Thinking, Political Correctness, and Thinking about Thinking

Description

The indigenous people of the prairies of North America originally fed on big game and buffalo. They hunted on foot before the horse was introduced to America by the Spanish in the 1500s [1, 2]. They took advantage of a characteristic of the buffalo: Buffaloes are herd animals. They follow the lead animal. Once the lead animal starts running, they all run after it. The Indians, â??First Nationsâ??, had special places where the prairie suddenly breaks off over a cliff. There they built fence-like obstacles that ran like a funnel from the prairie towards the cliff. Then they panicked the buffalo and drove them towards the obstacles. They all rushed after the lead animal. It ran, couldnâ??t stop in time and fell over the cliff, and they all fell after it to their doom. Down below, the hunters were waiting and could cut up the meat of the buffalo that had fallen to its death, and the hunt was over. When the Indians had horses, they applied the same principle, without fences, but with horses. In Montana there is a natural park called â??Buffalo Jumpâ?? where many archaeological remains of this hunting technique have been found.

Buffalo Jump: from Alchetron, the Free Social Encyclopedia

What was usually very convenient for the buffalo â?? relying on the experience of the leaders and the signals of the guards â?? was now their undoing.

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Political Correctness

We humans are also herd animals, even if we pride ourselves on our individuality. As a rule, we run after some leaders who set the pace or the tone. We then call this â??fashionâ?? or, in a political context, â??political correctnessâ??. A group we consider relevant or a few influential people dictate what is right and everyone else follows suit. In my youth, fashion was set by the Beatles in the 60s, and suddenly all the boys had long hair. Yes, I also had almost shoulder-length hair back then, when I still had some. You just want to belong.

Today, political fashions are different from what they used to be. They are determined by hashtags and Twitter followers, negotiated in talk shows or set by hip, young, sometimes old, but in any case considered influential, powerful and trustworthy politicians.

And following these guidelines and imitating them linguistically is what I call â??political correctnessâ??. Iâ??m sure there are many other definitions for that. But I invite you to look at political correctness from this point of view. Of course, there is a difference between fashion and political correctness: fashion is usually defined by a few predecessors. Political correctness ideally stems from a complex social discourse process, at the end of which there is an agreement on what is generally considered to be right. This then becomes a moral imperative: this is not only right, it must also be declared binding for all. If the discourse process is thorough, the consensus general, the matter undisputed, there is nothing to object to. But if the discourse process is aborted, manipulated or interest-driven, then political correctness becomes a thinking trap.

Political correctness has advantages, of course. One no longer needs to worry about whether the direction is right. After all, the lead buffalo has set it, everyone is running after it. If there are no â??devious Indiansâ?? behind it who want to drive the whole herd into the abyss, thatâ??s all right. But can you be sure? How can one be assured?

This is where what the Buffaloes lack, but which is available to us in principle, comes into play: Thinking, or more precisely, the capacity for reflection. For we can always think to ourselves: Is this really right? Does what is being said here make sense? Who benefits from what is happening here? Who has an interest in events developing in this way? And then we can just stop before we race into the abyss. We can look around and then maybe, if there are any, spot the few â??Indiansâ?? who are sowing panic.

Thinking, reflection and more

Antje Maly-Samiralow, a television journalist from the medical editorial department of Bayrischer Rundfunk, has invited me to a new format, â??Frau Antjes Salonâ??, together with the youth researcher Prof. Bernhard Heinzlmaier on the topic â??What is thinking?â?? in a round table discussion. A small sample. The full version can be seen on Langemannâ??s Internet TV channel behind a paywall.

Thinking in categories and political correctness

When we say â??thinkingâ??, we usually mean different things, some of them fundamentally different. A basic prerequisite and actually the simplest kind of thinking is categorizing, assigning individual things to generic terms or categories. Buffaloes can do this, too. They distinguish between what is edible and what is not, between things and living beings that are irrelevant and harmless â?? prairie dogs and trees, for example â?? and dangerous ones â?? wolves, humans, coyotes, etc. Higher animals can already categorize quite well, some birds and primates for example, and children learn this in kindergarten, or just incidentally. Once you learn it, this kind of thinking works very quickly, even unconsciously and automatically.

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This categorizing, this simplest form of thinking, is also the basis of â??political correctnessâ??: a person, an utterance, a video, a complex action, a book that one either wants to buy or not, is put into a category. The book is then â??interestingâ??, â??trendyâ??, â??must haveâ??, or â??old-fashionedâ??, â??boringâ??, â??too thickâ??, â??too leftâ?? or â??too rightâ??. This approach makes our lives easier: It shortens detailed considerations to a simple yes/no, good/bad decision. That is why it is so popular. But â?? see Buffalo â?? it can also lead us astray. Namely, when the categories that are given are not clear, or when the assignment is manipulative. For example, if the book cover says â??The most exciting book of this season, says the NYTâ?? and we think â??must be rightâ?? and buy it. When we read it, we realize that the NYT is sometimes wrong, too. Or in the end: the NYT was paid to write that? Ugh! Politically incorrect!

Rule-governed thinking

Some say computers can â??thinkâ??. By this we mean a form of rule-governed, algorithmic, basically programmable, processing of tasks. This kind of cognitive procedure adheres to certain rules defined, for example, in logic, or in grammar, or by rules of the game, as in chess. When we solve a Sudoku, we apply this form of thinking: â??If I put a two here, a three should go there. But since there would then be a three twice in this row, that canâ??t be, so I have to put a five there rather than a two.â?? This algorithmic, rule-based and thus programmable processing of tasks is something that computers can do very well in the meantime, better than humans often can. Computers have beaten chess world champions and recently even Go masters.

Reflection and criticism of presuppositions

What I have called â??reflectionâ?? above is a different form of thinking. It does not simply apply rules to a problem, but it asks about the foundations and presuppositions, or rules, of processes of thought and action. This is what computers are not yet very good at and buffaloes not at all, but we humans in principle are, if we have learned it and put some effort into it.

Reflection is, after all, exhausting. It requires us to use a different set of rules than the one we are used to, and it requires us to get to the bottom of things. Both takes time and requires a lot of attention. Since the capacity of consciousness is limited, we cannot do anything else in that time, and this form of thinking, unlike categorizing and simple kinds of rule-governed thinking, is not automatic.

If we reflect, for example, we would ask ourselves: how is it that such a bad and boring book is touted as the â??most exciting book of the seasonâ?? by a quality newspaper like the NYT? Reflection, then, begins with questions. With questions about what seems to be taken for granted, or what everyone takes for granted. If we pursue this question, we realize that there are several ways to answer it: the NYT is right, and I know nothing about literature. I could and would have to check that. I might have to ask some other people. I could give the book to my best friend and ask him for his opinion. I could think about conditions of how media work. I might also have to do some research: How does attention control actually work in the press? We notice: I would have to inform myself more deeply. Reflection makes us aware of what we donâ??t know and therefore encourages us to think about it and, where thatâ??s not enough, to get more information.

Yes, and now the political correctness trap is lurking around the corner again: if Iâ??m lazy, or donâ??t have enough time, or donâ??t want to inform myself so thoroughly anyway, then I can quickly check the top Twitter or Facebook influencers, or Wikipedia, to see what they say about the book. That saves me the trouble of doing my own researchâ?¦ and in the end I come to the conclusion: well, I really donâ??t understand anything about literature; the NYT, Wikipedia and Co. are probably right.

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Reflection is basically always ongoing and cannot come to an end. For new information can always emerge that overturns my old certainty. I can hear new arguments that refute what I have believed so far. Reflection is what characterizes scientific inquiry: Reflecting on the fundamentals and on presuppositions. Uncomfortable, often disturbing, time-consuming. Hence, unpopular.

But reflection has a very important constructive function: namely, it questions the presuppositions that others make when they make any claims or suggest actions.

A little reflection exercise:

It has become quite fashionable to say: letâ??s practice meditation and mindfulness. Because that helps to manage the ever-increasing stress, and then we are not so burnt out, and we can sleep better and enjoy life better.

Thereâ??s nothing wrong with that either. I helped spread this attitude with my research group in the 2000s when, for example, we published the first meta-analysis on mindfulness and health [3] and developed a mindfulness questionnaire [4, 5].

Many critics have now pointed out â?? quite rightly in my view â?? that focussing on mindfulness alone risks overlooking the structural sources of stress in the workplace: too fast a pace, too few staff, too much pressure to work overtime, etc.

Reflecting on the presuppositions that the mindfulness and meditation movement makes, leads us to understand that sometimes the approach to look at the individual alone is not enough. For example, Hartmut Rosa made this point in a fabulous talk at the Congress â??Meditation and Scienceâ?? on 2.4.2022 in Berlin, where he called for a new style of dealing with the world, things and ourselves.

One can only arrive at such ideas through reflection, that is, through systematic thinking about fundamentals. The way to get there is through questions, and specifically through questions about the seemingly self-evident. If the buffaloes could think, for example, they could have asked themselves the question â?? it would even have been enough if only the lead buffalo had done so: Why are there fences? Where does this road lead? That would have saved them from going into the abyss. But buffaloes can only think to a very limited extent.

We can do better. But it seems to me we can do it less and less. Because to do it, **firstly** you need the motivation. Do we really want to get down to the basics? What do we find there? Possibly something unpleasant? So better not ask too much!

Secondly you need time, because reflection is slow. We often have to get information and process it. And then need a free space where there is â??nothingâ??, except just thinking.

And **thirdly** you need some training and practice. For example, I see in recent years when commenting on student essays that the number of those who get to the bottom of questions is dwindling. Most can dutifully gather information along a given schema and descriptively state what A said, what B means, and that C says otherwise. But get to the bottom of it: Why does C say something different from A and B, and what presuppositions do A and B make? Are these presuppositions reasonable and correct? Very few undertake such deeper digging.

I assume this has to do with our schools. There, children seem to learn less and less to question things. The things little children still do: Grandpa, why is the sky blue? Why does the cow moo and the sheep bleat? Why does the

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goat eat grass and the dog doesnâ??t? Why is the neighbour always so grim? The obvious questioning, that is often beaten out of them at school and also later on. As Wieler from the RKI (=the public health institute in Germany) said the other day: â??The measures must never be questioned!â?? Thatâ??s the political message: obey and donâ??t ask questions.

Bad school, bad policy, question-worthy health policy. Question-worthy, in the truest sense of the word. Weâ??ll save that for another blog.

Insight and â??Perspicacityâ??

Insight

In addition to thinking in categories, algorithms and reflection, there are even deeper forms of thinking. These are actually those for which the Greek philosophers reserved the term â??thinkingâ??, namely insight and perspicacity, noesis and anchinoia.

Insight is a form of thinking in which we recognize connections and basic structures. Most people know the Pythagorean theorem: $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. But when we finally understand it, that in a right triangle the square of the two sides enclosing the right angle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse or the opposite side, then we have an insight. Namely, into the geometrical connection. The connection is already there and given. We knew it before, and we knew about it, but we did not understand it. Now we understand it and therefore have an insight.

So an insight is the intellectual grasp of a structure. Or if we understand that the engine of capitalist economy is the pursuit of profit, then we have gained an insight. Such insights are often abstract, precisely because they are general structures.

In physics, they take the form of highly abstract and mathematically formulated theories. They stem from a deep insight into basic structure, in this case the basic structure of the universe.

I have pointed out time and again that phenomenologically a spiritual enlightenment experience has a great deal of similarity to such a scientific insight [6, 7].

Such insights into basic structures can also affect our own lives. Then we call it sense experience. We begin to understand how things are related and perhaps why they happened. Some would say we construct these connections rather than have an insight. Again, this depends on presuppositions we make: whether we think our lives have a shape of meaning to be discovered, or whether we think we just shape it to our own liking. And again we notice: Basic reflection is at work here, too.

Insight is directed towards given structures that we recognize by directing our intellectual power and attention to them, as when we suddenly understand the Pythagorean theorem.

Perspicacity

Aristotle knows another modality in his scientific methodology, the Organon, and calls it â??anchinoiaâ?? â?? perspicacity or sharp-sightedness. The medieval translators and commentators called it â??sollertiaâ?? [8]. In modern terminology, this would be abduction, i.e. the ability to connect very different empirical facts with the help of a hypothetical structure. This is the form of thinking used by Sherlock Holmes when he puts a certain shape of cigar and other seemingly trivial things together, plays a bit of violin, maybe snorts a bit of cocaine, and then suddenly has an idea who the culprit might have been [9].

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So here too we recognize an â??underlying structureâ??, namely a model or theory of how the events or facts we find fit together. Only this kind of insight is very provisional. For there could also be a number of other possible connections â?? and which is the right connection, we then have to first substantiate by other forms of thinking and cognition, for example by collecting facts of experience.

Abduction or perspicacity is thus a kind of circumstantial process. Based on very different elements of experience, we search for a theory that connects them. â??Facts in search of a theoryâ?? is what Charles Sanders Peirceâ??s called abduction [10, VII 218].

The hallmark of abduction is that we must constantly question our provisional model. For this we need reflection, as well as patience, as well as the will to keep facing new empirical facts. Ultimately, these are not intellectual but moral virtues. In this respect, good and clean thinking is also a question of morality.

And that is also where humans and computers differ fundamentally. Not only are computers no good abduction machines. Abduction, in fact, is an eminently creative act that develops something completely new. Computers are creative within a framework. They can come up with shake rhymes and stories if you give them some cues. But I donâ??t know of any AI system that can come up with something completely new. That still seems to be human domain.

Abduction and perspicacity, I think, can also only be practised within limits. Itâ??s probably an aptitude. For one needs the ability to keep a lot of, even contradictory, facts present in oneâ??s working memory. You need the psychological virtue of enduring contradictions and the ability to deal with cognitive dissonance. Ultimately, this also requires keeping the chatter of other thinking operations to a minimum. Because, neuropsychologically speaking, our creative side, which does not operate linguistically but via images, must have its say here. And, as Iain McGilchrist has shown, it gets a raw deal in our culture [11]. In order for this quiet voice to be heard, we have to silence the other thought processes, especially the algorithmic-conceptual processing, which also often manifests itself as an inner monologue or as thought noise, and not everyone can do that. That only works through

Non-thinking behind thinking

To do this, we need to quiet the thinking and the inner noise of thoughts. This is what spiritual meditation traditions and mystics had in mind. Hugo de Balma, whom I translated, a precursor and source for Meister Eckhart, used to say, mutatis mutandis, â??We must leave behind all cognitive acts, all thinking, all images, all wishing and wanting, and align ourselves upwards with the wing or arrow of loveâ?? [12]. This is achieved through regular and faithful practice of meditation, by concentrating on the breath. Then we enter that inner space of silence where thinking, the noise of inner dialogues and monologues, is silent. Different traditions have coined different terms for this. But essentially it is a space of thought-free inner silence.

If one practices this for a longer time, then one also succeeds in other surroundings, when one is with people, when one looks at or hears something, to see, to hear or even to â??thinkâ?? from this inner space of silence. Then it is not we who think, but then thoughts arise, or it thinks us. The Soto Zen tradition calls this â??big mindâ??. Then really creative and constructive thoughts arise, what we very appropriately call â??in-sightâ??. For these come, phenomenologically speaking, from a beyond of the individual mind. The old mystical tradition would have said: They come from the Holy Spirit, because at this tip of the spirit, where thinking is silent, there we touch the Holy Spirit. For this tip, as the medieval scholar Thomas Gallus put it, is â??quae sola Deus unibilis â?? in it alone can one connect with Godâ?? [13]. This, in my view, is an image of reaching into, or more precisely becoming and drawing from, another dimension in this inner silence.

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What then comes to our mind are mostly precious thoughts. That is thinking behind thinking that comes from not thinking. It takes a bit of practice. But it can be done. We could even do it together if more people would do it and stop thinking that rule-governed thinking is the only and highest kind of thinking. It isnâ??t. Have fun not thinking.

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