

## NOTA BENE: THINKING IN QUESTION/S

### 1. TWO NOTES OF APPRECIATION

To our hosts Andrea, Emma and Gary. First, for the excellent question, which rightly puts our thinking in question, and second for the rolling river that carries us along together, week by week, to who knows where.

I'm going to offer some approaches to problems without solutions, drawing on my own work and others with similar notions. I'm not using slides; the quotations are in the Chat if you want to follow along. [a moment]

*What were we thinking?* is a moment of opportunity – a break in the continuity of our identification with the stories in our heads. Maybe a rude awakening or a crushing embarrassment; precisely a "learning opportunity".

Already, we have to make a choice. Will we seize the moment and learn to think differently? Already, a possibility, a freedom and a responsibility.

If we are willing to learn, which means to change, and we don't know how, Donna Haraway has a good approach: we stay with the trouble...

*Staying with the trouble means making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become with each other or not at all.*

### 2. READY TO GOVERN?

The moment that has made me cringe to look back at is the ANC's 1992 policy document, Ready to govern. Really??? What were we THINKING???

It begins with the four basic objectives of ANC policy:

- *To strive for the achievement of the right of all South Africans, as a whole, to political and economic self-determination in a united South Africa;*
- *To overcome the legacy of inequality and injustice created by colonialism and apartheid, in a swift, progressive and principled way;*
- *To develop a sustainable economy and state infrastructure that will progressively improve the quality of life of all South Africans; and,*
- *To encourage the flourishing of the feeling that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, to promote a common loyalty to and pride in the country and to create a universal sense of freedom and security within its borders.*

I have found it hard to read that with a straight face, to not grimace, to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, something like bitterness or bitchiness. I have to tell you that preparing for this talk had me awake in the wee hours every night for weeks, grappling with many, many thoughts and ideas, lots of tears, lots of rage. Gradually, I calmed down, began to see things differently.

What *were* they thinking? In 1992, after generations of violence and resistance, preparing to lead South Africa's first legitimate government ever. Bearing in mind the ferocity of the negotiations and the violence at the time. Bearing in mind that the ANC had never been a political party, had been banned for thirty years, had only existed legally in the country for two.

Knowing – at some level, they must have known – that they would not have a free hand to conjure the country of our dreams out of thin air, nor to beat it out of economic and political structures that were designed for division, extraction and oppression.

Maybe they were thinking what they had to think, what *that* moment demanded. To dare to set out the architecture of a democratic South Africa, thinking what the drafters of the African Claims and the Freedom Charter had thought. What liberation movements have always thought. That the people shall govern, that liberation was possible, even in our lifetime. That there was a political road to some kind of freedom, peace, justice, shared prosperity, and we might build and travel it together.

But now, we say “what were we thinking?” as if we indeed had been stupid, naïve, mad, as if we were betrayed, lied to, taken for a ride by crooks and conmen. As if we and they should have known better, should have done better. As if hope for *a better life for all* was a fools' game that we will never fall for again. It is not a good feeling. We desperately need somebody to blame.

Anne Carson, in the Preface to *Grief Lessons*, her translation of Euripides' tragedies, writes:

*Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say that rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements.\*Perhaps you think this does not apply to you. Yet you recall the day your wife, driving you to your mother's funeral, turned left instead of right at the intersection and you had to scream at her so loud other drivers turned to look. When you tore off her head and threw it out the window they nodded, changed gears, drove away.*

*Grief and rage – you need to contain that, to put a frame around it, where it can play itself out without you or your kin having to die.*

### 3. TO CHANGE OUR THINKING

In 2010, Marxist geographer and anthropologist David Harvey concludes a lecture on the crises of capitalism by saying the current world order isn't a world he wants to live in. He doesn't have the solution but thinks he knows the nature of the problem, saying “*We have a duty, it seems to me, those of us who are academics and seriously involved in the world, to actually change our mode of thinking.*” To say it is a duty suggests it is both necessary and possible, which in turn suggests that it's already available, ready to hand.

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*\* If you ask an older Ilongot man of northern Luzon, Philippines, why he cuts off human heads, his answer is brief and one on which no anthropologist can readily elaborate: He says that rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow human beings. He claims that he needs a place “to carry his anger.” The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement. Although the anthropologist's job is to make other cultures intelligible, more questions fail to reveal any further explanation of this man's pithy statement. To him, grief, rage, and headhunting go together in a self-evident manner. Either you understand it or you don't. And, in fact, for the longest time I simply did not. ~ Renato Rosaldo, Grief and a Headhunter's Rage*

But we also have a dilemma. If our current mode of thinking is the problem, then any solution we come up with will probably dig us in deeper. Also, if academics have been society's designated thinkers up to now, then academic thinking must be in question as well. So this can't be just about making a better plan: it's also about orientation here and now, in the dark.

Harvey's challenge already gives us three clues. First of all, the personal commitment of each one of us who feels and takes on that duty to stay involved and to change. Second, that we are "we", persons who come together to answer the call. [Because we each have to do it ourself, but we can't do it by ourself.] Third, that thinking has "modes", so we are not stuck with the one we've got.

### 3. LEVINAS'S IDEA OF A POSSIBILITY

It seems to me that philosophical practice – philosophy not as debates about texts but as a way of life – what Pierre Hadot calls "spiritual exercises" – active and particular engagement with how we think in our own lives over time – can help us to stay with the trouble, with the rage and grief, to come back to ourselves, to the struggle, to live and think otherwise.

It is also a practice to orient ourselves in the face of insoluble problems. The basis of my own thinking and practice is the work of Emmanuel Levinas, another philosopher who didn't have the solutions, but thought he knew where the problem lay: in ethics. He believed that Western thought, by placing the Self in the centre of all things, "tends to become totalitarian by the very fact that it ignores the radical experience of the Other". In the concluding paragraphs of an essay on Jewish-Christian relations in Europe, Levinas writes of a "*maturity and patience for insoluble problems*":

*What can it be? The presence of persons before a problem. Attention and vigilance: not to sleep until the end of time, perhaps. The presence of persons who, for once, do not fade into words, get lost in technical questions, freeze up into institutions or structures. The presence of persons in the full force of their irreplaceable identity, in the full force of their inevitable responsibility....*

*[A] new religiosity and solidarity – is loving one's neighbor anything other than this? Not the facile spontaneous élan [enthusiasm], but the difficult working on oneself: to go toward the Other where he is truly other, in the radical contradiction of their alterity, that place from which, for an insufficiently mature soul, hatred flows naturally or is deduced with infallible logic....*

*The presence of persons, proximity before persons: what will come of this new spirituality, that proximity without definite projects, that sort of vigilance without dialogue that, devoid of all definition, all thought, may resemble sleep? To tell the truth, I don't know.*

Then he speaks of the little prince in Saint-Exupéry's novel who demands the stranded pilot draw a lamb for him. The pilot tries and fails, tries and fails, eventually satisfying the boy by drawing a box in which, he says, the little lamb lies sleeping. Levinas concludes:

*I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems. It is still sleeping in the bottom of a box; but a box over which persons who have drawn close to each other keep watch. I have no idea other than the idea of the idea one should have. The abstract drawing of a parallelogram – cradle of our hopes. I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping.*

This is an approach we could talk about, perhaps to take up. Maturity and patience, attention and vigilance, the difficult working on oneself, the presence of persons in the full force of their irreplaceable identity, their inevitable responsibility. Something could happen there.

We could also practice letting go of old practices in the (egocentric, deathbound, reductionist, deterministic, violent) logic of “Western thinking”.

In earlier presentations, Andrea wondered if we were even willing to think and Vulindlela Nyoni talked about the popular culture of “no regrets”, how it gets in the way of the kind of remorse that would actually move us to stop our nonsense.

I keep remembering that dream where you think you are gripping a stick and suddenly it’s a snake. Or the throat of a stranger. Before cognition or will even come into play, your hands spring apart. Spontaneously. Before you know it, you knew it. Or, as Hannah Arendt says, “Every thought is an afterthought”. Thought reflects experience. As if this movement of “coming to know” is a whole body-heart-mind personal experience, and that we should be attending to the whole orchestra of our sensibilities, not just the idiot conductor.

Why are we failing to think from and with our experience? It isn’t just the climate crisis that we “know perfectly well” but fail to address. It is senseless violence, everywhere, all day, every day. Domestic violence, economic violence, state violence, war. We know perfectly well and we don’t stop. (See, I’m getting cranky again, looking to tear somebody’s head off. Full of rage, full of grief, of hopelessness, impotence. Deep breath.)

So: how do we take our hands off the throat of the world? How do we withdraw our fake ignorance, our consent-by-participation and come back to our senses? Part of doing-something-else has to include disengaging what we are doing now. Can’t we just do that?

This is where Laurie Anderson’s “From the air” has been keeping me company. It begins: *Good evening. This is your captain. We are about to attempt a crash landing... we are going down. We are all going down, together... Put your hands over your eyes, jump out of the plane. There is no pilot, you are not alone. Stand by.*

Imagine the plane is “Western thinking”, the pilot “Western man”. Imagine letting it go.

There is no pilot, you are not alone. Stand by.

Or there is Ursula K. LeGuin’s short story, “The ones who walk away from Omelas”. It is set in a utopia, a perfectly healthy, happy city that depends for its happiness on the suffering of one child. Everyone knows it and they are, regretfully, willing to pay that price. But every now and then, people walk away:

*They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.*

#### 4. PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

I am speaking today from decades of my own experience of learning to think for myself and more than twenty years of supporting others to do so in a philosophical counselling practice.

To a fly on a wall, philosophical counselling would look like psychotherapy, two people in conversation about what’s going on for one of them. But without the medical staging of pathology, diagnosis and

treatment, without playing the disparate roles of doctor and patient or, for that matter, master and student or service-provider and consumer.

It's a conversation, motivated by the desire or distress of the person who comes to my door or screen and my desire and willingness to welcome them, make myself useful, to learn from and with them, to tell them a thing or two, now and then. In the course of which, somehow, they also learn to find their way, to come to their senses, to stay with the trouble and think for themselves. Where they get to is always a surprise and it generally takes longer than anyone hoped.

I've written about this elsewhere – the titles are in the poster for today and in the quotations doc – but here is a paragraph on its philosophical nature and its cultivation of virtue:

*This is a fundamentally philosophical scene. A person, a world, a question, an interlocutor. The careful practices of expression and self-awareness. Attention to the suffering caused by unwarranted beliefs, fears and desires. It is not doctrinal. Rather than teaching about virtue, it encourages virtue to develop. Because it takes time, it calls for patience and discipline. Because it is formidable, it calls for gentleness and courage. Because it faces the truth, it is valiant and fierce. We learn how to learn. [We become less stupid.] Practical wisdom (phronesis) emerges as a trustworthy sense of orientation, not from principles and rules, but from "the self-confidence of the human being" that Marx (1843a) called freedom. It is not the certainty of achieving the truth so much as the sureness of being true to oneself, true to life, and therefore dependable.*

So here's my wager. Maybe we don't have to despise humanity or give up on it. Maybe we're supposed to recover it, give it new substance.

After all, philosophical counselling is only a stand-in – the relationships are real but the setting is kind of arbitrary – and the work is simply what my parents' generation called "building character". Mostly, it seems to involve adversity, a struggle. Such character formation – change, development – is happening all the time, and this is another place where we *ought* to be aware, to pay attention, to conduct ourselves accordingly. Being reflectively and critically aware of our experience, reactions and responses, of what moves us, how we shape and are shaped by each other, for better or worse. Such interdependent interrelated arisings with all our relations – all our kin – is the source and condition of a meaningful life. Or so it seems to me.

## 5. THE FUTURE

When I say "It's happening all the time", I mean "the future". Hannah Arendt is good on this:

*We don't know the future... Everybody acts into the future and ... nobody knows what he is doing because the future is being done. Action is a "we" and not an "I". Only ... if I were the only one could I foresee what's going to happen from what I am doing... Nobody knows what is going to happen simply because so much depends on enormous amounts of variables, that is, in other words, on simple hazard.*

Interviewer: *But if contemporaries hold on to their deterministic modes of thinking... you think it's because they're afraid of freedom?*

Arendt: *And rightly so, rightly so. Only they don't say it. If they did, one could immediately start a debate. If they would only say it. They are afraid. They are afraid to be afraid.*

So I am interested in practices and approaches in real life, in which we recover our humanity and our dignity – our faces – in practices and approaches in the present, here and now, that are open to futures that are never limited by any particular thought of their possibility.

I really wanted to close with some practical suggestions, but I don't know how to proceed any better than the people I've cited. I think the notion of withdrawing participation is a good one, however that could be done. Not that it will make us innocent! On the contrary, to take up our responsibility. I'm thinking like going on strike, withdrawing our human labour from the current order and turning toward another order, already of this world, that has been suppressed and denied. Maybe what Levinas calls a "humanism of the other". And heaven knows we need to organise towards popular non-violent mass democratic movement again.

Also can we please be a little kinder to this young democracy of ours that was born into a world where democracy would be blown up by globalising neoliberalism and IT? Really, look around. You can't blame the ANC for everything!

In the meantime, we can indeed work with whatever is available to work with in any situation, in its particulars, staying with the trouble by way of philosophical practices of working on ourselves together. Working with what puts us in question. Moving in the direction of freedom and more life with no assurance of a destination.

*Nota bene.* Note well. Be of good cheer, be of good will, be of good faith, good work and good hope.