
2. How to Think

The Fashionableness of Thinking “Out of the Box”*

This is one of those phrases that has been thrown about a lot during the last few years, a kind of trendy expression that seems to put those who use it on the side of the angels. Think “out of the box.” Look at things “out of the box.” Don’t be some old fogey, get with the program.

Well, in my humble view most folks who give this advice have in mind that you should think out of your box by starting to think in their box. And that is a natural wish, only it would be nicer to get the straight dope on it, not have it dressed up as some kind of wise insight—as if the people urging us to think out of the box had such a nifty handle on how restrictive our box is and how open and inventive and exploratory it is outside of our (and inside their) box.

To be sure, human beings often get stuck in a certain mode of thinking, although this is not always a liability. Much of what we accept and live by nearly automatically, without much scrutiny, is tried and true and indispensable. Traditions, customs, even laws arise, often, because after much rumination and reflection over the years, decades, and centuries a good many of us have intelligently enough decided that these are worthy ways to approach the problems we face. So scoffing at these ways, the insides of our boxes, is arrogant—as if what’s new and untried had some kind of natural claim on being sound and brilliant. More often, however, the novel approaches are purely speculative

and manage to be impressive only because they are rather vaguely laid out and no one quite knows how to assess their merits. It isn't so simple to forge a revolution, actually.

I recall back in the late 1960s, when the student revolution was in full force, both here and abroad, a great many of the academic practices we were used to were derided as fuddy-duddy. One such practice was grading. It was not cool to grade students anymore. Why? Well, because it was simplistic, uninformative, rather staid and rigid. After all, what does getting an "A" or a "B" or a "C" mean, anyway? It is a ranking, but what is the reasoning behind it?

Well, for a while professors who just wanted at all cost to be on the side of their hip students caved in and abolished grades. Entire institutions were written up in *Time* and *Newsweek* for banishing that middle-class tool, grading, from their systems. In its place professors gave consultations and made comments that laid out explicitly just how students had done in their courses. No longer would we take shortcuts but talk it all out with every student in detail.

But it turned out that those new ways were, well, just the old ways refashioned. For what did an "A" mean? It meant and still means, to anyone who would just use his mind a little, that the student's grasp of a subject was superb and that he or she managed to state it clearly and cogently and knew better than the rest the different schools of thought about it. And so on down the line. It really was no great mystery what grades meant, and a little reflection made it clear that the point of using those letters was, well, economical. They were like arrows pointing at intersections—why write out the elaborate "To get there you need to go this way" when using an arrow was simpler and more economical and took much less space on a street sign.

Not that all innovations are pretentious. But putting the

chairs in a class room in a circle and having a professor sit with the students as if, well, he or she were not really a professor but just some guy hanging out, didn't amount to anything very inventive and novel, after all. These innovations were mostly devices by which people faked serious reform. They made it appear that something productive had been thought of and introduced, while in fact it was all mostly a ruse.

I happen to think that all the talk about thinking outside the box is little more than this kind of ruse. An innovation, to have genuine worth, needs to be carefully and repeatedly tested. It needs to be compared and contrasted, not simply made to sound cool. Of course, it can be intimidating to be told that you haven't caught on to the contemporary, to what is progressive and advanced. You are thinking inside the box, doing what is routine, old-fashioned, and unchallenging. OK, but show me. Prove it to me, do not just throw around a bunch of jargon and invent some hip phrases. Give me the whys and hows, and then, perhaps, I will abandon my old ways of thinking, which have, after all, managed to bring me quite a way so far. As one old but useful saying had it a while back, "Where's the beef?" If you can show it to me, then I might change my ways for you!

The Cult of Feeling: Reason versus Emotion

Orange County (California) Register, September 30, 2002

In recent years one of humanity's most important discoveries—not inventions!—has been receiving a lot of flak. I am talking about human reason. If it isn't some multiculturalist claiming that being reasonable is just a cultural bias of Western origin, which has no universal significance (and cannot be used to criticize people who do not choose reasonableness as their standard), then it is someone who wishes to indict us all for the arrogance of thinking that human beings by reasoning can know a thing or two and make this or that, as well, that amounts to an achievement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Age of Aquarius was supposed to displace the age of science and reason, meaning we were supposed to give up our prejudice in favor of reasonableness and embrace our feelings uncritically, since the tool of criticism is reason, and that, of course, is just another bias.

Mind you, this is no new story. From the time human beings started to record their thoughts, those who were hostile to thinking quickly took up their pens and produced reams of text denouncing (often quite thoughtfully!) thought itself. This battle, maybe the secular equivalent to that between God and the Devil, will probably go on forever. Reason versus unreason, reason versus unchecked feeling, reason versus impulse, reason versus intuition—the terms may change a bit, but the idea is the same.

No, I shall not jump in to resolve the conflict. This is not the forum for such an ambitious undertaking, even for a little portion of it. But it is worthwhile to note something odd about the misanthropic distaste for reason and the preference for feeling or emotion in the context of the equally virulent dislike of many famous folks for the human ego. Selfishness, you see, is supposed to be a bad thing. Unselfishness is good, or so many tell us—except, of course, our shrink, who get paid to help us fix ourselves, selfishly as all get out.

There is a kind of reckless self-indulgence or selfishness that is unseemly and needs to be discouraged. Human beings who lack generosity, a sense of community and fellowship, can be a nuisance and, indeed, lack a good deal in their lives, thus verging on a failure to be selfish in the proper sense of that term. (Such terms, by the way—terms like freedom and justice and democracy—are constantly debated, so no one definition is widely accepted for them.)

That reckless kind of selfishness, however, is just the sort that goes hand in hand with the cult of feeling. This is because when we are guided mainly by feelings, not by reason, we are left pretty much on our own. Who else's feelings can we know better than ours? We feel thirsty, hungry, angry, jealous, envious, annoyed, playful, or whatever, and that is the end of it—how can we be sure what others feel? That would take reasoning, learning by rationally analyzing our experiences, and here reliance on feelings just cannot help.

The advocacy, therefore, of living by the guidance of feeling alone is pretty much the most antisocial, crudely self-centered advice you can give people. If you have nothing but your feelings, you can ignore others, certainly anything that would do them any good, which would take

diligent rational thought to find out. You just feel this or that way, and that is the end of the story. You then act on those feelings. Since feelings are self-centered, you live a self-centered life. And even “self-centered” does not tell enough of it—you actually live a mere feeling-centered life, leaving the rest of yourself out of it, neglected.

I am someone who holds that rational selfishness is healthy, and egoism of this kind is right for people to practice. But since I also think human beings are by nature rational animals, this selfishness requires us to be reasonable, to listen to reason, if you will. And reason is very likely to tell most of us not living in tyrannies that cooperation with others, caring for them, is a sensible thing. Cruelty, violence, disrespect for the rights of others, and lack of concern for the well-being of friends and family are extremely unreasonable, selfish things. But if feelings are to guide us, then the only way we can be is self-centered, self-indulgent in the crassest of ways.

So, I suggest we heed Socrates, who reportedly said: “Not for the first time, but always, I am the sort of person who is persuaded by nothing in me except the proposition which seems to me the best when I reason about it.”

The World from One's Own Point of View*

Too many people believe that they have their own view of the world, as does everyone else, and that there is no way to see things as they really are. This used to be a respectable approach to values, but now it is applied to nearly everything, even science. Some feminists argue that throughout history males have imposed their own viewpoint, even on the natural sciences, so that we have gained a distorted understanding of reality. Others hold that there is an Asian or European or African outlook on things. Or that each person sees things his or her way, period. There is no right answer, only my answer.

Common sense clings to the idea that if we try hard enough, if we watch out, we can learn how things are for real, without distortion. We take it that a careful scientist or detective or jury will get to the truth of things. Maybe not final truth but truth nonetheless. This is the source of respect for scientific research and, also, the source of the moral lambasting of racial, ethnic, sexual, and other prejudices. To prejudge, to judge before we get the evidence, based on some rash generalizations from loosely examined similar cases, is irresponsible.

But with certain influential thinkers this commonsense idea has come under serious criticism. Mind you, it is difficult to see how this could even be considered criticism, since to criticize is to assume you have standards that apply

to all and are not idiosyncratic. But, never mind, even consistency is often denied its traditional role as a necessary part of getting things right.

But, you may say, why worry? Isn't this all just so much academic babble, the fare that separates those eggheads from us sensible folks? Not really. In many ways the rest of us have bought into this relativist, subjectivist trap.

Consider that in the Microsoft debate it is now generally understood that no objective position is possible; it is all a matter of where you are coming from. If you like Microsoft's products and services, well, then you are against the recommended antitrust actions the Department of Justice champions. If you are a Netscape or Sun fan, well, then you want Microsoft to sink. Kind of like rooting for your favorite sports team — who really is good at the game isn't something we can even talk about, it's all partisan.

Consider that in politics it is all relative, too. Some people just like the American system of quasi-capitalism, others do not. As the Elian Gonzales fiasco shows, it is all a matter of point of view. Those in Little Havana cannot help wanting Elian to remain here, probably to bolster their own political biases, while those who like heavy-handed state meddling in our lives find nothing wrong with sending a six-year-old kid back to Communist Cuba. No right answer is really possible; again it depends on where you are coming from.

Consider the matter of gay rights. If you are a homosexual, hey, naturally you will want to have unions between members of your group seen in the favorable light of ordinary marriages. If you are heterosexual, then, of course, you won't. Partisanship is the norm, and objectivity, a myth.

Consider, finally, that if you are male, you will just look on all criticism coming from feminists as male-bashing, and

if you are a female, you will see any complaints of feminist extremism as the first sign of male oppression.

Many more areas could be highlighted as exhibiting this contemporary view, that we just cannot help seeing things from a perspective we somehow inherited or have because of our race, gender, or background. In the end, though, none of that makes sense since the idea that we all have a point of view simply becomes just another point of view, without a chance to be right, true, justified, correct. No, it too is just some point of view and not worth a higher standing.

Sure, we can be influenced by many factors, unique or common to some of us, such as height, color, weight, ethnic background, family upbringing, and so on. But do these constrain our minds as a harness constrains a draft animal?

One thing is for sure. With this reckless emphasis on point of view, we are liberated from the responsibility of making sure we get things right—in law, in journalism, in scholarship, or even in scientific research. So we need not worry about making mistakes, being accurate, or even being fair—the value of these, after all, is just a matter of where you are coming from.

What Do You Mean, “We”?

Orange County (California) Register, October 14, 2002

As I was listening to KNX-AM, Los Angeles’ CBS radio affiliate news station, a few days ago, the station manager, George Nicholas, was giving his editorial comments, something he has been doing for over thirty years if my memory serves me right. This time he was talking about people in need of shelter, and he said, among other things, “we shelter” such and such number of people in the city of Los Angeles.

When I heard this, my mind left the main points of his editorial, and I began thinking about what this word “we” means. Does it mean that Mr. Nicholas is among a number of volunteers who shelter some people who need it, at the volunteers’ homes (or other places that they own)? No, I am nearly certain that’s not it—you probably will not find homeless people at Mr. Nicholas’s house now or anytime soon, although I am not in a position to know this for sure—it’s just an educated guess!

Or perhaps what he meant is that all the citizens of Los Angeles are providing shelter for some people these days. Only, this isn’t right either, since many citizens of Los Angeles have no interest in doing this, may even believe it is wrong to do so, because they prefer to take a “tough love” approach to dealing with at least many of the homeless. In any case, many Los Angelinos are not in favor of sheltering

the homeless or, at any rate, all of the homeless being sheltered at city expense in Los Angeles.

Well, then what must “we shelter” mean anyway? I am pretty sure what Mr. Nicholas should have said is that “in Los Angeles such and such number of people are given shelter by city government officials, and this shelter is paid for with taxes.” Sure, it may take a bit longer to say. But so what?—it would clearly be more accurate than suggesting either that there is a group of volunteers, to which Mr. Nicholas belongs, who give shelter to the homeless or that everyone in Los Angeles has come together freely out of the goodness of their hearts to shelter the homeless. Neither of these suggestions is true, yet “we shelter” those who need it must mean one or the other.

In fact the use of the word “we” in public affairs is mostly a travesty. It serves to perpetrate gross inaccuracy, not always through mere oversight but more often through intentional deception or, at best, sloppy thinking.

Those who claim, for example, that “we owe it to such and such” might like us all to have such an obligation, but in fact, they offer nothing to back up what they are saying. When some folks say, “We want zero tolerance of drug use or gang violence,” it is clear that they do not mean it literally or precisely. Many, many people in fact do want plenty of tolerance toward drug users or even toward violent gangs, so the speakers simply discount them, implicitly declaring them nonpersons, noncitizens.

The “we” in these and similar contexts functions, in fact, as a grand ruse or ploy, akin to how “we” was used in the days of monarchies when the king presumed to speak and act for everyone—all his “subjects”—because of the myth of the king as the divinely ordained “parent” figure, God’s

stand-in here on Earth. Bad habits often take a very long time to overcome, and even in America, where the founding political act was to abolish a monarchy in favor of a republic, the myth continues to be accepted as reality that the government speaks for us all on all matters of significance. But this is, exactly, a myth and a repulsive and dangerous one at that.

There are very few matters people in free societies care about equally. We have vastly, and often justifiably, different goals, purposes, tasks, and worries. To pretend otherwise is an attempt to dupe us into thinking that those folks who use the royal “we” have somehow managed to make their own concerns those of every one of us.

But they haven’t! We—and here the “we” is right—better realize that!

If we do not, then we will all find that at one time or another we are being conscripted into a group whose membership we never sought. But because we paid scant attention to, and even went along with, the ruse, we will be treated as unwilling members. All the rules, to which we didn’t consent, all the dues we did not agree to pay, will be imposed on us whether we agree or not. Through this abuse of the term “we,” the idea of the consent of the governed will be eviscerated.

Of course, these liars and cheats shouldn’t need to be reminded that they have no moral authority to conscript others in this way. But then criminals should not rob and rape and steal, though they will anyway. And to deal with this we have to be alert, careful, prepared.

It was the idea of the American founders that government is instituted among us to secure our rights. Sadly, by now, government has become the most vigorous rights-vio-

How to Think

61

lator in our midst. One important way to make an advance toward remedying this is to heed very carefully what politicians and their allies among us say and catch them at each turn when they engage in verbal deception.

Calculating Bad Side Effects

Yuma (Arizona) Sun, August 24, 2002

Enemies of SUVs and other suspected environmental hazards (such as boats and airplanes) are telling us that the personal benefits of an SUV (or boat or airplane) ride must all be compared to the terrible public side effects. Economists refer to these as “externalities”—a word coined to make it appear that we can deal with these matters entirely without reference to values. (Social science, being a science, is supposed to be value-free, if you haven’t heard this yet!)

Yet what is at issue is clearly very much a matter of values or the lack of them. It is the practice of imposing burdens on unwilling others while enjoying benefits oneself. Secondhand smoking is supposed to be such an externality, which is why so many call for bans on smoking wherever others may be imposed on when smokers light up.

In some instances, however, while it is imaginable enough that certain practices both reap benefits and impose burdens, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the costs and the benefits or indeed the identity of those being harmed and benefited. Take SUVs.

True enough, big, gas-guzzling cars, whether trucks, SUVs, old station wagons, or what have you, produce more pollution than small ones. This is a burden, at least on first inspection. The added smog, for example, can cause problems for nearby inhabitants, such as eye irritation, respiratory ailments, and so forth. There is also the possible loss

of vegetation and animal life over the long haul, which is easily seen to be an ill effect of pollution.

Yet, gas-guzzlers also produce benefits—they are safer in certain respects than other vehicles, they enable people to haul their own stuff around (e.g., when they buy an arm chair or dresser, they don't need to pay for its delivery but can take it home themselves). SUVs, for one, are easier to get into or out of, which for some people—especially those with physical impediments—is a significant advantage over having to squeeze into a VW bug or something similarly economical and environmentally friendly when it comes to gasoline consumption. And yes, there is the SUV's ability to pull boats or horse-trailers or to climb up some dirt road into the mountains. There could well be many other benefits for all the different SUV owners, as well as some hazards no one has yet thought of.

Despite this list of the costs and benefits of SUVs, or similar vehicles, it is by no means easy to compare the two, to determine which on balance is greater or smaller. The attempt to do what is referred to as a “social cost-benefit analysis” on SUVs and similar pollution-producing devices used in public places is nearly futile if not outright impossible.

One reason is that roughly the same people who benefit from SUVs could also be hurt by them. Also, although often when people do what can benefit or harm them, they isolate themselves from others—so the costs and benefits are confined to themselves and do not spill over—with air pollution, especially, this is not possible. All the stuff that is being carried by trucks on our highways, shipped by airplanes and boats, all the services produced by those traveling in SUVs, small trucks, or minivans, may cost people less because the externalities or side effects are dumped into the public

sphere and need not be taken care of by vendors. If every truck had to pay the full cost for transporting goods, including the cost for all the pollution damage it creates, the cost of transportation would be much greater than it is, even to the very people who are hurt by pollution. If the cost of pollution created by SUVs and such were completely absorbed by those who own the vehicles, the owners wouldn't be able to spend a good deal of their wealth on other things that produce employment throughout the economy. Or their wages would have to be higher, preventing others from receiving wage hikes. These and similar results are all very complicated, indeed probably impossible, to measure.

However, understanding what is going on need not be very complicated. We can bring it down to a personal level. Sometimes, for example, one has friends—or pets for that matter—who are both pleasant and irritating. One then decides whether to hang out with—or on to—them based on what is more important, the harm or the benefit. Say a good pal of yours smokes. So, the only way to be around him is to put up with secondhand smoke. But he is such a fine pal that it's worth it, so you put up with the smoke despite its danger to you. Yes, this is something you can usually control—you might, if you are very vulnerable to tobacco smoke, just give up the friendship.

But when it comes to pollution created on the road, including that created by SUVs, just how much benefit we all get as opposed to how much harm, is impossible to tell. *This is because the realm is public*, and all the people involved, with their highly diverse wants, needs, and wishes, cannot be separated from one another. There is no effective way to measure the trade-offs, only very rough, unreliable guesses.

This indeed is one reason why arguments about the

environment get so nasty. Those who want a pollution-free world want the power to shut down things like SUVs, no matter what; those who like their SUVs, on the other hand, don't want any restrictions placed on the use of their handy vehicles. There simply is no way for each side to leave the other to stew in its own juices.

Environmentalists cannot just move to some region completely cut off from SUV side effects (a move which may also be very costly to them, of course), nor can SUV owners merrily continue to use their vehicles and live with their own self-created pollution to their hearts' content. We are, as it were, in the same boat, and sorting out the costs and benefits, while it would be helpful, is quite impossible—a tragedy of the commons!

The reason a lot of us have been urging more and more privatization is just this: when practices are carried out on private property, they are more easily confined to those who carry them out. There are distinct borders. People can stay inside and keep their private property in a shape they prefer. Others can be kept outside if they will not accept one's terms of association.

This is not the case, however, where privatizing is impossible or at least very complicated. So, the issue then will often be fought out politically, a solution that hardly anyone finds satisfactory. Compromises are involved; the giving and taking of ground occurs where no one really wants either to give or to take.

OK, so what about it then? Well, for one, the beginning of wisdom here is to recognize that there is no higher or lower moral ground in these disputes. Environmentalists aren't saints for despising SUVs and the like, nor are SUV owners innocent victims who are being unjustly pestered about their own private business. Unless effectively priva-

tized, the use of the roads (or the waterways or the air mass) will remain inherently controversial.

The goals of all those concerned on either side of the disputes may well be equally valid—good, so no one group can pretend to be on the side of the angels. The best bet is to recognize that neither side is going—or even deserves—to win a full victory for the time being, while we must carry on in the public realm and cannot cut ourselves off from others whose ways we dislike and who dislike ours.