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## Socrates versus Peter Pan: The Difficulties of Thinking Critically

In 1916 the American philosopher John Dewey wrote (in his book *Democracy and Education*) that “*all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned ... is to develop their ability to think.*” Now, almost a hundred years later, we still are far away from having realized Dewey’s recommendation. As recently as in 2008, the formulation “the pupils shall learn how to think critically” was included in the Norwegian school’s statutes, which probably is exceptional on a world basis. But how this is to be done in the classroom, is far from clear. No measures are taken to enable teachers to implement critical thinking in their teaching, neither by making this a subject of its own in schools, nor by training teacher students in the art of critical thinking.

Consequently, this new formulation in the statutes is mostly ignored. As in Dewey’s times, the basic faculties pupils are supposed to learn in school, is knowing how to read and write and do elementary math. Neither teachers nor parents tend to list “developing the pupil’s ability to think” as a fourth basic faculty. Maybe they deem this unnecessary, since thinking is something we automatically do, and thus have no need to learn.

In that case, they are mistaken. The ability to think, not understood in the broad sense of having thoughts in our head, which we always have, but in the narrow sense of critical thinking, does not come naturally at all. Critical thinking has to be meticulously learnt, like how to read and write and do math.

The fact that most people believe we can do sufficiently well without developing our faculty to think critically in a systematic way, is not very reassuring in a modern democracy. Most people even seem to be unaware of critical thinking as a possibility we humans have. But as Dewey pointed out, a well-functioning democracy presupposes citizens who are capable of assessing different statements in the public debate, in order to make informed choices that are in their own interest, and preferably also in the interest of their fellow citizens and the common good. To be able to do this, one’s ability to think critically must have been developed sufficiently well.

### **An advanced, culturally developed faculty**

Language and thinking are closely connected. Thus, human beings have since the dawn of times been thinking in the wide sense of the word. But thinking in the narrower, specific way of critical thinking was just as hard to achieve as the technique of freezing words and sentences and numbers into symbols written on material objects like stones, wood, papyrus, parchment, or paper. Like these faculties, critical thinking is an advanced, culturally developed faculty that has to be meticulously learnt. It did not come about until two and a half thousand years ago, in ancient Greece. That was a long time *after* man had started writing and reading and doing math, and tens of thousand years after our species had developed its faculty to communicate by way of language.

Being scientific in an Aristotelian sense was not possible until the faculty of critical thinking was sufficiently developed. It is not accidental that the scientifically-minded

Aristotle developed logic as a new philosophical discipline, based on the informal, implicit logic of Platonic and Socratic reasoning. Science and critical thinking, including logic, are closely linked, they are two sides of the same coin.

Even if people acknowledge this when it comes to science and philosophy, they tend to ignore that this also is the case in everyday life. We must remember that critical thinking did not start with Aristotle, but with Socrates two generations before him, who was not primarily occupied with science, but with ethical questions as how we are to live our lives. Socrates was a master of critical thinking by way of asking questions that problematized a seemingly true and straightforward statement. Through his practice of questioning people at the agora or wherever he went, he made it abundantly clear that critical thinking is most relevant to each one of us, as it enables us to understand better who we are, in terms of what and how we think about ourselves and the world we live in. «Know thyself» was a slogan Socrates embraced, and which he linked intimately with the faculty of critical thinking.

As Plato's dialogs display, Socrates had a hard time making his interlocutors think critically. This is because critical thinking does not come natural at all, and is something we are reluctant to do. The challenge of thinking critically tends in fact to disquiet and even offend people. Examining critically how and what other people think, does not make you very popular. In the end, the Athenian citizens killed Socrates to stop his troublesome questioning.

### **The Peter Pan impulse**

To better understand how unnatural an activity critical thinking is, we just need to compare such a state of mind with how our mind naturally works. This can be seen in the classroom and elsewhere most of the time. The Scottish author James M. Barrie has amusingly captured our natural way of thinking in his novel *Peter Pan*, published in 1911 (and based on his theater play of 1904). Here is a telling paragraph from chapter one:

*I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of a person's mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island, for the Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers, and a hut fast going to decay, and one very small old lady with a hooked nose. It would be an easy map if that were all, but there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needle-work, murders, hangings, verbs that take the dative, chocolate pudding day, getting into braces, say ninety-nine, three-pence for pulling out your tooth yourself, and so on, and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still.*

What is striking here, is how undisciplined this natural way of thinking is. It allows for lots of thoughts at the same time, in a random, zigzag pattern that prevents us from thinking one thought through before we are distracted by another thought, either because of something

happening outside our head, or within our head. The result is quite messy. What we end up saying and doing because of this will often be arbitrary, and not very clever or wise.

The Peter Pan character is the ultimate exponent of such a messy, zigzaggy state of mind. He does not just baffle us with his cheeriness, and ability to fly, and innumerable whims; he also makes it impossible to concentrate, and to dwell with a thought in order to think it through. The result is a total confusion and capriciousness that might be charming at first glance, but which becomes unendurable in the long run. It feeds on a desperation underlying Peter Pan's way of being in the world, which is his enormous fear of growing up, of becoming an adult. All his feverishly intense whims are aimed at arresting growth, mental as well as physical. He will at all cost stay immature, and incarnates thus anti-maturity.

Such a quest for anti-maturity gets less and less charming the older the person gets in terms of years. Contrary to our physical development, where we reach puberty and get an adult's body whether we like it or not, our mental development is not that fixed. It is possible to remain a child, mentally speaking, through a long life, also for people who are not mentally impaired. You can be quite intelligent, as Peter Pan obviously is, but still resist growing up by taking more and more responsibility for your life.

Acknowledging that the process of growing up aims at making you a more and more responsible person, in the sense of being responsible for your own thoughts and choices, is paramount in this respect. Then you must also develop the ability to distinguish between your own needs, and other people's needs, and not confuse the two. As an adolescent, you must learn to distinguish your own needs and aspirations from your parents's needs and aspirations on your behalf. If not, you will not be able to "know thyself". And if you become a parent yourself, you must teach your children to make their own choices, and to find out what they want with their life, and accept the outcome (provided it is not destructive, or insane), even if it is quite different from what you had wanted on your children's behalf. And that is because you and your children are different persons, however hard it may be to reconcile with this fact. You don't own your children, even if you have conceived them and raised them.

To live according to these demands is not easy, as lots of us might have experienced. Still, it has very much to do with becoming a mature person, which is what Peter Pan so desperately resists. Like him, we can let the spontaneous resistance to mature take the upper hand, and succumb to our natural inclination to think in fragments which impatiently zigzag or rotate in our head. Then we keep the stern demands of growing up out of sight, and seek refuge in our childish ways. We can call this inclination "the Peter Pan impulse."

Giving in to the Peter Pan impulse has several unfortunate consequences. One of them is refusing to take responsibility for one's own life by blaming everyone and everything but oneself for the misfortunes of life. Another one is resisting any insight in one's own way of thinking, and in how the world is functioning, by escaping relevant questions. One evades these by talking about something else, or by becoming irritable or emotional in another unpleasant way, and by literally running away, maybe screaming and slamming the door.

Such people arrest their personal development, and remain in a state of mind where thoughts are spinning around and around, like a carousel gone wild. This is the natural way of thinking, in the broad sense of the world. And as we all know, we cannot stop thinking at will, just as we can stop moving around by sitting or laying down. We have no button to stop our rotating or zigzagging thoughts, however much we would like to do so. This can bring us to the

point of desperation when we don't like our carousel of thought fragments any more, as it tortures us with worries or spitefulness or other anxieties that might not be well founded, should we be able to stop the thought carousel for a moment to critically examine a disturbing thought fragment or two. That's why childlike grown-ups tend to be more worried and unhappy than what mature grown-ups generally are. Remaining a child, mentally speaking, is not very fun after all. It is tedious, both to oneself, and to one's nearest and dearest. And that's because it arrests change and development when these things are called for.

Then the escape route by way of the Peter Pan impulse has led the person into a mental prison. Such people get more and more frustrated as the thought carousel spinning around continues, since they see no way out. And that's because they persistently block the entrance that in fact is there, which is to seize the thoughts one by one, and examine it thoroughly and quietly, in order to assess its truth or lack of truth.

### **Pushing the pause button**

Luckily, the Peter Pan impulse is not ruling the ground alone. If that had been the case, no one would have managed to mature mentally. If children have a fear of growing up, they also have a fascination for adult life, because of all its possibilities. Think about the exciting things grown-ups can do, which children are not capable of, or not allowed to do! Even if a grown-up life may look tedious, it has also its juicy sides that children look forward to do. What possibilities will not open up when we become adults! It's then we will conquer the world!

This "wanting to grow up impulse" is the opposite of to the Peter Pan impulse, and what we must rely on. It is the wanting to grow up impulse we must appeal to in order to think critically. We then must want to be reasonable, to make use of the faculty of reason we are born with.

Confronted with the Peter Pan impulse, we must admit that it is not entirely true that man is a rational animal, as we like to believe. We should rather state that man is an animal with *an option of being rational*, dependent on our ability to make use of the rationality we are endowed with as a species. Examples of irrational human conduct are abundant, as we all know. And that's because it is much easier to be irrational than rational.

The great gift of philosophy is its teaching us how to make better use of our rationality. Socrates showed us that it in some way *is* possible to stop the carousel of thoughts, at least for a moment, by saying the equivalent of "Hey, this is going too fast, let's stop for a moment to have a closer look at what's going on!". Said in modern terms, he pushed a mental pause button that in fact is there, similar to what we do when we watch a movie on dvd, and push the pause button in order to dwell with a single frame of picture. Then we have arrested the flow of pictures and sound, in order to examine it as long as we like to.

Normally, when we watch a movie, pushing the pause button is not something we tend to do. Then we would rather go along with the stream of pictures and sound and narration, and allow ourselves to be seduced, or intrigued. But if we should really like to find out what the moviemakers or actors do and say at some specific moment, we now have – unlike the audience in a movie theater – the possibility of freezing the picture at will, at any time we deem it desirable. For movie buffs, this is wonderful, as it allows them to be as nerdy as they want, for instance by solving any dispute of what was really said and done at that specific

moment of the picture. For everybody else, the use of the pause button is restricted to outside distractions, as when we must go to the bathroom, or somebody rings the doorbell.

Socrates is as nerdy as a movie buff when it comes to human speech. By way of his questioning, he repeatedly pushes the mental pause button of thought. This may frustrate the interlocutor, as it is never pleasant to have one's flow of speech halted. Typically, the sophists, who wanted to give long speeches that seduced the listeners mentally, accused Socrates of tearing their speech into little pieces. He destroyed the whole show by saying again and again: "Stop! Let's look further into the statement you just made!". That is necessary in order to find out if the statement really is true. Or if it will prove to be not very sound after having been thoroughly examined. In this way Socrates revealed that a speech often contains reasons that may be more or less good, and arguments that build on premises that may be dubious or false. Also the reasoning itself may be more or less sound, based on how it done – this is a matter of logic, which Aristotle was the first to explicitly point out.

Until we follow Socrates in pushing the mental pause button, we give ourselves no chance to find out if the thoughts contained in a speech are any good, or not. Only if we allow ourselves the opportunity to push such a button, we can indulge in critical thinking. As this implies interrupting someone's speech (or our own inner speech), it takes the courage and stamina to withstand the "You tear my speech into little pieces!" accusation. Yes, that's exactly what we do, and have to do, whether you like it or not. Normal rules of politeness and a diplomatic urge to smooth out differences have no place in a critical investigation. That does not mean that you have to be rude (Socrates always addressed his interlocutor in a respectful and even considerate way), it only means that you should not give in to social conventions you would abide to in another setting. The setting of a critical thinking session is unnatural and special and artificial, this is a point that can hardly be overstressed.

Peter Pan would have flown away in panic, should he have encountered Socrates and his quest to "know thyself". But he's beyond salvage, so let him just fly away. For the rest of us there is hope, if we dare to push the pause button of thought from time to time, in order to make room for critical thinking. Then we give ourselves the chance of maturing, as maturing is very much about a constant evaluations of our thoughts – about *what* we think of this and that, and *how* we think about it. Do we approve of the consequences of the thought in question, after we have managed to think it through, and thus have developed it from a fragment to a fully articulated thought? Or do we not approve of it, and find it even ridiculous, or unreasonable, or unpalatable in another way? If so, we might not want to have this thought anymore, and try to get rid of it.

This will in turn have consequences on some other thoughts we have, as thoughts tend to back each other, or form different parts of a whole conviction, like the different parts of a house. We sense this right away, and are reluctant to such an enterprise, as this may have unforeseen consequences. It makes us feel unsafe, and we would rather be safe than sorry, even if our present condition is lamentable. What we know, eventually becomes dear, however untenable the situation is. This is what the ancient Greeks called "tragic irony," as everybody but the person himself sees what's bothering him, and preventing him from flourishing in life. The tragic bit of this irony is that the person stubbornly refuses to realize what the others see, and thus remains stuck in his lamentable situation.

### **Neverland versus the Kingdom of rationality**

While Peter Pan lives in Neverland, Socrates and the other philosophers reside in what we can call the Kingdom of rationality. We enter this Kingdom of rationality when we manage, like Socrates, to push the mental pause button, in order to scrutinize a thought until we have thoroughly assessed it. This is a demanding endeavor, like playing a game or doing a sports performance. It requires so much self-discipline that we only are able to stay in the Kingdom of rationality for a limited amount of time. Such a stay hopefully makes us a little better equipped to cope with everyday life, after we have managed to adjust one or more of our thoughts, and thus can function a little bit better in daily life, and be a little bit less annoyed by the squeaks and squalor of our inner thought carousel, which of course starts spinning again as soon as we leave the Kingdom of rationality. We have become a little bit more mature and responsible human being.

The Kingdom of rationality is clearly as far from Neverland as one possibly can get. Compared with Neverland's lushness and feverishly abundance of activities, the Kingdom of rationality may look barren and not much fun, like a desert. That's why children, and grown-ups too, are so tempted to fly away to Neverland, while ignoring the Kingdom of rationality. In Neverland we are blissed with every distraction needed to stop thinking and escape troublesome thoughts or questions. There we apparently can stay forever, or at least most of the time, since we cannot totally free ourselves from the demands of daily life. Neverland is like a drug; it takes us away from any responsibility, frees us from any need of self-discipline, and bombards us with stimuli like a music video tv channel with no pause button at all: "Let's move further on before anything is finished, let's move to the next distraction before we have digested the previous one!" Those who enter this frantic rally of distractions, have a hard time stopping, if they manage it at all.

In this respect, Neverland is an equivalent to the island of the Sirens. As Homer tells us, the Sirens sing so beautifully that no sailor who comes within hearing distance, can withstand their song. They just have to sail closer and listen to it, and then they are never able to move away from it again. That is why the shores of the Sirens's island are crowded with skeletons of sailors who succumbed to the song, and listened spellbound until they died of thirst and hunger. Ulysses was the only man who managed to listen to the Sirens's song and get away with it. He managed that by putting wax in his rowers's ears so they heard nothing, and had himself tied firmly to the mast. The rowers were instructed to row past the island, and not untie him however much he signaled them to do so.

Socrates is somewhat similar to Ulysses by having made himself able to withstand the lures of Neverland. He was capable of that because he was compelled by a benevolent demon – in Greek: a *daimon* – who had an even better lure, namely the quest to know thyself. As Socrates (according to Plato) said to the assembly of jurors that eventually sentenced him to death, he would "let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking ...". And that was because "examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do ...". It was his *daimon* who had made him realize this, and thus to excel in critical thinking. He was well aware of how strange this enterprise looked to his jurors, so when he stated that "life without this sort of examination is not worth living," he did not expect them to believe him. But so it was, and he could not help it, even when threatened to drink the poison cup.

Socrates's pushing the mental pause button can be seen as the equivalent of Ulysses's putting wax in the rowers's ears. Then we others, the interlocutors, are like the rowers who need guidance and protection to avoid having our mental development arrested, and consequently suffer a spiritual death, on the shores of Neverland. But contrary to Ulysses's wax, Socrates's pushing the mental pause button enables us to hear even better than before. And what we then hear better, is our own and other people's speech. We are then prevented from drowning our words in the stream of other words we are inclined to let out of our mouth. We then overcome our natural urge to talk and talk and talk by willfully cutting our own – or our interlocutor's – speech in small pieces. This quite unnatural act, which demands lots of self-discipline, eventually makes us deaf, or at least indifferent, to the noise of Neverland. Then we at last can fully concentrate on one thought at the time.

Compared to the wildly undisciplined, zigzag mental state in Neverland, such a concentration is a remarkable endeavor. It is no wonder why it took so long for mankind to make a Socrates appear on the stage with the unusual quest for critical thinking.

When we bring ourselves to enter the Kingdom of rationality, we find it less barren and desert-like as it looked like at first glance. We then discover that it contains an oasis or two, with palm trees and life giving water and figs and dates, where it can be quite pleasant to stay after all. Once more we realize that things often are not what they appear to be. Thus, Neverland is not such an appealing place after all, since all its lushness and distractions impair us mentally in the long run. And the Kingdom of rationality turns out to be a good and nourishing place for our mental development, despite its seemingly barrenness.

### **Authority, not authoritarian**

How are teachers supposed to lead their pupils (and themselves) into the Kingdom of rationality? This can best be achieved by having a dialogue in the Socratic way outlined in Plato. The teacher must then be the facilitator of a group conversation, turning the class into a community of inquiry. This is a demanding task which must be exercised with lots of rigor. As a facilitator, the teacher must be in command, and not have any reluctance about that. Like Socrates, she must be the one who pushes the mental pause button by asking questions, whereby the interlocutor tries to answer that question, whereby she asks another question based on that reply, etcetera.

In the contemporary Norwegian school, teachers might find such a demand for rigor quite dubious. Isn't such an attitude too stern, with a flavor of the authoritarian teacher of yesterday? Few if any want to assume the role of the teacher tyrant that has been denounced in many books and movies and tv plays during the last forty–fifty years.

Of course teachers should not go authoritarian once more. This is not what is called for in a community of inquiry, as an authoritarian teacher stops thinking. Pupils shivering with fear of being ridiculed, and even beaten by such a nasty character of the bad, old days is the anti-thesis of a community of inquiry. In a facilitator, authoritarian arbitrariness and a rule of terror have no place.

Far from being authoritarian, the facilitator must exercise *authority*, which is quite another matter. To facilitate a group conversation with authority means to be so good at what you do that you also can be fair and consequent. Authority can only come from good craftsmanship and fairness – which is the opposite of arbitrariness and a mean-spirited

conduct. The facilitator's authority stems from her mastery of the art of questioning, and of conceptualization, and of problematization, and of informal logic and other thinking skills. Then rationality comes fully into play, within a framework of clear-cut rules which we according to reason recognize as fair. As long as the facilitator sticks to these rules, arbitrariness and confusion is avoided. Here she must be a role model, where she imposes self-discipline and fairness in the pupils by way of her clear-cut and consequent conduct.

This does certainly not come naturally, but requires much work, both on developing the skills required, and on getting the right attitude. The skills can be learnt by studying the rules of critical thinking, while the attitude can be worked on by reflecting critically on existing norms and unwritten rules in the teacher's domain. Then the current tendency of confusing exercising authority with being authoritarian must be dealt with. What is the difference between exercising authority and being authoritarian? How can we exercise authority, and at the same time avoid being authoritarian? Socrates could have asked these questions, which would be an instance of critical thinking.

If we should account for the reason why exercising authority and being authoritarian tend to be mixed up, we can point to the fierce, anti-authoritarian voices of the cultural radicals in the 1950s and 1960s, and from the even stronger anti-authoritarian voices of the 1968 generation. These voices have been tremendously influential, and have shaped a neo-Rousseauian ideology that advocates an innate goodness of man, and an equally innate ability to flourish whenever we are freed from the links of culturally shaped authorities. Here self-discipline is not much valued, and even less called for, as human flourishing is supposed to happen spontaneously, given the absence of outer restraints. Then a Socratic rigor does not make much sense, and can easily be lumped together with authoritarian despotism.

According to this ruling ideology, the teacher is supposed to run the class with quite loose reins, relying much on the individual pupil's ability to think and take responsibility for his own learning, even in primary school. Whether any other than the mentally best equipped pupils are able to do so, just by themselves, at such a low age, is an unwelcome question that has not been too much discussed. But so it seems to be. And if this is the outcome of the last thirty–forty years's mainstream pedagogy, it would be contrary to its intended goal, which is to empower all the pupils with self-made learning faculties, and thus diminish the gap between the best and the least endowed pupils.

Such a goal is praiseworthy, and in line with Dewey's request to turn to-day's pupils into to-morrow's mature, democratically-minded citizens. So if we have no trouble with this goal, the issue is about the means. Then our criticism must be that the goal cannot be reached with the means advocated by mainstream pedagogy. These means can even be said to be counter-productive. Yes, we want to teach pupils how to think for themselves, and to take responsibility for their own learning, and for their own choices. But to assume that a teacher can achieve this by just being "human" and "caring" and "emphatic" and even "cool" in the sense of loose reins and permissiveness, is wishful thinking. Which is the opposite of critical thinking. Loose reins and permissiveness tend instead to create confusion and distractions in the classroom, because of the lack of clear-cut rules and the security and fairness that go with them. The absence of authority has caused a pedagogical vacuum after the authoritarian teacher was made obsolete, and this vacuum has proven to be quite unfortunate indeed.

### **A seemingly paradox**

A paradox the teacher has to face, is that the authority exercised by a Socratic facilitator is not very democratic in the usual, superficial sense of the word. Yet the rigor and self-discipline such an authority imposes on the pupils, is just what they need in order to mature into democratically-minded persons. The paradox resolves itself as soon as we stop confusing the end with the means, and realize that the proper pedagogical method for developing the pupils's thinking skills is only the mean, and not the end.

Then we also realize that a "democratic" way of teaching, in terms of allowing pupils to speak at will, instead of restraining them, even if their speech is a digression, is counter-productive. Instead of making the pupils more democratically-minded, this tends to make them more undisciplined and ego-centered, and less listening and attentive of other people than a well-functioning democratic society allows for. And above all, it allows the pupils's ability to think critically stay far less developed than what Dewey and others have deemed necessary. We must bear in mind that the ability to "express oneself" and the ability to think critically, are two very different things. Pupils can surely benefit from being good at expressing oneself, instead of having one's own needs being ignored, or run over, by other self-imposing persons. Developing the pupils's social skills is very well indeed. But it is not what it takes to make us well-functioning, democratic citizens. Then critical thinking skills are also requested.

Contrary to a Rousseauian-inspired pedagogical ideology, we have to realize that thinking skills do not come naturally, but have to be meticulously learnt. We are not more naturally inclined to think critically than we are to read and write and do math. We really have to struggle, and to induce lots of self-discipline, in order to get this work done. Thus, a firm guidance by a teacher who exercises authority by way of her good craftsmanship and fairness, is what is called for. Only then will she be able to lead the pupils into the Kingdom of rationality, on short but quite frequent excursions.

These excursions have of course to be shorter, the younger the pupils are. Small childrens's minds cannot cope with such a self-disciplining endeavor for more than ten to twenty minutes at a time. This is why facilitating a group conversation should be considered a pedagogical tool, rather than a subject of its own (except in the education of teachers, where the different pedagogical tools indeed should be subjects of their own). Instead of trying to introduce "philosophy" or "thinking skills" etc. as a new subject in the primary and secondary school, it might be more realistic, and even better, to allow teachers to employ group conversation facilitation as a pedagogical tool in whatever subject they teach. Then they would enhance critical thinking within their own subject, and thus contribute to the development of thinking skills that should be a basic faculty taught in school, just as Dewey recommended.

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