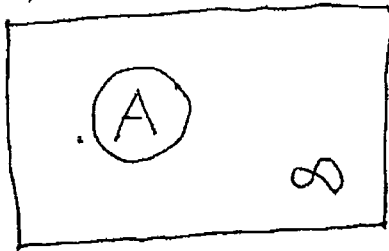


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Binary thought is formalized in Aristotlean logic through the law of non-contradiction. A concept is defined as 'A' and everything that does not fall within that concept is designated as 'Not-A'. Binary oppositions are mutually exclusive – there can be no overlap between 'A' and 'Not-A' and there can be no concepts that are both 'A' and 'Not-A'. The relationship between binary opposites is not neutral. It constitutes a violent hierarchy. Only the privileged term (A) has positive value, while the other term (Not-A) is defined negatively as an effect of A.



A / Not-A  
Man / Not-Man  
White / Not-White  
Clean/Unclean  
Civilised/Uncivilised  
Same/Other  
Heterosexuality/Not-Heterosexuality  
Mind/Body  
Culture/Nature

As critics of binary oppositions emphasise, the concept (A) is dependent upon its devalued opposite (Not-A) to have meaning and to maintain its privilege. But the violent hierarchization effected in a binary only operates to the extent that the dependence of the privileged term (A, Man, White) upon its subordinated other (Not-A, Not-Man, Not-White) is covered over.

In this structure, the subordinated term only has a negative value. For instance, Woman, who occupies the position of Not-A, is only insofar as she is Not-Man. This means that Woman has no autonomous identity of her own. So Woman can be confused with everything Man is not eg – God, animal, thing, and alien.

That Man is privileged over Woman, or White over Not-White is not logically required, it is rather an effect of power. This means a hierarchy can be reversed. For example, Culture is valued over Nature in philosophy but dairy food is privileged as 'natural', while 'junk' food is devalued as 'unnatural'.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy" Feminist Studies Volume 7, 1, 1981: 38-56.  
See especially, pp.44-7.

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Elizabeth Grosz Sexual Subversions: Three  
French Feminists Sydney Allen & Unwin 1989

**Dichotomy (also Distinction; Opposition)** When a continuous spectrum is divided into discrete self-contained elements, these elements exist in opposition to each other. When the system of boundaries or divisions operates by means of the construction of binaries or pairs of opposed terms, these terms are not only mutually exclusive, but also mutually exhaustive. They divide the spectrum into one term and its opposite, with no possibility of a term which is neither one nor the other, or which is both. Dichotomous structures take the form of A and not-A relations, in which one term is positively defined and the other is defined only as the negative of the first. The relation between the binary terms is regulated by the law of contradiction, which can be formulated as 'either A or not-A', or alternatively as 'Not (A and not-A)'. Within this structure, one term (A) has a positive status and an existence independent of the other; the other term is purely negatively defined, and has no contours of its own; its limiting boundaries are those which define the positive term. Dichotomies are inherently non-reversible, non-reciprocal hierarchies, and thus describe systems of domination (*see also* **Difference** and **Logocentrism**).