

To Think or Not to Think

A Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Perspective on Experience, Thinking and Creativity¹

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"Thoughts are a nuisance," says Bion's patient in *Learning from Experience*; "I don't want them" (1962b:34-35). "Thinking", writes Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*, is "equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed" ([1971]1977:176). Both these writers present theories of what thinking is, and about the risks associated with thinking; why we would sometimes not want to think. The purpose of this paper is to question how 'learning', conceived not as mechanical reproduction but as a process of creative engagement with the material, comes about, using Arendt's philosophical account of thinking and Bion's psychoanalytic account. They both illuminate how thinking is *not* a necessary component of a human life, though it would be a poor one without it, how it has the potential to undermine the existing social and mental frameworks on which we rely for support, and how thinking, as an activity arising out of experience, depends on some social conditions for its existence.

To explore this theme, I shall first present two pre-psychoanalytic tales which have been central to psychoanalytic thinking, Hoffmann's story of *The Sandman*, as read by Rand and Torok, and Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, primarily as seen by Bion. In these interpretations, both the play and the fairy tale are concerned with the theme of inquiry and its potential dangers.

The Sandman

In Hoffmann's fairy tale *The Sandman* (1816), which forms the basis for Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919), the harmony of Nathaniel's family is disturbed on evenings when his father receives an unknown visitor, and the children are rushed to bed, being told that the Sandman is coming. The answers the hero receives to his questions about the Sandman's identity do not satisfy him, and, hiding in his father's room, he discovers that the visitor is the lawyer Coppelius, a family friend feared and hated by the mother and children and treated with admiring subservience by the father. The two men perform some mysterious work involving a fire, and when Nathaniel is discovered, Coppelius wants to throw burning coals into the boy's eyes, but his father intervenes and prevents it (Hoffmann 1816).

In Rand and Torok's re-interpretation of the nature of the uncanny, based on their reading of Hoffman's story, damage to the eyes, rather than providing an image of castration, represents an epistemic loss (1994:188). The

authors' emphasis is on the effects of secrecy in the family, which "disrupts the intimacy and familiarity of the home" (1994:189). When attempting to ask about the Sandman, Nathaniel is told by his mother: "When I tell you that the Sandman is coming, it only means that you are sleepy and can't keep your eyes open any longer, as though someone had sprinkled sand into them" (1994:193). His sister's nurse, on the other hand, informs him that the Sandman "is a wicked man who comes to children when they refuse to go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes till they bleed and pop out of their heads" (1994:193). The point is that the mother's and nurse's explanations reveal the element of wilful deception involved in their own stories: "The expression they use "to throw sand in someone's eyes" (*Sand in die Augen streuen*) is the German equivalent for the English "to throw dust in someone's eyes", meaning to mislead, to dupe or trick" (1994:194,196).

As the story evolves, Nathaniel falls madly in love with the doll Olympia, thus failing to realize that she is a piece of mechanical clockwork rather than a human being. As in his childhood the hero is deprived of the insight those around him possess. The implied threat in the nurse's story: "if you try to look, you will be blinded" (1994:196) is in the end made true as Nathaniel's search for the truth ends in madness and he throws himself from a tower whilst in a delusional state. In Rand and Torok's interpretation (1994:198), the figure of the Sandman stands both for the ongoing fraudulent activity in the family and for the fact that its existence is covered up.

Freud stated that the uncanny is something 'familiar and old-established in the mind which has become alienated from it through the process of repression' (1919:241). Rand and Torok's argument is that *The Sandman* provides a less than perfect illustration of Freud's thesis. In Hoffmann's story the uncanny is not the return of something Nathanael himself has repressed, but the return of the secrets his family has kept from him (1994:202). We should think of repression here as happening primarily on a social level.

King Oedipus

In Bion's reading of the Oedipus myth the hero's persistent search to discover the truth is the core of the story. Oedipus "represents the triumph of determined curiosity over intimidation and may thus be used as a symbol for scientific integrity" (1963:49). Bion draws a parallel between this narrative and those of the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel – curiosity, in all these stories, has the status of transgression; it amounts to encroaching upon the territory of the gods: "The punishment in Eden is expulsion from the garden: in the Babel story the integrity of the language is destroyed [...]. The exile theme common to both stories is discernible in the exile of Oedipus" (1963:82-83).

Inquiry, in all these instances, is associated with potential danger. In the Oedipus myth the hero's inquiry is about himself. The riddle posed by the Sphinx, a creature who in its sexual ambiguity can be seen as representing both his parents, is about the nature of man, and the answer to Oedipus' questions about the cause of the plague and the identity of the murderer of King Laius is no other than the questioner (see also Shengold 1989). Originally Egyptian, the Sphinx as presented in this story is known from the legends of Oedipus, occurring in tragedies from the fifth century (March 2008:272). As a divine creature, it was arrogant in its certainty that a mere human would be incapable of grasping his own nature, of knowing himself, but the story differs from the biblical myths in that Oedipus is victorious.

There is an ambiguity in the story about whether knowledge is good or bad – on the one hand we witness a victory of reason; the sphinx who simply dissolves once its secret has been discovered – on the other hand there is the presence of the notion that insight into the true state of affairs may be too devastating to bear. The end of the story, where Oedipus blinds himself, is interpreted by Steiner (1985) along these lines, as an instance of self-mutilation signifying a shedding away from the truth. The truth is too gruesome to face, and he pokes his eyes out so as not to have to see it. In this version, the story echoes the theme of the nurse's prophesy in *The Sandman*: "Do not look, or you will be blinded." But the ending may also be interpreted differently, more in line with the symbolic significance of blindness in antiquity; in poking his eyes out, Oedipus becomes like the blind seer Tiresias. He may be regarded as having abandoned the world of appearances in favour of the world of spiritual truth, thus no longer being prey to the deceptive theatre presented to his senses.

To Oedipus' crucial question: "Who among mortals made me?" Tiresias responds; "This very day will make and then dissolve you" (Sophocles [429] 2004:63). This is a repetition of his earlier question to the oracle before leaving Corinth, where the response did not state the identity of his parents, but instead told him the prophesy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Precisely because he leaves Corinth in an attempt to avoid fulfilling the prophesy, he walks right into the trap set up for him by the gods.

Tiresias, like the gods, knows what is going to happen. But the gods, being immortal and invulnerable, are not in a position to empathise with human beings. Oedipus is acquainted with some of the facts, but he fails to understand them before it is too late. The situation can be compared to Bion's (1963:50) example of reversible perspective drawings, where the perceivers look at the same thing and yet see two different things. The image can be used to illustrate the distinction between meaning and truth. There is the perspective of the eternal truth of the gods, and there is the meaning of the event to human beings. The human spectators, fallible interpreters endowed with character flaws, neither omnipotent nor omniscient, are able to grieve for the fate of the hero, which could have been their own.

Arendt on thinking

The depiction in the stories of the Sandman and of Oedipus of thinking and inquiry as potentially dangerous activities strikes a theme that has intrigued psychoanalysts. Yet if thinking is not clearly distinguished from an instrumental activity, this point is easily missed entirely. Conceived as an activity of radical questioning, its potential becomes clearer.

In thinking, states Arendt, I am 'two-in-one' – I am conducting a dialogue with myself, but it is a dialogue in which other people are represented (1951:476). Hence thinking presupposes the human condition of plurality. This is not the case with what she calls cognition and logical reasoning, as these activities can be performed by 'Man in the singular'. Thought is distinguished from cognition by the fact that it has no utility function; it has neither an end nor an aim outside itself.

Cognition, on the contrary, always pursues a definite aim, and it comes to an end once this result is achieved. It is the intellectual work of fabrication, including those of science and of workmanship ([1958]1988:170-171). Thus Arendt does not identify 'thinking' with specific professions or layers in society; "inability to think," she writes, "is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility for everybody – scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded" ([1971]1977:191).

Arendt distinguishes logical reasoning from both thought and cognition. Deductions from axiomatic statements and the subsuming of particular instances under general rules are activities which obey the laws of logic. Hence they are characterized by a total absence of freedom; logical laws, to the mind, carry the same force of compulsion as do natural laws to the body. Arendt equates logical reasoning with "brain power" or "intelligence" ([1958]1988:171), thus an inability to think is distinct from a lack of intelligence (1971:423).

Reason, to Arendt, seeks meaning rather than truth. Taking over from Kant the distinction between reason (*Vernunft*) and the intellect (*Verstand*), she declares that thinking, belonging to the faculty of reason, is inspired not by the quest for truth, but by the quest for meaning (1977:14-15). Questions of truth are answered by the evidence provided by the common sense which belongs to the realm of appearances. Questions about meaning, to the contrary (1977:57-59), are meaningless to common sense, since common sense makes us feel at home in the world so that we feel no need to question what appears in it.

Yet, thinking has one characteristic in common with action, namely freedom. Arendt states that "both action and thought occur in the form of movement and [...] freedom underlies both: freedom of movement" (1968:9). Thinking, although it cannot replace action, is another way of moving in the world of freedom.

Thinking is a state of inner plurality, in which I have a conversation with

myself. In loneliness this two-in-one collapses into one; it is a state of being one person deserted by all the others (1951:476). "Man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts" and the confidence in the world required for experience (1951:477).

This is a description of what takes place in totalitarian societies. Whereas tyrannies, to Arendt, destroy the public sphere and thus the capacity for action, totalitarian states destroy the private sphere as well and thus ruin the capacity for thought. If we imagine a state of affairs where the neighbour has suddenly disappeared, and everyone knows, seemingly instinctively, that they are not to ask any questions, to proceed as if nothing ever happened, and pretend that he or she never existed, we can begin to discern the outlines of a situation where fear is instigated as an attack on thought, memory, curiosity, imagination, creativity – or mental freedom. An internalization of coercion takes place, based on the feeling that some things are too dangerous to be thought about. Thus creativity is severely restrained – one's thoughts can no longer move around freely for fear of what they might encounter. Prevented from receiving confirmation from others, one is put in a state where one's senses become untrustworthy. "Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world," writes Arendt, depends on contact with others, "without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data" (1951:475-476). "Only because [...] not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience" (476).

Hoffmann's story of Nathanael can be read as an expression of a similar totalitarian situation in the family. The hero's attempts to inquire are answered with threats; 'Do not ask questions, or else...', and his understanding is thwarted. His senses fail him, and he is drawn into a land of shadows, unable to distinguish deceit, in the shape of the doll Olympia, from the real and genuine, embodied by his human fiancée Clara. Since this is a gothic fairy tale, no path proceeds towards enlightenment; the reader is left more or less in the same position as its hero, unable to draw a clear line between his hallucinations and what is objectively happening.

Experience and thinking are undermined when human beings are prevented from engaging in meaningful contact with others. Arendt's account of totalitarianism is not just intended as a historical description. It ends on a note of warning, stating that in a social situation where people are made superfluous as human beings, when they are placed outside of a context where they can exchange opinions, exercise judgement and act together with others, a totalitarian temptation is created. When meaning is not upheld interpersonally, the world becomes inhuman, like a desert, from which ideology may provide an escape, appearing "like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon" (1951:478).

Bion on thinking

Like the bird-mother who feeds the baby bird with food she has digested, Bion's mother nurtures her infant with digested experience, leading to the growth of an ability to think. While Arendt dwells on the necessity of a space *between* people for meaning and thinking, Bion elaborates on the requirement of an inner space and on the presence of a receptive other. They both convey how assigning meaning to experience, in the intimate sphere as in the public sphere, rests on a joint effort. The starting point for both these paths of reflection is how meaning is destroyed, in Arendt's case from without through the collapse of a public space and in Bion's case from within. These seemingly similar processes are intertwined. It is interesting to note that Freud, when explaining the concept of the censor, employs the example of political censorship in Russia: "Where can we find a similar distortion of a psychical act in social life? Only where two persons are concerned, one of whom possesses a certain degree of power which the second is obliged to take into account. [...] This censorship acts exactly like the censorship of newspapers at the Russian frontier, which allows foreign journals to fall into the hands of the readers [...] only after a quantity of passages have been blacked out". (Freud 1900:141-142, 529)

Freud is in effect saying 'take this political phenomenon of tyranny, and try to imagine it as taking place on an individual level.' Bion's further development, his theory of containment, articulates how meaning, thinking and subjectivity originate in an interpersonal constellation; the mother lets the infant "project a feeling, say, that it is dying" and "reintroject it after its sojourn in the breast has made it tolerable to the infant psyche" (1962a:116). However, "if the projection is not accepted [...] its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has", thus it "reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread" (1962a:116). Bion's description of nameless dread goes further than Freud in conceiving of how the social reaches into the soul of the individual. Not only is meaning distorted and covered up; it is thoroughly destroyed. The object of refuted containment has become meaningless, indigestible, that-which-cannot-be-thought. Bion's analogy of witnessing not so much the remnants of a past civilization as a primitive catastrophe (1957:88) paralleled the political situation that gave rise to Arendt's thought, where human beings had not simply been killed on a massive scale, but an attempt had been made to destroy their humanity beforehand and to eradicate the memory of them in the aftermath. The situation was one in which one could not simply pick up the pieces of past Western thought and gather them together again; a thorough effort at re-thinking was required.

Thinking and experience

Psychoanalysis can be seen as an effort to reinstall or recreate meaning, to

think about the unthinkable. But as a conceptual scheme, it is also socially determined. This means that it is guided by power structures, as we saw in the quote by Freud, but another point in the context of thinking is that as long as you are operating within a conceptual scheme, you are making sense, but once you start testing the limits of that conceptual scheme, you risk meaninglessness.

Thinking is, as we have seen, essentially disruptive. It "brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them", thus it liberates the faculty of judgement. It has a political function only in times of crisis; "When [...] those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous" ([1971]1977:192). The story of Anton Schmidt, a sergeant in the German Army, who supplied the Jewish underground in Poland with forged papers and military trucks until he was arrested and executed, shows that "under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*" ([1963]1994:231-233). Examples that such actions are possible are needed for the worldly preservation of meaning.

The stories of thinking that interest Bion – the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel and the myth of Oedipus – all end in expulsion, pointing towards his interest in the potentially stifling quality of the group. Arendt's ideal type, Socrates, the thinker *par excellence*, was, as we know, finally executed for corrupting the youth of Athens. Yet his example is two-sided as his thinking was always dialogical; he always thought *with* someone, yet he was also got rid of by the community.

A twofold quality can be discerned in teaching and learning as well. In acquiring a conceptual scheme one is enriched with a capacity to experience reality through its concepts, but the process also serves to set up a barrier against that which cannot be grasped through them. Thus in teaching someone a conceptual scheme one is also teaching them where not to look. One is simultaneously, to a greater or lesser extent, saying: "We will throw sand into your eyes".

To appeal to Arendt's clarifying distinctions, cognition can be taught, but thinking cannot. Thinking cannot be copied, or passed on like a piece of knowledge, only inspired. Around the age of 14 I had a teacher who, in the context of speaking about the French Revolution started asking: 'What are the preconditions required for a revolution to take place?'. Rather than saying 'this is the truth because it says so in the book', he was taking a step back and wondering why. This was a revelatory experience to me, where I thought: 'he is standing up there and actually thinking'. In doing so, he was creating a space in which such activity could take place.

Finally, I have aimed to imply that Arendt has something essential to add to an idea of containment extended in a social sense, namely an epistemic point about perspectival plurality. A distinct humanism inheres in her emphasis on the irreducibility of the different positions people occupy and the potential for extended vision each participant's perspective lends to all.

According to Hecht, the translator of *King Oedipus*, the hero is the person to whom the riddle of the sphinx does not apply. Having had his feet pinned together as an infant, Oedipus was in fact handicapped; he never walked upright on his own two feet without the support of a walking stick (2004). An Arendtian interpretation of this fact could be that the specific place in the world he occupied as a result of his deformation allowed him to see what all the others overlooked. What to everyone else would be too obvious to notice, walking upright and unsupported, was not obvious to him, thus he was the only one capable of guessing the riddle.

Whether a teacher is capable of taking up a perspective that comes from the sideline – in terms of culture, class, gender etc. – depends, I think, jointly on a basic security and a willingness to take a risk. Bion's concepts illuminate how this security is an unconscious state of affairs and how it is unconsciously communicated. The element of courage required to put one's concepts into play and risk one's frameworks of support is fruitfully explored in Arendt's political existentialism.

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