

The Quest for a Co-operative Way of Thinking

1. Solitude and Totalitarianism

During my first lengthy stay in Europe in 1988 (I was in Yugoslavia just one year before the collapse of the Eastern Bloc Nations), I was just beginning the translation of Hannah Arendt's »The Life of the Mind«. My stay in the Eastern Bloc Nations in 1988 is unforgettable in many senses. First of all, the intellectuals and philosophers in such countries had been oppressed and forced to keep silent very fiercely, unless they were in accord with the ideology of the ruling party.

Especially interesting and incomprehensible was that the rulers were afraid of thinking activity in solitude, which is the first indispensable condition of the philosophy in one sense. It was very clear that they considered solitary thinking to be hostile to the collective thinking or ideology of the multitude. It seemed that solitary thinking was incompatible with these regimes. Hannah Arendt clarified this problem in her »The Origins of Totalitarianism«, which impressed me so much during my stay in Yugoslavia and East Germany. Upon the completion of her book, she added the chapter »Ideology and Terror« in 1955, in which she made a very important distinction between »solitude« and »loneliness«.

»Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others.« – »The lonely man finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore ›can be together with himself‹ since men have the capacity of ›talking with themselves.‹ In solitude, in other words, I am ›by myself,‹ together with my self,

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and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others.« (The Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 476)

This paragraph demonstrates how totalitarian regimes do not want to acknowledge this kind of solitude as a human condition.

2. Solitude and the Axiom of Contradiction in the Western Tradition

What is even more complicated and embarrassing is the fact that philosophers, artists, scientists and intellectuals, those who need solitary thinking activity, often tend to live lonely. Therefore, they can be organized easily to the totalitarian movement. Arendt also describes how the elite was easily organized and utilized by the totalitarian movement. This is especially characteristic among some of the European philosophers. The Western philosophy has been essentially rooted in the Greek philosophy, i.e. in Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Their logic of dialectics and the axiom of contradiction have influenced the Western philosophy quite deeply.

Arendt has raised a question concerning this logic. She stresses that this axiom of contradiction was originally necessary for the consistency of thinking activity. Aristotle once pointed it out as follows: »We must necessarily believe (it) because (...) it is addressed not to the outward word [exo logos, that is, to the spoken word addressed to someone else, an interlocutor who may be either friend or adversary] but to the discourse within the soul, and though we can always raise objections to the outer world, to the inward discourse we can not object.« In other words, the axiom of contradiction is really necessary when we make inner dialogue between ourselves and our alter ego within the thinking process. In this dialogue, the alter ego is both the partner and the ego itself. Therefore one cannot betray oneself nor can one betray the alter ego. The inner dialogue which becomes possible by withdrawing from the appearing world is the essence of thinking activity and personal identity.

But Aristotle applied it into the philosophical principle in general. The formula »A cannot be

both B and A under the same condition and at the same time« is the generalized form of logic that must be valid for the logic applied for the persuasion of others. In such a form of generalization, the truth can be disputed under the premise as to who is the most consistent. If we were to discuss with each other in the struggle to decide who is the most consistent, consistency would play the compulsive role toward others as the criterion of truth.

Arendt seems to have posed a very radical question in this context. Truth can be pursued by each individual, but once people begin to argue about what the truth is, the discussion becomes oppressive. »The way of thinking and communication for the truth is necessarily overawing and oppressive. This way of thinking does not take into the consideration the opinions of others, which is, on the contrary, the very proof of all political thinking«.

The thinking, activity which deals with the truth, is an indispensable element of life in the world of the two-in-one. But in the political sphere whose absolute condition is to acknowledge the otherness, the discussion as to the consistency, if one opinion is proposed as the truth, the truth turns out to be oppressive.

If thinking activity as a search for meaning, which Arendt considers to be »the highest and perhaps purest activity« of human condition, can survive in our time, in what form can we find it? In considering this problem, the question of whether the axiom of contradiction becomes as the axiom for thinking within one's own mind or for the criterium in competition with others on the authenticity of opinions is so decisive. In the latter case, the axiom becomes favorable for the stronger side, because those in power-wielding positions can control both the situation and the theme of discussion. As feminist theories made it clear, one who wields power can make use of situations that they have in their power. This is the very reason why Aristotle pointed out that philosophy is essential for leaders and rulers. Leaders and rulers can determine the theme and dimension of discussions. The discussion, which leads to the consequence as of who is the most consistent, is for leaders, rulers, power-holders and philosophers. It is therefore necessary to assure the existence of space where people can carry on discussing with one another regardless of the differences between the stronger and the weaker. The axiom of contradiction cannot play the central role there.

3. »Renko« (chain-thinking) and Non-totalitarian Way of Speech

The first condition of such a sphere is that it should not be the stage for the struggle as to consistency on grounds of the axiom of contradiction. There should be a willingness to allow acceptance of each other among the participants. Otherwise these common people will not express their opinions. In this sense, I should like to introduce the genre of »Renga« (chain-composition), which is a traditional Japanese form of poetry composed by individuals in a group. As was pointed out, the logic of contradiction can end up causing conflict and struggle in public discussion.

This process tends to contradict with the process of dialogue. For, in the real dialogue the speaker is often obliged to extend or change his theme in the course of discussions with other partners. The change of topics occurs quite normally in the dialogue, unless, of course, one speaker contributes to the initiative of the dialogue or controls the theme. Accordingly it often happens that a discussion, which at first seems to be consistent can not maintain its consistency throughout the development of the dialogue.



In past public discussions, this kind of inconsistency meant the victory for one side and loss for the other. If the speech implies in itself some power structure, the weak is forced to be silent. For the weaker one it becomes more difficult to be consistent in the speech. This is the reason why common people don't express their opinion under the system of democracy.

The principle found in the poetic form known as »Renga« (chain-composition) is, however, quite different. This type of verse was the outcome of artistic creative activity carried on by individuals working as a group. It arose in Japan during an age of civil wars and transition from feudal to modern society, and it may perhaps be regarded as one very interesting tentative example, which demonstrates how individuality and co-operative work can harmonize. In the age of civil war, the earlier presuppositions for mutual communication were totally destroyed. Therefore people had to find other forms of communications to make contact with those who communicate by other means. Renga and the tea ceremony played a very essential role in meeting the mutual communication among those who had no other way of communication.

The verse genre called Renga is, first of all, the co-operative composition of verses. Many poets up to a maximum of about 100 gather in one place. Then together they try to compose one chain of poems. The first poet composes one stanza in the standard line form of 5-7-5 syllables. Then the next one composes the counter-stanza in the form of two lines 7 syllables each. The third poet continues with 5-7-5 syllables, which the fourth follows 7-7 and so on down the line. In this group composition artistic creativity is the basis and the goal, not only of each individual poem but also the entire process and its result itself. Each member becomes an original creator and develops his own individuality through this co-operation. Can't we apply this process into philosophical discussion? Is it not possible to develop a form of discussion that could be called

chain-thinking (Renko) instead of solitary philosophical thinking?

When we consider the dangerous character of dialogues (dialectics) in the European form, it seems worth considering about its possibility. Because the so-called dialectics from Plato to Hegel often functioned in quite opposite forms that they claimed to be. In such case as dialectics of Plato and Hegel, it functioned in a disguise presupposed that the speaker (e.g. Socrates) wished to carry on dialogues with others. In reality, however, this kind of dialogue was utilized to show how consistently the speaker could develop his idea in various situations. In this sense, the partners of discussion were exploited only as a means to show how the first speaker was right. Only the most consistent speaker can hold the truth. Accordingly, all others' opinions are eventually deemed false. This is simply because the form of dialectics had been connected with logic in the political sphere. In political discussions, where the most consistent man wins, the inconsistent, or weak, have no place.

If philosophy as solitary consistent thinking is not to take the place of the political discussion, the idea of chain-thinking can have something to do with the question of how we are to restore the political sphere. If people could experience such a kind of co-operative discussion, they would not succumb to feel lonely in spite of the modernization of life. And this new form of philosophy may perhaps contribute to democracy, but it could never form a basis for totalitarianism. ┘

