baker 2005
2. Religion	Conservative christianity versus secularism	Greeley and Hout 2006; Conger 2009; Williams 2009
3. Family	Strict father versus nurturant parent	Lakoff 1996; 2004
4. Politics	Red versus blue states	Fiorina with Abrams and Pope 2006; Evans and Nunn 2006
5. Law	Originalism versus living constitution	Calabresi 2007
6. Environment	Dark versus bright greens	Hoffman 2009
7. Healthcare	Supporters versus opponents of public health insurance plan (public option)	Author's observations and commentary on <a href="http://www.OurValues.org">www.OurValues.org</a>

## TWO PRINCIPLES

The world is a “big blooming buzzing confusion,” wrote William James. We make it orderly and manageable by the convenient device of dividing aspects of it into categories. Categorization is fundamental to perception, cognition, language, social interaction, and so on. I propose that a special case of categorization – mutually opposed dual categories – is central to moral dynamics in America. I call this the duality principle. Of course, categorical systems with more than two categories exist; as I explain below, different categorical systems may be complementary rather than competing views of the world. Alternation – the shift back and forth between the two sides of a duality – is a fundamental dynamic of moral culture. One side of a duality may dominate at a given time, but eventually its dominance wanes and the other waxes, only to alternate again in the future. This is the alternation principle. The reasons for alternation are varied, but as I explain below, may be classified as internal (endogenous limitations or inconsistencies) or external forces (exogenous shocks or surprises).

## DUALITY PRINCIPLE

Duality is defined as division into two interrelated and opposing categories. These binary categories may be expressed in dual social organization (e.g., moiety systems or two-party political systems) and/or as polarities of logic and experience (Needham 1980), social thought, ideologies, and social action. The Chinese concept of yin/yang is an example of an ancient duality that still informs thinking today. Similarly, the Latin American hot/cold duality is a pre-Hispanic worldview that continues to inform contemporary society. For example, native Mexican understanding of health and illness of humans and food plants continues to be shaped by hot/cold principles and their mutual interactions (Chevalier et al. 2002). These Chinese and Latin American dualities originate outside America, but Chinese Americans and Latinos would find American culture to be a hospitable environment for the reinforcement and expression of dualistic thinking.

Duality is widespread. As Maybury-Lewis (1989:1) noted his introduction to *The Attraction of Opposites: Thought and Society in the Dualistic Mode*, the organization of social thought and social institutions in patterns of opposites “. . . is reported from so many different

parts of the world that it is clearly a kind of system that human beings keep inventing and living by, independently of each other." Similarly, Bell (1978:155) asked, "How did man [sic] come to think of two radically different, heterogeneous realms, the sacred and the profane? Nature itself is a unified continuum in a great chain of being, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Only man has created dualities: of spirit and matter, nature and history, the sacred and the profane."

Where does dualistic thinking come from? In part, it may share the evolutionary advantage of categorization in general. For example, the human ability to rapidly categorize novel natural scenes to assess danger enhances survival (e.g., Li et al. 2002). Dualistic thinking in moral culture may be adaptive because it provides a quick way to assess complex and ambiguous moral situations. Some argue that categorization is common because humans are "cognitive misers" (Taylor 1981). If so, then dual categories offer the simplest and most efficient system of categorization. Overwhelmed by a barrage of information and social stimuli, people cope by taking cognitive short cuts, ignoring massive amounts of information and placing others in simple us-versus-them categories. Stereotyping is an example, where the "other" is categorized and perceived as an undifferentiated member of a group rather than a unique individual (e.g., Johnson and Fredrickson 2005). Of course, categorization "does not function in a social vacuum, in the minds of isolated, asocial perceivers; human cognition is not purely individual, private, asocial, unaffected by group memberships, social norms and values" (Turner 1999:28). Political actors, for example, manipulate the categorization process to achieve political and ideological domination, "reifying social categories and therefore denying alternative ways of social being" (Reicher and Hopkins 2001:383).

Dual models may stem from the polarities that are perceived in nature or as part of the human experience. "All cultures," writes Maybury-Lewis (1989:12), "note and deal with such oppositions as night-day (or darkness-light), male-female, sky-earth, life-death, and a host of others." Dual categories are often (if not always) simplifications of reality – divisions of infinite continua into binary categories. For instance, the night/day duality is an obvious simplification because the 24-h cycle is a continuous progression.

Maybury-Lewis, among others, offers a functionalist account of dualistic thinking, arguing that it provides the "harmonious interaction of contradictory principles" that helps to manage the inevitable conflicts that arise in the human experience (1989:13–14). Dualistic thinking "offers a solution to the problem of social order by holding out the promise of balancing contending forces in perpetual equilibrium" (Maybury-Lewis 1989:14). In a similar vein, dualistic models may offer resilience to a society because, as has been noted for other categorical systems (e.g., Mamadouh 1999:443), cultural diversity is less prone to surprise and better ability to accommodate shocks to the system compared with a single mode of thinking, ideology, or social organization.

Of course, dual models are not the only system of categorization. In some domains, multiple categories might be more appropriate and accurate than a dual model. However, dualistic thinking can coexist with other systems of categorization and need not be in competition with them. Consider, for example, group-grid theory, an influential approach to cultural analysis introduced by Mary Douglas and developed by her and many others (e.g., Douglas 1970, 1986, Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Wildavsky 1986). The literature on group-grid theory and analysis is broad and deep (e.g., Mamadouh 1999) and here, I provide only a sketch to illustrate the compatibility of dual models and more complex categorizations.

In brief, the grid-group model is built from two dimensions of sociality: (1) degree of individual freedom or individuation (grid) and (2) degree of incorporation into a bounded group (group). Grid-group creates a two-dimensional space, which may be considered continuous or, more commonly, divided into four types or modalities (also called cultures, ways of life, or rationalities). Each type represents a different combination of social relations and cultural biases, from which “people derive a great many of their preferences, perceptions, opinions, values and norms” (Mamadouh 1999:387). Each of the four types goes by different names; common names are given here. Individualism or market refers to low group, low grid. Hierarchy or collectivism is the opposite type, referring to high group and high grid. State capitalism is an example. High grid, low group is fatalism or isolation; it combines binding prescriptions (high grid) with weak group incorporation. Low grid, high group is egalitarianism, sect, or enclave.

All four types are present in any society, but one or a combination of group and grid tends to dominate. Single cultures (i.e. one grid-group type) dominate some states; a combination of two cultures (i.e. two grid-group types) dominates others (Wildavsky 1986, Webber and Wildavsky 1986). American society is a “hybrid regime” in which two types – individualism and egalitarianism – jostle and compete (Wildavsky 1986:335, Webber and Wildavsky 1986:25). Different types in group-grid theory are antagonistic and adversarial; competition between types is always in a state of disequilibrium, with movements back and forth between them (Mamadouh 1999:397). In other words, the application of group-grid theory to American society suggests that moral culture revolves around a principal duality in the four-type model, and, possibly, that the movement between these two types corresponds to the alternation principle that animates moral dynamics in America. This does not imply that the grid-group model can be collapsed into one dimension; nor does it imply that a dual model trumps grid-group theory. Rather, it shows that binary and multicategory systems can be compatible, and, perhaps, even mutually reinforcing.

### ALTERNATION PRINCIPLE

Alternation is the successive change from one state (or phase) to another state (or phase) and back again. Alternation in the political sphere is a clear example. In 1919, Henry Adams observed this alternating pattern: “A period of about twelve years measured the beat of the pendulum. After the declaration of independence, twelve years had been needed to create an efficient constitution; another twelve years of energy brought a reaction against the government then created; a third period of twelve years was ending in a sweep toward still greater energy; and already a child could calculate the result of a few more such returns” (p. 67). Similarly, historian Schlesinger (1949) argued that American politics alternates between conservatism and liberalism, an idea that his son developed with greater detail in *The Cycles of American History* (Schlesinger 1986). Huntington (1981) and Hirschman (1982) also propose cycle theories of American history and politics; Skowronek (1988) argues that presidential succession and leadership styles follow a cyclical pattern.

Alternation may occur for endogenous or exogenous causes or a combination of both (Baker 2005:112–134). An endogenous cause is the inherent imperfection of each side of a duality. Whatever its strengths, any version of “truth and reality” is inherently incomplete

and inadequate; hence, it contains the seeds of its eventual replacement (Sorokin 1957:679–683). For example, Schlesinger, Jr. (1986) argued that political cycles stem from the inherent limitations of conservatism and liberalism. The limitations of one political ideology become more and more apparent over time, bringing about a shift to the other. Borrowing Hirschman's (1982) ideas of "private interests" and "public action," he notes that conservatism favors self-interest, free markets, and monetary gain (private interests) while liberalism promotes reform and regulation (public action). A period of liberalism follows a period of conservatism when the emphasis on private interests breeds too much corruption, scandal, inequality, and other social problems. "People grow bored with selfish motives and vistas," he says, "weary of materialism as the ultimate goal. The vacation from public responsibility replenishes the national energies and recharges the national batteries. People begin to seek meaning in life beyond themselves" (Schlesinger 1986:28–29). Eventually, however, they tire of reform, returning to a period of private concerns: "Worn out by the constant summons to battle, weary of ceaseless national activity, disillusioned by the results, [people] seek a new dispensation, an interlude of rest and recuperation" (Schlesinger 1986:28). Similarly, Huntington (1981) argues that an "ideals-versus-institutions gap" animates cyclical oscillations. When the gap between ideals and reality becomes intolerable, we initiate reform, regulation, and collective action to realign American institutions with American values.

Others locate the causes of political change in external events – economic depressions, wars, the business cycle, severe social problems, and disruptive technological developments. For example, the causes of "critical realignments" – "an abrupt, large and enduring form of change in prevailing electoral patterns...that is initiated by a critical election and results in a significantly different partisan balance in the electorate" (Nardulli 1995:11) – are typically considered to lie outside the political system "A different mix of political, moral, cultural, and economic forces" causes every critical realignment (Nardulli 1995:14). Similarly, Burnham (1970:10) argues that "abnormal stress in the socioeconomic system" causes such critical realignment. Others emphasize "severe stresses to the political system resulting from some cataclysmic event such as the Civil War or the Great Depression" (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998:635), or simply as "some exogenous 'shock' to the electoral system" (Beck 1979:130).

The "Great Awakenings" in America – periods of religious-political change – are driven by exogenous forces. A Great Awakening is a period of cultural revitalization that begin[s] in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend[s] over a period of a generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values takes place. Revivals alter the lives of individuals; awakenings alter the worldview of a whole people or culture" (McLoughlin 1978:xiii). These awakenings occur in unsettled times, when prevailing theology and wisdom no longer give "meaning and order to the lives of a people", due to "social, ecological, psychological, and economic changes" (McLoughlin 1978:xiii, 8; see, also, Fogel 2000).

### Dualities in American Society

Dualities are found in many places. I describe seven examples, selected to illustrate the range of domains in which dualities occur. These descriptions are short due to space limitations. (Table 14.1 provides an overview of the seven domains. References in the text and in Table 14.1 provide supporting details). I note, however, that clear patterns of alternation are identifiable in most but not all domains. This may be due to a lack of empirical investigation of

alternation; it may also be because some polarities do not alternate. Nonetheless, the dualities cohere, more or less, into two sets, and it is possible to discern patterns of alternation as the movement of these sets over time. After presenting the dualities, I discuss the alternation of two coherent sets of interconnected dualities.

## SEVEN DUALITIES

1. Moral visions. Moral visions are worldviews about the location of moral authority and judgment: the “transcendental sphere” or the “mundane sphere” (Orrù 1987, Eisenstadt 1982, Jaspers 1953). For moral absolutists, the location is the transcendental sphere – usually thought to be God (or religion), but can also be in the realm of pure ideas (Plato) or even society itself (Durkheim). The transcendental sphere contains absolute, eternal, and universal laws that always apply to everyone. For moral relativists, moral authority and judgment reside in the individual or in the local social situation (Fletcher 1966). The individual decides what is right and wrong in any given situation. These dual moral visions have ancient roots (e.g., Jaspers 1953, Orrù 1987). The duality is expressed today in the idea of an American culture war pitting moral absolutists against moral relativists (Baker 2005:64–109).

I used a survey item from the World Values Surveys (WVS) to measure the extent to which Americans are divided along these lines (Baker 2005:78–85). The WVS asked respondents to pick between two statements. Moral absolutism is indicated by this statement: “There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances”. Moral relativism is indicated by this statement: “There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time”. The 2000 survey is the WVS of America that included this survey item. About half (49.2 %) of Americans agreed with the first statement, and about half (46.6 %) agreed with the second. (About 4 % volunteered that neither of the statement was true.) Of course, an item with only two, mutually opposed response categories might be expected to yield (what appears to be) a polarized pattern. Therefore, in a national survey conducted in June 2009, I asked two questions about moral visions with 5-point Likert scales: (1) “What is right and wrong is up to each person to decide” and (2) “There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is right and wrong because it depends entirely on the circumstances at the time”.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 14.1, both items yielded a bimodal pattern consistent with the idea of polarized moral visions.<sup>3</sup> Most Americans agreed or disagreed with these statements; at most 12 % said “neither agree nor disagree.”

<sup>2</sup> The national survey was a rider to the June 2009 Reuters/University of Michigan Survey of Consumers, based at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research ( $n = 500$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 matches one of the hypothetical polarized distributions in Fiorina and Abrams (2008:566). This hypothetical distribution (Figure 2, top) shows a 7-point Likert scale, while Figure 1 here uses a 5-point Likert scale. Nonetheless, they are quite similar in shape. Is this conclusive evidence of polarization? As Fiorina and Abrams (2008:566) point out, the answer is open to interpretation. Advocates of the “polarization narrative” might say yes;

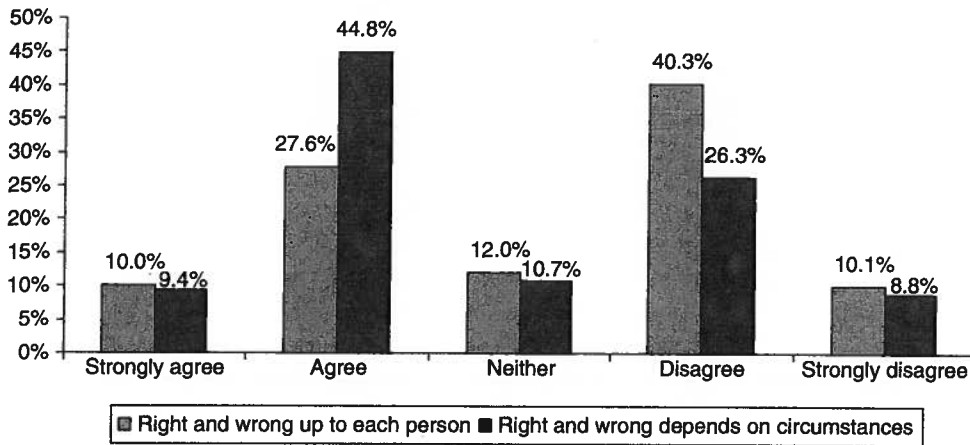


FIGURE 14.1. Percentage distributions of opinions about right and wrong.

Source: June 2009 Reuters/University of Michigan Survey of Consumers ( $n = 500$ , weighted) Item wording: (1) Right and wrong up to each person: "What is right and wrong is up to each person to decide." (2) Right and wrong depends on circumstances: "There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is right and wrong because it depends entirely on the circumstances at the time."

2. Religion. America remains one of the most religious (and religiously diverse) societies in the Western world. A prominent duality is the simplification of religious variation into Conservative Christians versus secular (non-religious) Americans. Greeley and Hout (2006) describe these mutual opposites in their introduction to *The Truth About Conservative Christians* (see, also, Smith 1998). On one side, "Conservative Christians defend the core values of both America and Christianity against the onslaughts of a secular and vulgar culture that will, if unchecked, undo both the nation and religion. Conservative Christians alone can be trusted to accomplish this, and in pursuing it, they become stronger". On the other side, Conservative Christians are viewed as a "dangerous juggernaut bent on undoing liberty, equality, and the fraternity of nations. Power-mad hypocrites, they mask hate with love, a judgmental streak with pieties, exclusion with appeals to inclusion, and monoculture in the name of diversity" (Greeley and Hout 2006:1). Of course, these stereotypes mask a wide range of diversity and agreement, as empirical studies have shown (e.g., Baker 2005, Davis and Robinson 1996, DiMaggio et al. 1996, Greeley and Hout 2006). But "[b]oth insiders and outsiders have an interest in exaggerating" (Greeley and Hout 2006:1). Williams (2009) argues, for example, that Conservative Christians have constructed secular elites as a "moral other," using this construction to boost political mobilization and strengthen collective identity. As noted above, reifying and simplifying categories is a strategy for achieving political and ideological domination (Reicher and Hopkins 2001).

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other analysts might disagree because "lots of people consider themselves slightly conservative or slightly liberal, but the majority of respondents fall near the center of the scale."

3. Family. In *Moral Politics*, Lakoff (1996) argues that moral reasoning revolves around two opposed family models: “strict father” morality versus “nurturant parent” morality. This duality informs discourse about the domain of family per se. But, Lakoff argues, it informs thinking in almost all the other domains (see Table 14.1), such as national politics, where moral reasoning is based on “the common, unconscious, and automatic metaphor of the Nation-as-Family” (Lakoff 1996:13). The strict father model “a universal, absolute, strict set of rules specifying what it is right and what is wrong for all times, all cultures, and all stages of development” (p. 366). This model, as Lakoff (2004:7) summarizes in his political manual, derives from a set of assumptions: “The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. There, they have to be made good. What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can: Protect the family in a dangerous world, support the family in the difficult world, and teach his children right from wrong”.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the “nurturant parent” sees the world in a different way. This model “requires that one empathize with and be nurturant toward people with different values than one’s own, including moral values. This means that one cannot maintain a strict good-evil dichotomy. To be able to see the world through other people’s values and truly empathize with them means that you cannot see all people who have different moral values than yours as enemies to be demonized” (Lakoff 1996:127). The moral responsibility of the nurturant parent is “to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled” (Lakoff 2004:13). The goal is to raise children who will be “happy, empathic, able to take care of themselves, responsible, creative, communicative, and fair” (Lakoff 1996:11). Rewarding and punishing (the strict-father method) does not produce this type of child; only nurturance and empathy does – being cared for and respected, caring for and respecting others.

4. Politics. Nothing captures the duality in politics better than the maps of Red States versus Blue States from the 2000 and 2004 elections (The 2004 map is reproduced in Figure 14.2a). These images became darlings of the media and riveted public attention, portraying what looked like a geopolitically divided nation. An article in *The Atlantic Monthly* described the stereotypes of Red and Blue: “Red America is godly, moralistic, patriotic, predominantly white, masculine, less educated, and heavily rural and suburban; blue America is secular, relativistic, internationalist, multicultural, feminine, college educated and heavily urban and cosmopolitan. Reds vote for

<sup>4</sup> Lakoff (1996, 2004) argues that conservatives are better rhetoricians than liberals, better able to use strict-father reasoning to mobilize support and consolidate political and ideological power. In defense, he wrote the bestselling *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (2004). Called “the essential guide for Progressives,” it tells liberals how to use the duality to promote their interests, turning the tables on the conservatives by employing their own rhetorical devices in reverse. Though Lakoff’s theory of framing has fallen into disfavor as a useful political strategy, his insights as an analyst remain valid.



a. Original Red vs. Blue State map



b. Cartogram taking population size into account



c. Map of county-level results, taking into account proportions of voters for Bush versus Kerry



d. Cartogram of county-level results, taking voter proportions and population size into account



**FIGURE 14.2.** Maps and Cartograms of the 2004 Presidential Election: (a) Original red vs. blue state map, (b) Cartogram taking population size into account, (c) Map of county-level results, taking into account proportions of voters for Bush versus Kerry, (d) Cartogram of county-level results, taking voter proportions and population size into account. Source: Mark Newman's web site, University of Michigan < <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/2004/>>

guns and capital punishment and war in Iraq, blues for abortion rights and the environment. In red America, Saturday is for NASCAR and Sunday is for church. In blue America, Saturday is for the farmers' market (provided there are no actual farmers) and Sunday is for *The New York Times*" (Rauch 2005:102).

The Red/Blue map implies that the people with similar political ideologies and social attitudes cluster together, and that clustering is increasing over time. Increasing

geopolitical clustering is theoretically possible (Baker and Faulkner 2009). However, whether “like-minded people cluster together. . .remains an open question” (Fiorina and Abrams 2008:563). Like all dualities, the red/blue duality contains important elements of truth, but it is a simplified version of reality. Empirically minded political scientists have expended effort debunking the myth of Red versus Blue States, showing that the differences are smaller than imagined; rather, citizens of Red and Blue States have a lot in common (e.g., Fiorina with Abrams and Pope 2006, Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Mark Newman, a physics professor at the University of Michigan, devised “cartograms” that redraw the Red/Blue maps to better represent geopolitical patterns. Figure 14.2b shows a cartogram of the USA (at the state level) that considers population. For example, New Mexico’s acreage is much bigger than Florida’s, but the Sunshine State is the 4th most populous state in the union and the Land of Enchantment is 36th. Hence, Florida is much bigger in the cartogram. Figure 14.2c shows a normal map at the county level, where counties are shades of red, blue, and purple to represent the proportions of Republican and Democratic supporters. This is superior to Figure 14.2a, but does not consider population. Finally, the cartogram in Figure 14.2d represents the most refined view, taking both proportions of voters and population size into account.

5. Law. A duality in law centers on how to use and interpret the US Constitution: “Originalism” versus the “living Constitution” (e.g., Calabresi 2007). Originalists like Judge Robert H. Bork and Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court Antonin Scalia argue that the meaning of the Constitution does not change over time. Judges should “interpret the [Constitution’s] words according to the intentions of those who drafted, proposed, and ratified them” (Bork quoted in Calabresi 2007:14). Originalism is clearly connected to an absolutist moral vision. As Calabresi (2007:15) writes, “Many of us [originalists], myself included, believe in the existence of a divinely prescribed natural law”.

Opponents of Originalism argue that the present-day meaning of the Constitution should not be determined by the “dead hand” of the long-ago Framers. Times change, and the interpretation of the Constitution should change with it. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

The duality was apparent in the 2009 confirmation hearings for Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor. Originalists saw her as a judicial advocate – someone who had and would take into account evolving norms, understandings, values, and ethics. Her ethnicity, gender, and humble roots figured in the debate, but the deep intent of questioning from conservative quarters was to reveal her as an advocate of the living Constitution. Obama coined the term “empathy” as a more palatable term for the living Constitution. In a news conference after Supreme Court Justice David Souter announced his retirement, Obama said, “I view that quality of empathy, of understanding and identifying with people’s hopes and struggles, as an essential ingredient for arriving at just decisions and outcomes.” Even the Framers, Obama wrote in 2006, argued about the meaning of the Constitution.

“Before the ink on the constitutional parchment was dry, arguments had erupted, not just about minor provisions, but about first principles. Not just between peripheral figures, but within the revolution’s very core” (Obama 2008[2006]:108).

6. Environment. Debates about the environment (such as the reality of climate change) are rife with oppositions. These debates are often linked to different views of nature, as grid-group analysts have noted (e.g., Schwartz and Thompson 1990, Thompson et al. 1990). Though grid-group theory reveals four different views of nature,<sup>5</sup> there are also examples of dualities in debates about the environment. Consider, for example, a duality within the environmental movement. The shades of green are infinite, but environmentalists have constructed a duality that splits their ranks: “bright green” versus “dark green.” “On the one extreme, the dark green groups—such as Greenpeace USA and Friends of the Earth—seek radical social change to solve environmental problems, most often by confronting the corporate sector,” writes Hoffman (2009). “On the other extreme, the bright green groups - such as Conservation International and the Environmental Defense Fund - work within the market system, often in close collaboration with corporations, to solve environmental problems.” The bright/dark duality appears to correspond with the grid-group duality I discussed above: bright greens in the individualism/market category (low grid, low group) and dark greens in the egalitarian category (low grid, high group). These also correspond to the views of nature associated with these grid-group types, “nature robust” versus “nature ephemeral,” respectively (see footnote 5 for definitions).

The dark/bright division is widening, says Hoffman (2009), as each side criticizes and vilifies the other. The dark greens say the brights have been coopted by corporations, “helping them to greenwash their polluting activities.” The bright greens say the dark greens are “out of touch radicals that only complicate the environmental agenda by resorting to extreme tactics like burning down chalets at Aspen or genetic engineering labs.” However, the dark and bright greens need one another to accomplish their goals, says Hoffman. The dark greens “pull the tail of the political spectrum further in one direction, they shift the center of the debate and create a category of moderates.” The moderate bright greens engage the powers-that-be, while the radical darks keep the tough issues on the table and help to set the agenda.

7. Healthcare. Healthcare reform was a big plank in the Democratic platform in the 2008 elections. Most Americans favor major reform. For example, in a July 2009 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 82 % favored forcing insurance companies to provide coverage to people with pre-existing medical conditions (Pew Research Center for People & the Press 2009). A large majority (66 %) supported the “individual mandate” requiring everyone to have insurance. Opinions about the “public option” were split, however – 55 % for, 45 % against (Pew described the public option as “a government health insurance plan to compete with private health insurance plans.”) In 2009 and 2010, such healthcare reforms were fiercely debated, and the

<sup>5</sup> The four views of nature are (1) ‘nature benign’ (or ‘nature robust’), corresponding to individualism (low grid, low group); (2) ‘nature capricious’, corresponding to isolation/fatalism (high grid, low group); (3) ‘nature perverse’ (or ‘nature tolerant’), corresponding to hierarchy (high grid, high group); and, (4) ‘nature ephemeral’, corresponding to egalitarianism (low grid, high group) (e.g. Schwartz and Thompson 1990; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990).

legislative process polarized Congress along party lines. Democrats favored major reforms (though they were internally divided about some, like the public option). Republicans displayed military discipline in their unified and total opposition to anything the Democrats favored.

One duality in healthcare reform is the conflict between the two ideologies: individualism versus egalitarianism. These, as noted above, are the hostile and jostling “cultures” grid-group theorists say are central to American society (Wildavsky 1986:335, Webber and Wildavsky 1986:25). While individualism emphasizes self-reliance, independence, and freedom from governmental regulation, egalitarianism emphasizes equality of political, economic, social, and civil rights and opportunities for all. This duality is always present in moral debates, but it may be exacerbated for political and economic advantage. The extreme polarization of Congress along party lines appears to be an example, with each side vilifying the other and making compromise virtually impossible.

These seven dualities are just a few of the dualities that animate and structure moral debates. Each duality, like any system of categorization, is a simplification of reality. By moving down levels of observation, examining a domain in finer and finer detail, it is often easy to question the validity of a categorical system. For example, do the purple cartograms (Figure 14.2) mean that the Red/Blue duality is false? Are people simply ignorant or misinformed? Once they had the facts, would they drop the Red/Blue distinction? There are at least three answers. First, every duality (like any categorical system) is a myth that partially represents reality. An element of truth resides in each one. This truth (or factual accuracy) varies across time and space. For example, there are redder and bluer areas in the cartograms. Second, a duality represents two central tendencies. A duality is a set of complex categories, with many variations. However, the many variations are related to the two central tendencies. Despite complexity and variation, there are only two modalities. Third, a duality is a dominant way that people perceive and interpret the world. For example, people use the Red/Blue distinction as a way to think about and discuss ethical, political, social, and economic issues. To dismiss a duality as a misconception is to deny the reality of individual experience.<sup>6</sup>

### Alternation of Domains as Sets

The alternation of mutual opposites is a common temporal pattern (Baker 2005). As discussed above, alternating patterns have been observed in political, economic, and social domains. Here, I make three claims: First, dualities are interconnected as “radial categories” (e.g., Lakoff

<sup>6</sup> Just as Lipset (1996:267) said with regards to the argument that the widespread perception of a moral crisis is simply the result of ignorance, panic, or media-fueled hyperbole: “The critics [of America] have exaggerated many of the problems in the quest to demonstrate decay. There is, however, no denying that the impression of a change in basic values exists, and to dismiss public perception [of crisis] as somehow wrong or misinformed is to deny the reality of individual experience.”

1996). Second, the coherence of a related set of polarities is variable. Third, radial categories of moral domains alternate, rising and falling over time. These claims are testable. To the extent available data allow, I explore these claims by drawing on analyses of the “culture war” in America.

1. Dualities are radial categories. Building on Lakoff’s (1996) work, I use the cognitive linguistic idea of “radial categories” to explain how domains are interconnected (Baker 2005:68–71). Radial categories “are the most common of human conceptual categories” (Lakoff 1996:7). They define both central tendencies and variations around these tendencies. The moral visions of absolutism versus relativism are the cores of two opposed radial categories; other domains revolve around them (Baker 2005). As illustrated in Figure 14.3, the spokes on the hub of absolutism include Conservative Christianity, Red State politics (conservatism), the strict father family model, originalism, and opposition to the public option in healthcare (worded in the affirmative in Figure 14.3 as support of private healthcare). The spokes on the hub of relativism include secular elites, Blue State politics (liberalism), the nurturant parent family model, living Constitution, and support of the public option in healthcare reform (I exclude the Bright/Dark Greens duality because it exists within the environmental movement, which, typically, is associated with liberal politics, secularism, and so forth. A broader duality – environmentalism versus non-environmentalism – fits the level of analysis represented in Figure 14.3).<sup>7</sup>
2. The coherence of a radial category is variable. Coherence is the extent to which the domains in a radial category are linked. The lengths of the spokes in Figure 14.3 represent how tightly domains are linked. For simplicity, the spokes are equal lengths in this figure, but in reality, the length of each spoke could be different, representing the strength of the connection of a polarity to a moral vision. Tight coherence means that the domains in a radial category are strongly linked; loose coherence means that they are weakly linked. It is possible that one radial category will be more or less coherent than the other will. For example, the debates and legislative struggles in 2009 and 2010 about healthcare reform (see domain 7) suggest that the coherence of the absolutist radial category was tighter than the coherence of the relativist radial category.

The duality of American moral culture appears to be empirically valid when radial categories strongly cohere. Dualistic thinking seems to be less of a simplification and more of the “truth.” Dualistic thinking appears to be incorrect and inaccurate when radial categories do not strongly cohere. There appears to be more complexity and variation than a dual model allows. Yet, the duality of American moral culture remains, even if it appears to recede at certain times and advance at others.

3. Radial categories alternate. One radial category of moral domains dominates for a time, only to be superseded by the other. Moral visions are the core of these radial categories. The duality of moral visions was created long ago (Jaspers 1953) and

<sup>7</sup> The Bright/Dark Greens duality suggests that alternation can occur at different levels. Moreover, two domains in the same radial category can be connected in patterns of alternation. For example, Conger (2009) argues that the relationship of Conservative Christianity and the Republican Party exhibits cycles of conflict and accommodation.

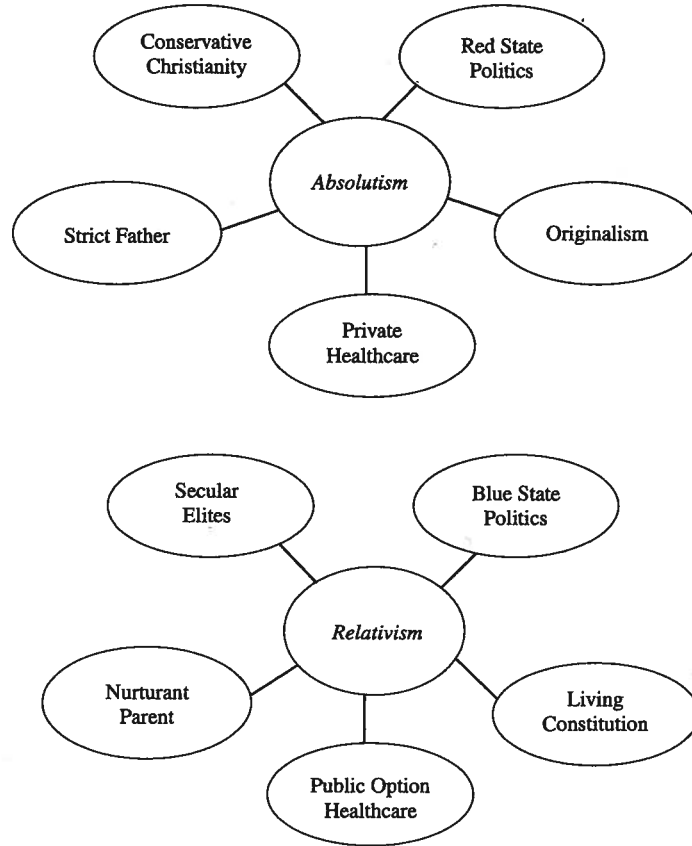


FIGURE 14.3. Illustration of dualities as radial categories.

has informed moral debates ever since (Orrù 1987). Recall, for example, Emerson's remarks quoted in the introduction to this chapter, as well as analyses of the Great Awakenings in America (Fogel 2000; McLoughlin 1978). These debates appear to be cyclical (Jaspers 1953, Orrù 1987). That is, moral visions alternate: one moral vision dominates for a time, only to be superseded by the other, and so on in a continual cyclical pattern. Building on this idea, I proposed a cyclical model of alternation (Baker 2005:147–156). Absolutism and relativism rise and fall over time, driven by endogenous and exogenous forces. The alternation of moral visions implies that their radial categories also alternate. The extent varies to which the domains of a radial category alternate with their moral vision. When radial categories tightly cohere, domains move in synchronicity with their moral visions; when they loosely cohere, domains move at different rates and appear to be less connected with their core moral vision.

Analyses of the American “culture war” provide an opportunity to explore these claims, at least to the extent that available data allow. Two claims underlie the culture war thesis (Baker 2005:66–85). First, the “polarization claim” argues that Americans are sharply divided into two moral camps based on absolutism/relativism duality. This duality is considered to be the

overarching frame of the culture war (Hunter 1991). Second, the “linkage claim” argues that moral visions and the constellation of values and attitudes around them are tightly coupled. That is, people use their moral visions to derive their values and attitudes about a host of issues. “The polarization is most conspicuous in such hotly disputed issues as abortion, gay marriage, school vouchers, and prayers in public schools,” writes Himmelfarb (2001:117–118). “But it has larger ramifications, affecting beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices on a host of subjects ranging from private morality to public policy, from popular culture to high culture, from crime to education, welfare, and the family.” As defined above, coherence is the extent to which people actually hold consistent moral visions, values, and attitudes. Political activists and religious leaders always try to get their followers’ beliefs to cohere as a way to consolidate political, economic, and ideological power. If the linkage claim is correct, then a radial category would closely cohere and polarization would extend from moral visions to religious values to social attitudes.

What limited data we have on moral visions suggest that they have become increasingly polarized over time (e.g., Baker 2005:78–80, 142–144). In 1981, Americans’ views of moral authority were different from what they would be ten years later. In 1981, only 37 % of Americans chose the absolutist position in the World Values Survey; the majority (60 percent) chose the relativist position. By 1990, however, the proportions of relativists and absolutists were about the same (45 % versus 50 %, respectively). The roughly 50:50 split was reproduced in the 1995 and 2000 World Values Surveys.<sup>8</sup> This rising tide of absolutism occurred across all age cohorts, social classes, men and women, married and unmarried, and whites and non-whites. The bimodal distributions in Figure 14.1 indicate that polarized moral visions are still evident in 2009. Thus, the available survey data provide evidence of a clear duality of moral visions.

The coherence of radial categories is loose. Unlike moral visions, values and attitudes are not deeply polarized (Baker 2005, Davis and Robinson 1996, DiMaggio et al. 1996, Fiorina and Abrams 2008, Greeley and Hout 2006, Williams 1997). For example, God is more important in the lives of moral absolutists, compared to relativists. Absolutists are more likely than relativists to hold traditional values and to favor closer ties between church and state. Yet, absolutists and relativists have a lot in common (Baker 2005: Table 3.1). For example, 97 % of absolutists believe in the soul; 95 % of relativists do as well. About 95 % of absolutists believe in Heaven, compared to 80 % of relativists. The biggest difference concerns beliefs in Hell: 84 % of absolutists versus 65 % of relativists. Nonetheless, moral visions are significantly related to a host of religious, political, economic, and social values and attitudes (Baker 2005). In addition, the beliefs of some groups indeed have become more coherent over the last three decades, especially strong political partisans and wealthier and politically sophisticated voters (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), suggesting that domains can move together with their core moral vision.

Despite evidence of weak coherence, the culture war debate continues (see exchanges in Hunter and Wolfe 2006). Hunter (2006), for example, says that we are looking in the wrong place when we look at what everyday Americans think and believe. Hunter (2006:20–21)

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<sup>8</sup> The World Values Surveys were administered in the United States in 1981, 1995, 2000, and 2006. The 2006 survey did not include the item on moral visions.

argues that we should not view culture “as the norms and values residing in people’s heads and hearts but rather as systems of symbols and other cultural artifacts, institutions that produce and promulgate those symbols, discourses that articulate and legitimate particular interests, and competing fields where culture is contested.” Moreover, he says, “the heart of the culture war hypothesis was the contention that there had been a realignment in American public culture that had been and still is institutionalized chiefly through special interest organizations, denominations, political parties, foundations, competing media outlets, professional associations, and the elites whose ideals, interests, and actions give all these organizations direction and leadership.” In other words, the culture war is more about elites and what they think and do, less about the masses and what they think and do.

There is no doubt that elites have become more polarized over time. Those who conclude that a deeply polarized America is a myth also conclude, based on empirical evidence, that elites are indeed polarized (e.g., Fiorina et al. 2006, Fiorina and Abrams 2008). In addition, as political parties have become more polarized, people have more clearly sorted along ideological lines (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008) Partisans have become “more closely associated with one or the other of the increasingly interconnected clusters” (Fiorina and Abrams 2008:577). Nonetheless, elite polarization has not translated into mass polarization. One reason, Fiorina (2006:86) says, is that elites are not as influential as they like to believe. It may also be that the ordinary Americans are not “cultural dopes,” to use Garfinkel’s felicitous phrase.

Continuing the debate about the culture war is essential for understanding the source and issue of value pluralism in society, as well as to maintain the health of democratic deliberation in the public sphere (Evan and Nunn 2005). The mass versus elite perspectives are not incompatible. The duality of moral visions may be expressed and promoted with greater force and clarity by elites, but the empirical evidence (Baker 2005) shows that moral visions do, indeed, inform the values and attitudes of the masses – just not as strongly. In other words, the radial categories of absolutism and relativism cohere more tightly for elites than they do for everyday Americans.

Though moral visions are only loosely connected to values and attitudes, we can expect the perception of crisis and conflict to be acute at a time when absolutism and relativism are held in equal measure (Baker 2005). At these times, disagreements between moral absolutists and relativists appear to be at their maximum, even though there are still wide areas of agreement in values and attitudes. In other words, the radial categories of absolutism and relativism appear to have moved farther apart. Elite discourse is especially shrill at these times. It feels as if the “harmonious interaction of contradictory principles” is in jeopardy, and “the promise of balancing contending forces in perpetual equilibrium” (Maybury-Lewis 1989:14) is hollow and false. If the data on the mass polarization of moral visions are indicators, it appears that we are in one of these periods (at the time of this writing). If historical patterns are repeated, the debate will subside, only to be renewed once again.

### **What is American about Dualistic Thinking?**

Dualistic thinking is universal. It is not an American invention or monopoly. What is special about dualistic thinking in America? America is fertile soil for dualistic thinking – especially in moral domains – because of its unique ideological foundation (Baker 2005). The cultural



adhesive of any nation-state is what Habermas (1998) calls the popular self-consciousness of belonging to a people. This self-consciousness forms "a relation of solidarity" between people (Habermas 1998:111). For almost all nations, this relation of solidarity stands on a common heritage, including common ancestry, religion, history, language, customs, traditions, and territory. This common heritage produces "the consciousness of belonging to "the same" people, and makes subjects into citizens of a single political community – into members who can feel responsible *for one another*. The nation of the *Volksggeist*, the unique spirit of the people – the first truly *modern* form of collective identity – provided the cultural basis for the constitutional state" (Habermas 1998:113).

America does not have this sort of "primordial substrate" (as Habermas calls it). America is not a "birthright" community (Lipset 1996). Rather, the popular self-consciousness of belonging to the same people rests on an ideological foundation – a shared (or thought to be shared) set of values and ideas (Baker 2005). This ideology-based relation of solidarity is America's "civil religion" (Habermas 1998), or what Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Lincoln called America's "political religion" (Lipset 1996:18). Cultural citizenship is based on ideology: "Being an American. . . is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American" (Lipset 1996:31).

In this context, disagreements become moral battles. As Lipset (1996:63) said, Americans "tend to view social and political dramas as morality plays, as battles between God and the Devil, so that compromise is virtually unthinkable." The well-known "splitting-projecting" dynamic operates with considerable force (Baker 2005:137–138). Each side "sees itself as good and its adversary as bad and uses this justification for being oppositional, applying logic such as 'only when they are eliminated will badness disappear.' Since each group takes the same position, the conflict escalates to the point where both are behaving self-righteously, wholeheartedly denying that the accusations of the opponent have *any* validity" (Smith and Berg 1988:77). This oppositional dynamic clearly operates in the domains considered here (Table 14.1).

Each side of a duality needs the other: absolutists and relativists, liberals and conservatives, strict fathers and nurturant parents, originalists and living Constitutionals, and so on. Neither side truly wants to eliminate the other. As Smith and Berg (1988:79) note, "when A gets B to carry and express its displaced parts, A will be invested in remaining in the vicinity of B to obtain vicarious gratification as the disowned parts of itself are enacted and to maintain the strength of the subgroup that carries these disowned parts." For example, as Orrù (1987:156) puts it, absolutism and relativism "are dialectically related as parts of a common discourse."

Does the duality of American moral culture mean that there is no single truth, no single reality, for Americans themselves or for the sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, and humanists who study them? What Collins said about the fields of social science and the humanities applies here as well. "One way out of this conclusion [that there is no single reality, no truth] is the possibility that multiple realities and competing truths will turn out to be complementary. We may hope that the situation is that of the many blind men touching different parts of the same elephant; more appropriately, since that image is too static, we may hope that the competing factions of philosophers or sociologists are pursuing multiple paths of advance into the same wilderness. But is it also possible that this will not be the case; a unified map may never be filled in because the paths may never intersect" (Collins 1998:879).

## CONCLUSION

I propose that two principles – duality and alternation – are central to the structure and dynamics of American moral culture. The division into mutually opposed categories (duality) is a simplification of reality. Like other systems of categorization, dualistic thinking may occur because people are “cognitive misers,” because it confers evolutionary advantages, or because it is more resilient to shocks and surprises compared to a single mode. Dual categories in particular may come from the polarities that are perceived in nature or as part of the human experience. Dualistic thinking and dual social organization may be functional, providing a mechanism that harmonizes contradictions and solves the problem of social order by balancing oppositional forces. Dualistic thinking can be a tool to pursue political and ideological goals.

Dualities are ubiquitous. I presented dualities in seven domains in American society – moral visions, religion, family, politics, law, environment, and healthcare – to illustrate the diversity and range of duality. Like any categorical system, each duality is myth that is a partial representation of reality. Each contains elements of truth. A duality represents two central tendencies – two centers of gravity in moral discourse – even though the reality they represent is complex and variable. People use duality as a dominant way to perceive, frame, and interpret their experience.

Dualities form sets. These sets are radial categories, where spokes are domains and the hub is a moral vision. The coherence or consistency of each radial category varies over time and place. When a radial category tightly coheres, it appears to be a more accurate representation of reality than when it loosely coheres. Moral visions alternate over time, driven by internal (endogenous limitations or inconsistencies) or external forces (exogenous shocks or surprises). Alternation may coexist with long-term secular trends. When a radial category tightly coheres, domains move in synchronous pattern with their core moral vision. When a radial category loosely coheres, domains may move at different rates.

America is fertile ground for dualistic thinking. Disagreements escalate into moral battles between good and evil. Each side vilifies the other, each side denies the validity of the other, and compromise becomes remote. This oppositional dynamic is the theme of this chapter. Duality is not only an elite project, but also is a part of everyday moral culture.

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