

# CARING THINKING ABOUT CARING THINKING

by Oscar Brenifier, April 2008

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Among the aficionados of Philosophy with children, called P4C by the initiated, there is a concept that has gained a lot of popularity over the last few years: “caring thinking”. Appealing to the traditional criteria of “goodness” or “quality” in the modern American tradition, which has now been universalized through the Internet, we might well conclude that if it’s popular it must be good! Be it the hit parade, the best seller’s list or the “Ten best” classical concept on U.S. and affiliated campuses, all of which fit very well with basic principles of marketing. Thus this “caring thinking” has become now such an overtly and widely claimed characteristic of philosophical practice with children, so much so that recently one could read in the mails of an international forum, without any reactions from readers, a P4C practitioner claiming that indeed this “caring thinking” was the primary—we could have almost heard the sole...—interest for philosophizing with children, the main reason to do it.

Becoming conscious of this phenomenon triggered in us the traditional fiber of criticism, an instinct that seems inherent to philosophical practice. We could here invoke the Tao, and claim “When everyone says this is good, this is bad”, or appeal to Hegel’s invitation to do the work of “negativity” without which there is no thinking, or recall, a more recent warning, Popper’s reminder that if we don’t perceive the dimension of falsity in what we claim, we are not acting as scientists but are indulging in an act of faith. Taking into consideration these encouragements or injunctions, we thought the time was ripe for attempting to produce some short critical piece of analysis on the aforesaid “caring thinking”. This article is the result of this work inspired by our own personal daemon—as called by Socrates—or the devil, as the reader will choose appropriate.

## **Caring**

Caring, in English language, has different meanings or connotations, depending on how we use it, in which context and in which form. We basically encountered five basic meanings, of course interrelated. First, caring is to feel concern or interest for someone or something: “I care for him”. Second, it is to be cautious, to watch for oneself: “Take care of yourself”, or “Be careful”. Third, it is to provide for someone or something: “I take care of my plant”. Fourth, it is to deal with something: “I take care of the cleaning”. Fifth, it is to like: “Would you care for some beer?”. Let us finally add here that the etymology of the word care is *chara*, which in old high German means grief, lament, therefore it is a term of sentimental or emotional origin.

When we observe the different acceptations of the term, we notice that every time we have the word “care”, either as a verb or as a substantive, we have an object for it, and of course a subject, even though not always explicitly mentioned. The implication is usually that a subject takes care of an object. And indeed, “care” is always a term of relation: it establishes a relationship between two terms, in general the subject being a human, the object being a human (someone else or oneself), another type of being, an object, an activity, etc.

Returning to the expression “caring thinking”, we have a little problem: neither the subject nor the object are mentioned, only the action itself. At the same time, the problem is very interesting. Let us say we had the expression “caring running”. The centerpiece of the expression is the activity itself: running. We have some subject that probably runs, but we don’t need to know anything about him,

we ignore the running subject, we could even say that we “don’t care” about him. Therefore, we can eliminate him in order to work on the meaning of the expression, which we clarify by simplifying the issue. We would like—*au passage*—to remark here that “not caring” has found a positive or useful usage, to which we will come back later on: a discriminative function.

Now, how about the object of the care? Well, we have here two possibilities: either we proceed like we did with the subject, that is we don’t care about it, or we do care, and therefore we have to determine “who” or “what” we are talking about. If we don’t care about it, this would tend to signify that the activity is the only determinant or substantial reality, and therefore the “running cares about the running”. This implies, following the different acceptations of the term, that “running is concerned about running”, that “running watches for running”, that “running provides for running”, that “running deals with running”, that “running likes running”, etc. We would have produced a sort of “self-conscious running”, “self-concerned running”. And in spite of the relative awkwardness of this hypostasized, reified or substantialized “running”, it seems that it can make sense. We are faced with an activity that is its own alpha and omega, both goal and means in itself, to such an extent that it needs neither an object nor a subject. And funnily enough, this brings us back to thinking, since the idea of a subjectless and objectless self-sustaining activity reminds us of Aristotle’s definition of God as “Knowledge knowing itself”, which is echoed by the Hegelian concept of a subjectless “absolute knowledge”, for which everything has a meaning, a sort of total conscience. Therefore “caring thinking” can be proposed as a kind of “regulatory ideal”—Kant’s idea of an unreachable but useful inspiring normative goal—where thinking is concerned about itself, watches for itself, provides for itself, deals with itself, enjoys itself, etc. We have a fully deployed activity of thinking, intellectually and emotionally, reaching higher degrees of self-consciousness and autonomy, as well as a profound feeling of joy linked to the activity and its accomplishment. Why not? A bit pompous and idealistic, but if we forget the overloaded connotations of the expression, a philosopher can recognize itself in the overall process hereby described.

## ***Pampering***

But is this the meaning given in the famous P4C concept, as it is commonly conceived? Far from it, we now have to come back to earth. Let us say, if we might express a P4C generality, that “caring thinking” has more to do strictly speaking with the idea of pampering—one of the possible connotations of the term “caring thinking”—than with any other form of mental activity. And of course we cannot pamper thinking since it is not a person and does not need pampering, but we pamper the “others”, and ourselves, as if thinking beings were babies or weak little creatures that could not stand on their two feet. We doubt we should call this activity thinking, since it has more to do with a purely sentimental non-examined behavior, than with anything else. When we pamper, there is no demand.

In general, “caring thinking” is invoked in order to counterpoise it—“complement it” says philosophical correctness—to critical thinking: an opposition which on the one hand makes sense, but on the other hand is very revealing of a certain world vision, which for now, without justifying it, we will call “complacent relativism”. How did this happen? Well, for one by simply replacing, without any warning, the object of care from the thinking itself toward some interlocutor, toward a human subject, including oneself. In other words, thinking does not care so much about thinking itself, but about whom it speaks to, and by a principle of reciprocity to the person speaking. This Copernican type epistemological reversal does not surprise us. First it fits the spirit of the time, where “people” or “persons” are more important than anything else. Second, in the wave of popularization of philosophy, such a newly defined vision has to fit consumer society, where the client is king, and has to be pleased, contra to the tradition of philosophy that conceives of thought

itself as a disturbing activity. We think here for example of Leibniz claiming that philosophy creates “uneasiness”, or of Socrates the gadfly. So we see many philosophy for children practitioners acting to establish a situation where everyone goes out of his way not to provoke, deride or criticize “persons”, but at the same time, thinking itself is not really cared about. This is probably because if there are human rights, there are no “thinking rights”; thinking is a mere product, very cheap, and democracy allows us to say whatever we want... The best proof we can provide for this, is that in most activities of P4C, even in training session, very rarely—if not never—is there any invitation to critical analysis of the sessions. And it is admitted, just like in political movements, that the main point is that it becomes popular and grows: we “care” about people, about “gathering people”, with not so much care for the quality of the work.

On the other hand, caring for people could certainly take place, and probably does take place, in a different way, not so much by practicing “pampering thinking”, but through another perception of “caring”. Let us distinguish here between “motherly care” and “fatherly care”, as this polarity has been established principally since the birth of psychoanalysis. One is linked to unconditional love, the other one is linked to conditional love. The first one is undifferentiated, the second is differentiated. One considers that caring is giving one everything it wants, the other one considers that caring is to give one what it deserves. And of course, the popular “non dualistic” apostle who enjoys the new age perspective will tell you that there is no reason to oppose those two visions, and they can be united, for example with the concept of “need”. But we choose to obey the logical principle of identity, which claims that one is one and the other is other, and asserts an excluding principle which permits clear thinking by seizing the operating tension between the terms. Therefore, either we care about the speaker by telling the person that everything he says is wonderful, or imply such a vision by excluding criticism: the important goal is only that he participates. Or we care about the person by examining thoroughly what has been said, and inviting everyone to do so, in order to see what is worthy and what is not worthy in a given behavior or a given thinking. And we don’t see why the latter one would be a lesser form of caring: maybe more rigorous and less generous, but as attentive.

One concrete example of this is the demand of answering questions, which for Plato is the art par excellence of dialogue. The idea of questioning and answering is for him, following the Socratic model, the way to meet with the other, to care about him, since this produces the closest encounter between souls. This is the reason why he does not want long speeches but short answers that have to deal with the problem posed in the question. Since good questions set us up in front of a specific task that forces us to produce specific concepts or oblige us to confront some aporetic “dead end”, or at least force us to face a situation of a double bind where we have to see our own blind spots or contradictions. Of course, this form of caring thinking, which cares about the thinking, the question and our capacity to answer, and about the other, since we honor his demand, is far from being “nice” since the whole idea is to confront the finiteness of the being, its imperfection. But there again, is not this to care for someone, than to examine his own limits, which constitute his being, and allow him, if possible, desired or necessary, to go beyond them? Growing up constitutes here a process of education: learning to accept oneself and reality, independently of the nature of self and reality.

### ***Matthew Lipman’s “caring thinking”***

But let us now examine briefly the way “caring thinking” is thought of by Matthew Lipman, the reference par excellence for many P4C fans, although as far as we often saw it, his work is ignored—deliberately or through ignorance—by the ones that supposedly refer to him.

His basic claim on the matter is that *“There is such a thing as caring thinking, and that it is the third prerequisite to higher-order thinking (along with critical and creative OB)... It is based on the contention that emotions are judgments: the emotion is the choice, it is the decision, it is the judgment. And it is this kind of thinking that we may well call caring thinking, when it has to do with matters of importance.”*

We can summarize this by saying that emotions are a form of thinking, since they produce judgments. Therefore, says some happy reader, there is no reason not to listen to the emotions! And they will identify and use such a declaration as an anti-rational declaration, which is not the claim of the author, as we understand it. And to temper their enthusiasm even further, let us give another quote from the *auctoritas*:

*“Is it possible to teach children to consider the appropriateness of having the emotions they have? The answer seems fairly obvious: in their upbringing of their children, parents and siblings constantly contribute to the shaping of the young child’s emotional outlook. By reward and reproof, they let the child know which emotional expressions are deemed appropriate in a given context and which are not. (Their rationales may be fairly idiosyncratic: laughing at funerals is often reproofed, but not crying at weddings.) But if there can be an education of the emotions in the home, there can be an education of the emotions in the school and, indeed, there already is... Consequently, if we can temper the antisocial emotions, we are likely to be able to temper the antisocial conduct.”*

In other words, there is some content to emotions, emotions express a judgment, but at the same time, like any other form of thinking, emotions have to be educated, even though we take into account their arbitrariness, often socially determined. Just like opinions, emotions have to be examined, evaluated, criticized, in order to modify them and discriminate them, since some are desirable and others less. There is no particular reason why they should be trusted more than anything else in the human mind. We are therefore not falling here into some wild “flower children” or psychotherapeutic “express yourself”.

Let us now take the risk, while we are examining an author “promoting” emotions, to provide some criticism of those views. In order to do this, we wish to add here a comment of Lipman explaining the thinking of Martha Nussbaum, endorsing her position: *Nevertheless, it rests, she argues, on normative premises, such as the need for self-sufficiency and detachment, that are highly controversial in an age when the need for community seems to outweigh, by far, the need for individual independence.*

This passage seems to us important, because it recognizes the bias of the concept of “emotional thinking”—since many philosophers traditionally criticize emotions mainly for the confusion they bring to the mind—while it attempts to justify it under the guise of some modernist perspective, where the “need for community” would be more important than the “need for individual independence”. This is rather interesting, since we are contemplating a little judo operation typical of our times, where pragmatic philosophy, for whom the concept of community is important, attempts in its traditional way to impose its world view by pretending to some objective argumentation: time and evolution. Therefore, any other form of philosophy is nothing but the immature preamble to pragmatism. In other words, the Taoist master, the stoic philosopher, Descartes in his lonely meditation, Cusa in his contemplation, are nothing but the stuttering of real accomplished philosophy: American pragmatism. Of course, one should not be surprised: a crucial form of American contention to world cultural hegemony has been for a number of years the “soft spoken”, “humanist”, “politically correct”, “scientific”, “concrete”, “democratic” way of thinking, very much inspired by pragmatist philosophy. This way of thinking being very critical of “idealist”, “dogmatic”, “ideological”, “abstract”, “cold”, “continental”, “authoritarian”, “sterile”, “traditional” philosophy. Any caricature being presented here only for heuristic reasons... This is one of the

reasons why P4C practitioners periodically fall into a certain sectarianism, even in a “mild” way, without realizing it: intuitively, they reject forms and content of philosophizing that do not correspond to pragmatist or “modernistic” attitudes and schemes of thought.

It is interesting that such a world view promotes “other directedness” rather than “self directedness”, because in the facts, it does the contrary. It does the contrary because the epigones of such a perspective, like epigones always do, take out of the original message what fits them best and run away with it. In this case, they take concepts like “emotion”, “feelings”, “otherness”, and use them to justify or glorify the subjectivity of the individual being in a very complacent way. They graft on to this scheme some moral justifications, calling it “respect” or “tolerance”, and thus they establish a system that perfectly fits our “consumer society” outlook, where psychologizing is used as an alibi for everyone to say exactly what pleases him, where the basic deal is “let me say what I want and think what I want, and I will let you do the same”. And this “opinion based” way of conceiving social exchange, for which society or community is only an empty shell, a gathering of listeners for our own ramblings, is indeed what one sees a lot called “Philosophy with children” or “community of inquiry”, where there is neither “community” nor “inquiry”. The only rule universally applied being that one has to be nice and wait for his turn to speak, what can be called politeness. Adding the fact that the child is being glorified as a natural thinker, his emotions being qualified therefore as genuine and legitimate. Unless he starts “behaving badly”, or being “not nice”, adjectives which will be attributed to him if he refuses the world outlook that is thus presented to him, where one is not supposed to confront explicitly his neighbor. In other words, “critical thinking” is being totally overtaken by this special “caring thinking”, the first one being dangerous, the second being more comfortable. Let us add here that as far as we understand it, this is not the purpose pursued by Lipman and Nussbaum, nor is it what P4C always is, as we have witnessed other types of practice, for example in Australia or Norway. But at the same time, we have to know that the consequences of our ideas include as well what they produce in other persons, in the listeners, in the readers, in the followers. One cannot ignore the by-products and fallouts of one’s own mental production.

### **Person and concept**

But let us examine another passage of Lipman’s writing about caring thinking, attempting to define it.

*Thinking in values is always "intentional" in the phenomenological understanding of that term, in the sense that one who values (or thinks valuationally) is always directing his or her thinking at something. Thus, thinking that values rational beings is respectful thinking. Thinking that values what is beautiful is appreciative thinking. Thinking that values what is virtuous is admiring thinking. If it values what is sentient, it is considerate thinking. If it values what needs to be sustained, it is cherishing thinking. If it values what suffers, it is compassionate thinking. If it values the fate of the world and its inhabitants, it is concerned thinking. In general, we can say that thinking that values value is caring thinking.*

This quotation might indeed surprise many readers, since we are here far from the “feely touchy” conception of “caring thinking” that is widely spread in the lipmanian community, for some strange reasons. We appreciate the fact that “caring” has different meaning, depending upon what we care about, and what we care about is something we have to know or determine. This is what in the first part of our text we thought of as the “missing object”. And the reader will notice that it is a “thinking object” one cares about, and not “persons”; it does not exclude “persons”, but that is not the main goal. “Persons” become here a mean, not a purpose. We then wonder how and why some

practitioners or theorists have transformed this philosophical lipmanian concept into a psychological “AA meeting”, “Thanks for sharing” type “code word”.

Let us now get back to Matthew Lipman, and ask the following question: whom is he implicitly criticizing with his concept of “caring thinking”, real persons or windmills? Who would lack “caring thinking” thus defined? What would be the “big whoopee” about “caring thinking”? Who would lack such an axiology in their thinking? Who would not have such a vectorized thought? Philosophers generally do put into the forefront of their thinking some crucial concept, be it reason, truth, justice, morals, aesthetics, faith, etc. That is the reason why we still take notice of them. Even subjectivity is not denied in most classical authors. They have just different ways to articulate it, to educate it or to present it. It is a total myth that there would be purely “objectivist” or purely “rationalist” thinkers in the tradition. Let us examine some classical authors. Plato speaks about *eros* (desire) as being the motivation of thinking, although he is eager to distinguish earthly *eros* and celestial *eros*. Spinoza speaks about a *conatus*, some kind of survival instinct as the fundamental drive of any being. Descartes wrote a treatise of the passions where he invites reason to regulate passion, not to annihilate it, and his “Metaphysical meditations” is a very personal work. Hegel claims that without passion nothing great could take place. Kierkegaard affirms that there is no truth outside subjectivity. We could go on like this, and therefore we do not see which recognized author would refuse to give any room to subjectivity, no more than we would see which author would think in a way that would be deprived of any leading value structuring his thinking. Our best bet here is that the only “enemy” of Lipman is found in modern academic philosophy, the proverbial philosophy professor, who has some relational problem with his students and tends to speak to himself in the classroom. For indeed, in this profession there would be a certain pretension to objectivity, even to certain scientificity, in the grotesque rather recent obsession of viewing philosophy primarily as a history of ideas. Although we can think as well of Erasmus criticizing harshly the neo-Aristotelian philosophical sects, for whom the whole issue about philosophy was to determine who really “truly” understood Aristotle. In this sense, we fully support Lipman’s work, aiming at developing philosophy as a practice: construction of thinking. We recognize that in this path, he invites the student to walk in the footprints of the great thinkers, rather than parroting them.

At the same time, we perceive an internal tension in Lipman’s view: his official and open ties to Dewey and pragmatism, advocating individual experience, and a certain attachment to continental philosophy, to idealist philosophy. A latter dimension that is obliterated by many of his “followers”. The most blatant aspect of it is the way Lipman’s pedagogy is being used, a trivialized “deweyian” model, where under the guise of personal discovery we get a mere exchange of opinions. In most cases, teachers use Lipman’s novels, read it in the classroom and then have a free discussion about it. Rare are the ones who use the manual and exercise books he composed, a work much more geared to formal thinking, methodology, epistemology, critical thinking, conceptualization, problematization, etc. In fact, in many countries, teachers invoking his name have never even heard of those manuals, or have quickly forgotten them.

### ***Noble and mundane philosophy***

Once we have established that “caring” has always been consubstantial to philosophy, let us now examine closer what has been the shift of paradigm in the nature of “caring”, primarily in its object, since that is the place where lies the ambiguity, as outlined earlier in our text. Lipman is right to say that there are different values in the philosophical tradition, which of course imply different types of “caring”. In the classical tradition, heritage of the Greeks, we primarily observe the importance of the transcendental concepts: truth, good, beauty, etc. Any other object of preoccupation, more “personal”, is of a lesser value. A vision that does not imply that there is no personal engagement, on the contrary. The classical Greek conception of man as a citizen is a good example of this

specific commitment. In such a context the “person”—if such a concept makes sense here—is not its own finality: it is deeply involved, body, mind and soul, reason and passion, in the realization of what it conceives as the crucial ideal or goal to pursue, for which he accepts to be a mere “tool”, be this goal very abstract or extramundane.

The historical major rupture with such a “noble” perspective, where the abstract concept comes first, before the person, comes in the Roman period, in a transformation probably connected to the emergence of Middle Eastern thinking, more specifically the Judaeo-Christian culture. Philosophy then emerged as a form of “consolation”, as we find it explicitly in Boethius, or as a practice as in Seneca and the later stoics, such as Marcus Aurelius. The irony is that the idea of philosophy as a mere instrument for making man happy or feeling better comes at a period viewed as decadent from the standpoint of culture and philosophy. We are not in the pursuit of great schemes anymore, but in a “humanistic” vision where one is concerned primarily with his own daily existence. Therefore, the concern with the other comes primarily as a concern for one self. And it is true that as we progress along the centuries, man becomes more and more his own finality, his own goal, as Kant will specify later on. The emergence of pragmatism, in its criticism of idealism and intellectualism—the main enemy at the time being in particular Hegel—inscribes itself in this modernizing tradition. The claim is the following: What is the use of philosophy if it cannot solve daily problems? Ironically enough, Marx is in that very tradition as well, as expressed in his famous quote: “Until now philosophers have interpreted the world, now they have to change it”. But the question thus imposing itself, as we have already raised while criticizing Nussbaum, is then: Is this merely a descriptive perspective, or is it a normative one? Is this historical process good and desirable, or is it merely the way that things take place? It is true that today, the idea of dying for a cause is not the most widespread western philosophical vision of the world: it would rather be viewed as primitive or backward, or a mere worse case scenario. “Discussion” or “dialogue”, and particular concepts such as “intersubjectivity”, are trendy if not obligatory. The tenants of anti-philosophy, the rogue cynic or the brutal Zen master, with their systematic refusal to explain, would be perceived as relics of another age (see our article on Nasruddin Hodja). Truth, beauty or any form of absolute would be viewed as out of date or signs of dogmatism. Concepts always have to be “person related” or “place related”, if not “case related”. The death of Socrates could therefore be viewed as a pathological suicidal behavior. This posture makes a lot of sense, since in general, the concepts that don’t belong to us are the ones who incarnate or reflect dogmatism. The problem is always with the foreigner, with the other, with the strange person who deviates from what we think is right or normal. Which is probably the reason why Plato, in his later dialogues, insightfully introduces as the main character “The stranger”, who replaces Socrates as the questioning person. He provides us with the key to this choice by explaining that “When the gods come to visit men, they always take the form of the foreigner”. And as we all know, gods are inhuman: they have little respect for men and their petty lives. Thus our modern philosophy practitioner will precisely criticize Socrates as being somewhat heartless with his witty irony and devastating sarcasm. Was Socrates not caring? Surely he cared, but about truth more than about the “person”. Who would care about the person, this mere theater mask! He had observed that men often use their own person as an obstacle to truth, which can account for his disrespectful attitude. He delicately tries to explain this recurrent phenomenon by calling it forgetfulness, or ignorance, and so the philosopher, the foreigner has to remind the poor fellow of his own alienated nature. That for him is caring, or respect...

## ***Respect and respect***

Let us now examine one definition we found, among many, of caring thinking. “Caring thinking means that persons take each other as seriously as they wish to be taken”. At that point, in order to problematize the definition, we would like to oppose to this scheme what we will call the “not caring thinking”, in order to see what happens. We have observed in many P4C discussions that

indeed participants take themselves seriously. In fact, too seriously. We must add here that in many such discussions laughter is often banned, if not taboo. Laughter being perceived as a form of disrespect, as is often thought by some teachers, who explicitly prohibit it. Indeed, we want to be taken seriously when we speak, and why not! We want our thinking to be valued and not derided. But at the same time, this taking ourselves seriously prohibits us from thinking, as we see in many philosophy professors. (Aside from the U.K. where self-irony is an almost obligatory behavior for professors in order to look smart and liberated.) But we had noticed in our practice that at a very early age, as soon as 5 years old, problems of logic are linked to laughter. Any perception of paralogism produces an enjoyment in the children, such as when we tell stories about crazy people, or traditional tales like the ones of Nasruddin. In other words: no laughter, no critical thinking. Now of course, one can laugh nervously, stupidly or aggressively, and since laughter is an emotional issue, like any other emotions, it can be educated. Just like critical thinking, caring thinking is a practice in itself, that implies a certain attitude, a simultaneous desire to confront the other and oneself and sympathize with him, as well as the development of certain skills. Just like in the martial arts, where one learns to fight while learning a profound respect for the other.

“Take off your shirt, and come for the body to body”, says Socrates. And that is why he does not like long speeches but short statements and questions. And let’s not forget that caring for the others in antiquity, had often to do more with passion, including the agonistic and violent dimension of it, than with some soft passive mental state often called “feeling”. Although we could attempt to distinguish here the wild and violent frenzy of *eros*, the calm and patient *philia* and the ascetic *agape*. They of course produce different forms of caring thinking, different types of relationship to others.

Another argument that we should briefly mention, to justify reason as the form par excellence of caring thinking, is the fact that it can pretend to universality, probably much more than emotions, that are very personal, much more cultural and individual history dependent. Strangely enough, if one wants to share his emotion with someone, he has to be able to explain what he is feeling, take some distance from it in order to give it a name, or provide an explanation without which the other one will be blind to his personal situation. We might feel something at the sight of the person that is expressing emotion, but if he cannot master the words to express it and we ignore what caused the emotion, we will hardly be able to share it. Reason seems paradoxically to constitute a condition for sharing emotions.

Evidently one wants to be taken seriously, but at the same time one has to learn not to take himself seriously, otherwise this will produce sincerity or rigidity, two main obstacles to real thinking, for the latter implies a work of negativity. Even trickier is how to teach someone else not to take himself too seriously, a task which many pedagogues relinquish. Too dangerous, too delicate, too politically incorrect. In our times of extreme psychologization of thinking, the subjectivity is sacred, and you might get sued for not respecting one’s subjectivity. I still remember the mother of a little girl who was totally enraged at me since she had heard that I asked her nine years old girl if she was in love with her bag, because of the way this pupil was holding the object so tight to herself in the classroom. Teaching one to let go with his ideas, to examine them with distance and a critical eye, like teaching this nine years old girl to let go with her bag. What a difficult task! But how fundamental! And this has to do with emotions, like it has to do with growing up.

### ***Philosophy is not for children***

Plato thought that philosophy was not necessarily good for children. He argued that children should be prohibited from doing philosophy for their own sake ‘for it fills them with indiscipline’. He believed that children should be prevented from practicing philosophy in order to protect both the

discipline of philosophy and respect for the adults. This led him to suppose that: *You have noticed how young men, after their first taste of argument, are always contradicting people just for the fun of it... like puppies who love to pull and tear at anyone within reach... so when they have proved a lot of people wrong, often themselves, they soon slip into the belief that nothing they believed before was true; with the result that they discredit themselves and the whole business of philosophy in the eyes of the world.*

We think this remark is very appropriate to many P4C workshops, as we have witnessed them. Why? For the very simple reason that the icon of the “I” is being made sacred. Some time ago, a Mexican researcher produced a report about a large evaluation done of philosophical practice in Mexico. And she basically discovered that if it was clear that children had learned to express themselves in an open fashion through this practice—which of course is an important advantage when one thinks of the classrooms where the child’s speech has no real statute—but she also discovered that there was no particular improvement in critical thinking, capacity of abstraction or any other thinking competencies. In other words, this report was accusing P4C or being a mere practice of discussion, not even of rhetoric, since in this field one has to be able to distinguish different types of speech and recognize the specificity of each argument. In other words, children were not initiated to meta level discussions; they were not invited to think about the thinking. And when this is the case, “to liberate speech” encourages participants to merely give their own opinion, thought of as being very valuable in itself, in order to practice what we call the “Yes, but...” mode of discussion.

As we see it, the “Yes, but...” is roughly what Plato is referring to—the wiseacre mentality—when he argues against philosophy with children. The “Yes, but...” means: “I have to say something as well”. It is exactly the contrary to what we would call “construction of thinking”, as Hegel recommends, or any kind of caring, for ideas or for the other. In a simple way, what Hegel proposes as a condition of dialectical thinking, which for him is the form of thinking par excellence, is to first produce a clear statement, then in a second moment, produce a counter thesis which produces a real problem in relation to the first. As a result, the necessity of a third moment will emerge, when we will produce a new concept that will account for the tension of the first two, either by defining the issue or by solving it—i.e. overcoming—the initial problem. Some will claim that the “Yes, but...” does exactly this, showing how the students are creative and know how to problematize. But if we analyze in a closer way this functioning, this is not the case at all. For a very good reason: the “Yes, but...” is a meaningless, automatic and unthought-of syntactical structure. First, because the “Yes” is here a totally unclear and confused word. We don’t know if it means “Yes, you have spoken, now it is my turn”, “Yes, I agree with you”, “Yes, you have the right to speak”, “Yes, that is the best you can do”, etc. Same for the “but”. We don’t know if it means “I don’t agree with you”, “You forgot something important”, “I would rather say this in a different way”, “Let me add something”, “I prefer to speak about something else” etc. In other words, we have a speech that is neither conscious of itself nor of what the other has said. Maybe it is interesting or appropriate, maybe it is not.

Therefore, unless we stop to define what the “Yes, but...” means and determine the legitimacy of its content, the way it connects the previous speech to the coming one, we have not done any philosophical work. But of course, it is not natural to stop the flow of words and hold such analysis. It goes against the immediate impulse to “express one self”, often expressed by the “Yes, but...”, a subjectivity totally impregnated with its own sincerity. And the natural tendency of the young person discovering the power of speech, making the experience of its own power to argue, is to always find something else to say, something to add or argue about: “Yes, but...”. And weirdly enough, if this egotist positioning is what the discussion is about, it is better in a way that the child just stays quiet and listens, rather than abuses of his own opinion, thinking that the value of

anything said is a matter of mere “personal feelings”. Unless one uses such occasion to invite the child to analyze the content of his own speech, which implies that he can learn that what he has to say might be irrelevant, false, inappropriate, etc. And to come back to “caring thinking”, this implies that he creates distance from his own emotions, since when one wants to speak, his immediate emotions often drive him primarily to “speaking with his guts”, be it to “say what he feels”, to “show himself”, to “settle an account” with someone else, to express his chronic age linked “spirit of contradiction”, etc. And at such words, the typical “children philosophy romantic”, who himself implicitly pretends to the “freshness of childhood”, will react, for he “loves” children: “they are such natural philosophers”, claims he. But the truth of the matter is that an adult who has a problem with other adults can so easily feel great and powerful with children, that he claims as an explicit narcissistic statement that children are wonderful. And that is one of the main reason why so many teachers do not want, for anything in the world, to introduce critical thinking into the classroom: that is exactly what their undernourished self fears in adults. They therefore prefer to be cared for... In this harsh world, a little supplement for the soul never hurts anybody...

### **Socrates “caring thinking”**

Like we have said before, if we had to propose a good example of “caring thinking” in the history of philosophy, it seems to us it would be the figure of Socrates, since for this forefather of philosophy the only adequate form actual thinking can take, is the one of dialogue. Thus the historical Socrates, as far as we know him, was going around the city, market place, gymnasium, private houses or elsewhere, looking for interlocutors, famous ones or banal ones, free men or slaves, in order to search for truth. He described himself as a lover—a passionate one indeed—for just like a lover he could not imagine himself existing or thinking outside of the relationship to others. Encountering the other was the very condition for truth, and his own addiction to truth was therefore an addiction to the other, his fellow human being. Thus we have here the double form of “caring thinking”, since he cared extremely both for the person in front of him and the content of what is being said. But of course, as a critic would comment, this was conditional love, since he could not love or would not love anymore anyone who would abandon truth as the primary object. Not that he despised the one that had a hard time looking for truth, this was for him not a problem, and he would patiently accompany that person in her wanderings. But if one would prefer glory, power or academic pretensions, then he would be pitiless, because the attitude was not conducive to searching for truth. Although he was not pitiless in the sense that he would condemn them, but simply that he would make them look foolish by creating the conditions where their own foolishness would appear: through their refusal to truthfully answer questions. Therefore we can see some sophist get angry with him, but never Socrates getting angry at anyone, as Plato depicts a Socrates that would relentlessly pursue his interlocutor, like the hound dog pursues its prey all the way to the far end of his hole.

What is the main instrument Socrates uses for his “caring thinking”? Dialectics, which is not only a methodology, but as well what Plato defines as “the art of questioning and answering”. And of course, contrary to those usual debates where no one really listens to the other, unlike those so-called philosophy workshops where we see participants raising his hand while someone is already speaking, in order to get his turn to speak and throw in his two bits, the art dialectics—dialogue—implies not only that one is very attentive to the other but that he wants—truly desires—to know more about his thinking. It is not therefore a mere politeness or good manner, a “democratic” attitude where everyone gets his “chance” to speak, but a real interest in deepening the other’s thinking. It is not respect, but passion, a passion for truth, and therefore a strong attachment to that other soul which is the condition and the means for attaining truth. Here of course, the critic will claim that the other becomes a mere instrument, he is instrumentalized in a terrible and harsh fashion, but Socrates will defend the idea—contrary to the more recent concept of man as his own

end—that realizing one’s self implies becoming a vessel for the true, a channel for the good, a mirror for the beautiful. And indeed, what better statute can we give to a soul than reminding him who he is, a spark of the divine fire, and not some mere wanting beast trying to satisfy his desires, whose ego ideal is to become a “filled sponge”, what Nietzsche will later call the “last man”, the one who is not led by anything other than his own well-being and security, a non-person who has no drive to go beyond himself, a state of nihilism that today is too often conceived as “happiness”.

Thus “caring thinking” is to care about someone and not to abandon him to this sordid conception of “doing your own thing”, in a form of discussion where one “freely expresses himself”. The worse aberration being when such a gathering of egos is called “community of research”, when there is neither community, not research, but a mere bundling of egotistic opinions. True questioning implies being passionate about the other, since a condition of being able to question a person, is that one has to perceive what he says and thinks in order to get him to go further. True answering implies accepting the strangeness of what the other one is asking, and carefully answering without trying to dodge the issue, consciously or not. A positioning that implies a tremendous care, a very demanding “caring thinking”.

### ***The necessity of “not-caring thinking”***

With a concern for problematizing the concept of “caring thinking”—a necessary critical examination of the term—let us now introduce and defend the idea of “not caring thinking”. Let us add, in order to reassure the anxious pedagogue, that this “not caring thinking” might actually be, in a certain way, the real form of “caring thinking”. The question is: what is it that we should not care about? And what advantages would we gain by “not caring”? The first “object” we should not care about is our own self, and from this abandonment we would gain an increased capacity to think. Strangely enough, “not caring” about oneself allows a greater possibility to commit oneself. The main reason for this, as we have outlined before, is that our “person” is a hindrance to the search for truth. Plato comments that friendship and truth don’t fit well together, since truth is repellent rather than being attractive: saying the truth will bring us enemies more than friends, as the example of Socrates shows. And our worse friend is of course our self, a friend who wants us to feel good, really good, and be very happy. Therefore, anything in the way of real thinking must be removed. And if we accept the idea that critical thinking has principally to be applied to oneself, we must “not care” about oneself in order to apply this critical thinking. If I have no distance from my emotions, how can I examine their legitimacy? Now, of course, if one takes the romantic perspective that emotions are always good, “pastel” love being the epitome of this “wonderland of subjectivity”, one does not see why there should be distance from emotions. On the contrary they should always be expressed, if only to relieve the overburdened soul! And we periodically meet adults that thus glorify children emotions, in order to feel better, fill their existential gap, get themselves a good conscience, and justify their own emotions as well as their own self. They forget too easily that emotions are, like ideas, the main reason for violence, xenophobia and war. Possibly those naive pedagogues escape this argument by assuming some kind of Rousseau like posture, where the children, closer to nature, are good, and they become bad as they integrate into society. Why not! But let’s not forget that children integrate into “society” at a very early age, probably even more so today than before, as experienced by many contemporary parents.

“Not caring” about our self therefore allows us some distance and a capacity for critical thinking. And this does not imply an abandonment of emotions or opinions, but a mere suspension of them, or a capacity to split one self, in order to become an object of one’s own thinking. And paradoxically, this capacity to split probably allows us to reconcile ourselves with our own being, since it implies growing up emotionally. But as well, it allows us to accept much more the other, with his differences, since emotions—probably even more than opinions—can be very blind to

otherness, especially when this otherness does not vibrate in the same way as ours does. Furthermore, for teachers or parents, this “not caring” about oneself allows us to understand and accept that children—or other adults—do not function like us. How many times have we been amazed at adults who project in a totally unconscious way their own emotions on children, with the utmost good conscience! A blindness which induces in the children they are responsible for a sort of corruption, since those children then mimic those adults in order to get some “reward”, if only the satisfied look contemplating them. I will always remember the astonished face of the Norwegian teacher who “had suffered” during the “harshness” of a philosophy workshop with her pupils, and cried out later in her report to the teacher’s meeting: “I can’t believe it! They liked it!”. Another such example is a workshop of critical thinking where I was asking the children, after they heard someone speak, to state openly if they believed or not the person speaking—as well as justifying their choice—a demand which horrified the teacher as a rude thing to do; but the children found it fun, among other reasons because this rightful and common judgment is generally banned, being never expressed in public but always in private way.

How often when an adult projects his own needs to be loved on the children themselves, very surprised when some pupil dare reject that “love”! A rejection sometimes expressed in an unexpected violent way, especially with teen-agers, a rejection which the poor disappointed teacher explains entirely with the “problems” of the pupil. If he would “care less” about himself, be less dogmatic about his own emotions and his own “needs”, he probably would see better, understand and accept better the persons he has in front of himself, especially the different ones. At the same time, he would invite his pupils to see and understand better what they say and are, a condition for seeing, understanding and accepting better what the others say and are. Just like ideas, emotions have to be passed through the sieves, examined and criticized, in order to see which are legitimate, which are not. For the advocates of pragmatism who are so keen on “self-correction”—although this is a new name for an old concept, like Spinoza’s “adequate idea”—why would self-correction be applied only to ideas but not to emotions? But indeed, emotions are much more difficult to examine than ideas, we tend to trust them a lot because they are harder than ideas to distance ourselves from, which explains why philosophers have often been somewhat critical and suspicious of them, as they have been with common opinions, largely criticized as well. But let’s not confuse this criticism with the strange behavior of the proverbial philosophy professor, what students familiarly call a “nerd”, among other reasons for his incapacity to exist and relate to human beings. And for sure academia is often a place where irrationality, egotism and emotional blindness reign, under the guise of not being emotional. But let’s not forget that this caricature of a philosopher should not be a reason to throw out the baby with the bathwater and fall—from Charybdis to Scylla—into the arms of the caricature of a psychologist, for whom emotions are the only real thing. Complacency is in both cases the enemy, be it with rigid ideas or glorified emotions. And strangely enough, as we see it, to be authentic, to commit one self, is the condition both to exist and to think, which implies not being a prisoner neither of our emotions, nor of our own ideas.

### ***Philosophical correctness***

In our own practice, we use a concept that can be related to caring thinking, which we call “sympathy”, close to the Greek “*philia*”. We consider it as one of the basic attitudes conducive to thinking, along with settling down, astonishment, confrontation, suspension of judgment, etc. We distinguish those attitudes from actual thinking competencies, such as argumentation analysis, critique, conceptualization, since the first ones have to do with the way to be—you can settle down, be sympathetic or be astonished without really thinking—and the second ones being actual thinking as a process of production of ideas. And for not being thinking in action, those attitudes are not secondary, since most times, when entering a workshop, the primary task is to put into effect those attitudes, without which competencies cannot operate. And funnily enough, sympathy, a sort of

minimal kindness or goodwill toward other, allows us to engage in critical thinking because there is trust. Any lack of trust would prohibit critique, since it would risk degenerating into a squabble. Or if one wants to enter a squabble, the critique would become rather irrational and violent, and probably meaningless.

Thus from a general perspective, we would have nothing against “caring thinking”, a concept that echoes *philia*, *eros* and *agape*, if it were not the tip of the iceberg of a “philosophical correctness”, as we have already hinted at. But to be clear, let us examine what would be the content and premises of this paradigm shift. Here are a few of its postulates, mostly made in the U.S, now considered world culture. First and foremost is the very protestant conception of the predominance of ethics above any other philosophical field: above metaphysics, aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, etc. Ethics would almost be the meta philosophical issue, that would determine what position is acceptable or not, which would of course reject numerous powerful philosophical attitudes, such as the untranslatable Greek “*agon*”, out of which comes the words agony and antagonism. Second is the idea that there is progress—or regress—in philosophy, a concept which we find in the founding of pragmatism, although it is not the first time this appears in the history of philosophy, as we have seen with Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, etc. But it is the only time probably in history, due to the functioning of our modern world, that an ideology has such power—technical, cultural and political—to impose itself. The criteria for this progress are largely taken from psychology, cognitive sciences, pedagogy, sociology, etc., in other words, domains that are outside of philosophy, which implies a certain instrumentalization of philosophy or control over philosophy. Third, a rejection of dualism, a certain holism, largely influenced by “New age” mentality, where monism is conceived as superior to dualism, under the cover of “holistic” or “wholistic” perspectives, which have a lot to do with pretensions to totality, or omnipotence. Fourth, a political influence, of Anglo-American liberalism, where all individuals are considered equal, sufficiently educated, free to choose, and do not need any surpassing transcendent concept or body to regulate their activity. In this context, the individual, his desires, feelings and wishes are not questionable, and no one, under the guise of a certain egalitarianism, can pretend to know for the other. This political vision can as well be called consumer society, as supply and demand determine reality. Fifth, an abandonment of transcendence in favor of immanence, where the community, a very concrete body, primes over universality, or humanity, considered as a too abstract and empty concept. Sixth, the sacredness of the individual, the human person being established as an end in itself, in opposition to any other more conceptual purpose: truth, beauty, good, reason, etc. Seventh, an ecological world vision, where science and techniques, or the general activity of man upon nature becomes highly suspicious and even dangerous, and therefore must reign in the principle of precaution, a world where Prometheus is equated to the devil. These are very general principles, which are sometimes in contradiction to one another; depending on the proclivities and axiology of the subject, one will hierarchize or order them differently. But they form as a whole the matrix of the “new dominant world thinking”. After all, just like man’s thinking in history has undergone different transformations and gone through different phases, maybe our world had for some time to abide, willy-nilly, to this world outlook. Like children have to experience their own foolishness in order to learn.