

A School for Thought II: Thinking & Unthinking

Paul Moor-Bridger*

In a [previous post](#) I worried about the lack of real thinking in our schools. A couple of weeks later, [Freya and Andy Fisher](#) raised the concern that ‘thoughtwashing’, the simulation of the virtues of thinking, was becoming ‘a curse’ of university philosophy departments up and down the country.

But what is this thing that isn’t happening as much as I and some others might like? What is thinking? And how can we distinguish its genuine forms from its ersatz appearances? Because, as the ‘thoughtwashing’ complaint makes clear, it is easy to go through a seminar or write an essay or, dare I say, teach a lesson *as if* you are thinking, when in fact you are just running through a series of well-rehearsed moves without needing to trouble yourself with anything so irksome as genuine thought.

I like Hannah Arendt’s suggestion – and in such a bold inquiry it is useful to have a confident guide – that thinking is a conversation you have with yourself (Arendt 1978). She attributes this discovery to Plato’s Socrates, drawing attention to the well-known passages in *Theaetetus* and *Statesman* where thinking is described as the process of the mind ‘simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them’ (Plato, 1961, 895); ‘the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself’ (Plato, 1961, 1011). We refer to this kind of thinking when we use the phrase ‘Let me think about that’, an indication that our minds have been presented with a question which we



require time to *stop and think* about aside from the press of the here and now.

Of course, it was Socrates' *modus operandi* to produce in his interlocutors, through questioning, a state of *aporia*, that unnerving realisation that your once-definite answers have dissolved under the weight of their own contradictions. The benefit of this disorientating loss of certainty is that you feel the vital force of the question: any subsequent ideas that begin their gestation from such a moment of conception emerge all the more lively into the light of day.

For those of us without the opportunity to wander down to the Agora for a conversation with the 'gadfly', we can try to provide the Socratic pedagogical midwifery for each other by asking the kinds of questions and responding to each other in ways that give birth to ideas we better understand – not in the confusion of the aporetic moment – but when we enter into our inner conversation on the train home, on a park bench; or wherever the thoughtful quiet descends.

The power of open, critical, communal dialogue – thinking as conversation – was brought home to me a couple of years ago when I was a volunteer with Edinburgh University's [Philosophy in Prisons](#) project, which used [Catherine McCall](#)'s Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI) method. We were presented with a stimulus – a short text, such as a fable, or image – which was used to generate questions for our discussion and a ban was placed on the injection of jargon and standard positions into the conversation by the philosophically-trained volunteers.

Unsurprisingly, the prisoners didn't express their questions in conventional philosophese. Trying to answer them was an uncomfortable experience, and I found my mind continually trying to think along established lines. When you are asked in a direct way to respond to, say, an ethical question, Kant/cant is hard to avoid. Thinking is hard work when you aren't able to stand on the shoulders of giants, or, more accurately, to peep out from behind the cover that their massive bulk affords. It was also exhilarating and educative.

But the old worry returns. How can we know that students in schools and universities – or even participants in a community of inquiry – are really thinking, not just running the 'philosophical discussion' or 'critical, reflective, personally-engaged writing' programme that they have uploaded into their brains? Brows are easily furrowed, utterances can be deliberately halting, it isn't hard to appear to have stumbled across something remarkably similar to the categorical imperative all by yourself.

Let's assume there is a difference between real thinking and its mere performance. How might we discern the difference? Surely this is the educationally interesting question. Yet of course that is precisely what we can't establish. We don't have direct access to our students' minds, and won't for the foreseeable future, I hope.

Fisher and Fisher blame capitalism for having created a climate suspicious of critical inquiry and reducing education to final, marketable, measurable outcomes. They are probably right, but global capitalism is a frustratingly



nebulous windmill at which to tilt. Is there anything we can do to allow genuine thinking to develop in our educational institutions while we wait for the capitalist system to undermine itself through the perversity and contradictions of its incentive-structure? Can we create, even now, conditions in which the motivation is not to 'fake it' compliantly, but to run the risk of original thought?

Good questions. I'll come back to them once I've had time to think.

References

Arendt, H. (1978) *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt

Hamilton, E. & Cairns, H. (1961) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

*After eighteen years of wandering through the full range of English and Scottish secondary schools, **Paul Moore-Bridger** has ended up in Birmingham where he is Head of Religion and Philosophy at King Edward's School, Edgbaston. He is still wondering.

Author contact: pdm@kes.bham.sch.uk