

Developing as Rational Persons: Viewing Our Development in Stages

Humans are capable of developing into rational beings. This is our ultimate assumption. At some level all of us want to effectively analyze and solve our problems. We want to live significant, meaningful lives. We want to be persons of integrity. We did not consciously choose to be selfish and egocentric, any more than we consciously chose to think unclearly, inaccurately, irrelevantly, superficially, narrow-mindedly, or illogically. Nevertheless, we often think and behave egocentrically. We often think unclearly, inaccurately, irrelevantly, superficially, narrow-mindedly, and illogically.

In this paper, we focus on one multi-faceted tool — a theory of the stages required for rational development. We can use it to think less egocentrically and irrationally in our personal lives. If we can understand where we are in our own development, if we can envision a series of stages through which we can imagine ourselves moving, we will be more likely to develop along those lines. If we can more concretely and realistically conceptualize how to go about acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions which characterize highly developed critical thinkers, then, we will more effectively gain that knowledge and acquire those skills and dispositions.

Stage One

We Begin as Unreflective Thinkers

We all begin as largely unreflective thinkers, fundamentally unaware of the determining role that thinking is playing in our lives. We don't realize, at this stage, the many ways that problems in thinking are causing problems in our lives. We unconsciously think of ourselves as the source of truth. We assume our own beliefs to be true. We unreflectively take in many absurd beliefs merely because they are believed by those around us. We have no intellectual standards worthy of the name. Wish fulfillment plays a significant role in what we believe. Whatever we want, we believe we should have. We create and maintain pleasant illusions. If it feels good to believe something, we believe it.

At this stage, we may think well intuitively within certain domains of our lives. For example, we may have high quality thinking skills with respect to our work, or we may be good at balancing our personal budget, etc. But when there are problems in our thinking, we usually fail to recognize them as such. We have no knowledge of the "moves" our minds are making. Therefore, we cannot correct its errors.

We begin to move beyond this stage when we develop real insight into the "flawed" nature of our own thinking. This insight, to be effective, must be concrete and specific. Virtually everyone will agree in the abstract that they have some "prejudices" and that

their thinking is "not perfect." But these unelaborated admissions have no functional value to those who concede them. They are not based on any real knowledge of the nature of thinking. They are not based on a realistic sense of the skills they would need to develop to improve. They are not based on an accurate appraisal of the kinds of motivation they would have to develop to improve over an extended period of time.

Stage Two

We Reach the Second Stage When We Are Faced with The Challenge Of Recognizing the Low Level at Which We and Most Humans Function as Thinkers

We cannot solve a problem we do not admit to. We cannot deal with a condition we deny. Without some knowledge of our ignorance we cannot seek the knowledge we lack. Without some knowledge of the skills we need to develop, we cannot develop those skills. When we develop through this stage, we begin to become aware of the fact that as thinkers we routinely and inevitably make assumptions, use information, make inferences, generate implications, define problems, use concepts, reason within a point of view, and that, given that, we are capable of making many "mistakes" in thinking. For example, we are capable of making false assumptions, using erroneous information, or jumping to unjustifiable conclusions. This knowledge of our fallibility as thinkers is connected to the emerging awareness that somehow we must learn to routinely identify, analyze, and assess our thinking.

The hallmark of the second stage, then, is that we are faced with a crucial challenge to our development. We are confronted with the idea that our thinking is often flawed, and that if we are to improve the quality of our thinking and of our lives, we must become serious students of our minds and how they operate. The important question at this stage is: Will we take up, or back away from this challenge? Put another way, will we squarely face the fact that our thinking is often unsound. Will we take seriously the implications of that fact? Or will we retreat into that comfortable self-complacency that is "natural" to the human mind? Are we ready to begin the process of long-term development as thinkers? Or will we rationalize our way around it?

To fail to recognize the value of developing as rational persons, to deny the fact that our thinking is flawed in many directions, has the consequent that we remain at the unreflective thinker stage.

Stage Three

We Reach the Third Stage When We Accept the Challenge and Begin to Explicitly Develop Our Thinking

Having actively decided to take up the challenge to grow and develop as thinkers, we become "beginning" thinkers, i.e., thinkers beginning to take thinking seriously. We are in the preparatory stage of taking explicit command of thinking. We realize that we know

very little about the constituents of thinking, very little about how to analyze thinking for its soundness, very little about how to upgrade and improve thinking. Yet we have begun to see the necessity of learning how to take charge of our thinking.

As "beginning" thinkers, we recognize the egocentric nature of our thinking in one or more contexts of our lives. For example, we may sometimes catch ourselves trying to dominate others to get our way, or, alternatively, acting out the role of submitting to others (for the gains that submission will bring). We may begin to notice the powerful role that conformity to group norms and values plays in our lives.

As novices, we are beginning to analyze the logic of situations and problems we face, beginning to question our purposes and goals, beginning to struggle to express clear and precise questions when addressing a problem. We are beginning to see that whenever we gather information to address problems, we need to check that information for accuracy and relevance. We are beginning to understand the difference between raw information and our interpretation of it, beginning to question our conclusions, beginning to recognize assumptions guiding our inferences. We are beginning to recognize prejudicial and biased beliefs and how they lead us to unjustifiable conclusions about people. We are beginning to notice that we often misuse words and fail to follow out implications. We are beginning to recognize that whenever we reason, we think within a point of view, and that our viewpoint is often biased toward our selfish interests. We are beginning to recognize that we often think without giving due consideration to the rights and needs of others.

Thus, as beginning thinkers we are becoming aware of how to deal with the constituents of our thoughts (i.e. our purposes, questions, information, interpretations, etc.). We are beginning to appreciate the value of consistently applying intellectual standards—standards such as clarity, accuracy, relevance, precision, logicalness, justifiability, breadth and depth in reasoning.

To reach this stage, our values must begin to shift. We must experience some sense of the importance of intellectual humility. For if we do not come to value knowledge of our own ignorance, we will not be motivated to gain that "knowledge." What is more, as "beginning" thinkers we must find ourselves developing some confidence in reason. In other words, we must become persuaded that developing our skill in reasoning is crucial to solving our problems, and that we are capable of developing that skill. We notice ourselves talking more to others about the importance of reason and reasoning, and noticing more the negative consequences of those who fail to value them. We find ourselves struggling to develop some intellectual perseverance. We notice ourselves being quick to give up as soon as a problem becomes difficult. We have not yet found a way to systematically and successfully develop the skills and the dispositions that we now want to develop. Even though our ability to reason well may still be greatly limited, our values are beginning to shift. We are learning to want what is rational to want. In short, the foundation is beginning to form on which we can re-build our identity and character.

Stage Four

We Reach the Fourth Stage When We Begin to Develop A Systematic Approach to Improving Our Ability to Think

If the hallmark of the third stage is beginning to take thinking seriously, although without a successful plan for achieving what we now want, the hallmark of the fourth stage is the development of just such a plan. In this stage, we move from an unorganized to an organized approach to the improvement of our thinking.

At this stage, we now know that simply wanting to change is not enough, nor is episodic and irregular "practice." We recognize now the need for real commitment, for some regular and consistent way to build improvement of thinking into the fabric of our lives. We realize now that a hit-and-miss approach to developing our thinking abilities will not result in our learning to live a rational life.

Although the manner in which regular practice designed to improve our thinking might take many different forms, it may be useful to look at some possible components of a reasonable plan. Consider the following strategies:

- Begin to ask yourself "fundamental" questions about the character and nature of your life. If someone were to follow you around for a year and knew absolutely everything that you were thinking, feeling, and doing, what would that person say are your fundamental values and beliefs? To what extent would that person conclude that you unconsciously conform to group-imposed values? To what extent would that person conclude that you pursue your desires at the expense of the rights and needs of others? To what extent would that person conclude that you fail to empathically enter the point of view of others? To what extent would that person conclude that you are committed to living your life as a rational person would? To what extent would that person conclude that you are often guided by irrational emotions?
- Begin to keep an "intellectual" journal in which you record your analysis in the following way. Describe only situations that are emotionally significant to you (that is, that you deeply care about). Describe only one situation at a time. Then describe (and keep this separate) what you did in response to that situation. Be specific and exact. Then analyze, in the light of what you have written, what precisely was going on in the situation. Dig beneath the surface. Then assess the implications of your analysis. What did you learn about yourself? What would you do differently if you could re-live the situation?
- Whenever you feel some negative emotion, systematically ask yourself: What, exactly, is the thinking leading to this emotion? How might this thinking be flawed? What am I assuming? Should I? What information is my thinking based on? Is that information reliable? . . . and so on.
- Whenever you have a complex problem, a problem that you need to think seriously about, take the time to analyze the elements of thinking through the problem. Figure out your purpose for addressing the problem (be precise). Write

out, clearly, the exact question you are trying to answer. Write down the information you need to address the problem rationally. Do you have that information? Where can you get it? Think of alternative ways a reasonable person might interpret that information. Restrain yourself from jumping to a conclusion. Identify the main assumptions you are making. Analyze and evaluate those assumptions. Focus on the key concepts you are using in your thinking. Explicitly state the point of view from which you are approaching the problem. Consider some alternative points of view. Examine the possible consequences that might follow if you make this or that decision. Check to see if you are considering all the plausible alternative possible decisions.

- Look closely at your behavior to determine how you use, and relate to, "power" in your life. See if you can isolate some common events in which you use egocentric thinking to get others to do what you want. For example, systematically analyze your behavior to determine whether, as a general rule, you tend to "dominate" others in order to get your way, or whether you tend to "submit" to them to get what you want.
- Notice how you react in situations when you don't get what you want. What exactly are your emotions? What exactly do you do? If you find that you act in a dominating or submissive way, you will be alerted to the fact that you are thinking egocentrically. You can then work to replace your egocentric thought with more rational thought through systematic self-reflection. What would a rational person feel in this or that situation? What would a rational person do? How does that compare with what you did? (Hint: If you find that you continually conclude that a rational person would behave just as you behaved you are probably engaging in self-deception.)
- Closely analyze the behavior that is encouraged, and discouraged, in the groups to which you belong. For any given group, what are you "required" to believe? What are you "forbidden" to do? If you conclude that your group does not require you to believe anything, or has no taboos, then conclude that you have not deeply analyzed that group. Review some introductory text in Sociology to gain insight into the process of socialization and group membership.
- Target the key areas in your life where you are experiencing difficulties or where you need to think through significant issues with potentially long-term implications. Ask yourself what "strategies" you are presently employing in those areas. How did you come up with those strategies? What strategies did you consider and reject? On what grounds? If you find that you have trouble answering these questions, entertain the hypothesis that your thinking about these areas of your life may not be very deep.

These are a few of the many things that we might do in seeking a systematic approach to the development of our thinking and rationality. We are not in the stage we call "the practicing thinker" until we are engaged in activities analogous to what is suggested above. When in the practicing thinker stage, we devise specific strategies which we believe will prove useful in cultivating our own development as a thinker. We act on those strategies and assess their viability for us. If one set of strategies does not work, we devise another. The key is that we devise some strategies, that we embody them for

a reasonable time in our behavior, and we assess how well they are working. We continually monitor those strategies to make them more and more effective. When a given strategy proves ineffective we abandon it and seek another. In other words, we routinely re-evaluate the methods we are using, assessing them, and altering them when necessary so that we continue the slow but steady process of development.

Stage Five

We Reach the Fifth Stage When We Have Established Good Habits of Thought Across the Domains of Our Lives

We know that we are reaching the stage we call the Advanced Thinker stage when we find that our regimen for rational living is paying off in significant ways. We are now routinely identifying problems in our thinking, and are working successfully to deal with those problems rationally. We have successfully identified the significant domains in our lives in which we need to improve (e.g. professional, parenting, husband, wife, consumer, etc.), and are making significant progress in all or most of them. We find that it is no longer a strain to aspire to reasonability. We continue to find evidence of egocentricity in our thoughts, emotions, and behavior, but we are also finding that we can often, if not usually, overcome those thoughts and emotions and shift our behavior accordingly. We no longer find it difficult to admit when we are wrong. We are attracted to people who give us constructive criticism.

We are now enjoying the process of observing our minds in action. We enjoy entering into the points of view of others. We take satisfaction from learning from the thinking of those with which we may have significant differences. We now see assumptions in our thinking in every direction we look. We are no longer concerned with the "image" we maintain, are largely indifferent to what others may think of us, are comfortable standing up in opposition to popular beliefs in the groups to which we belong.

We find the process of assessing our behavior, motivations, and feelings in order to determine the extent to which they result from faulty thinking a satisfying and fulfilling process. We continue to find many ways in which we need to "correct" our thinking and "shift" our feelings. We continue to make many mistakes, but we are rarely so ego-identified with those mistakes that we cannot "abandon" them and admit we were wrong. Since we have used our thinking as the leverage point for changing our feelings, desires and action on many occasions, we now find ourselves doing so intuitively, and without significant effort.

We have come to understand, through routine analysis of our behavior and thoughts, the havoc that egocentricity and sociocentricity play in human lives. We have personally experienced that havoc in our own lives. We find ourselves continually assessing our effectiveness in living in accordance with our deepest values. We now have deep insight into the fact that our development is directly dependent on the extent to which we are successful at decreasing the role of egocentric thinking in our daily lives. We

have come to understand the conditions under which we tend to use "domination" or "submission" to get what we want.

We now know what types of behavior on the part of others tend to elicit our dominating or submissive ego. We know whether we tend to more predominantly rely upon submissive or dominating behavior. But most important, we recognize that egocentric thinking is never a reasonable mode of thinking--however "natural" it might be. Thus, at the advanced stage we become skilled in identifying our egocentric thoughts, and we refuse to make use of the rationalizations we could easily concoct to justify them.

We are now skilled not only in detecting egocentric thinking in ourselves, we are also skilled in identifying it in the behavior of others. We now routinely figure out the logic of the thinking of other people, and frequently recognize when others are operating from egocentric thinking. We recognize when others are attempting to inappropriately manipulate us into submission, or when they are trying to force us to back down through domination.

At the advanced stage, we are now skilled at monitoring the role in thinking of concepts, assumptions, inferences, implications, points of view, questions, purposes, and information. We routinely and often intuitively assess our thinking for clarity, accuracy, relevance, logicalness, depth and breadth. We often engage in dialogue with ourselves in an attempt to check our thinking and upgrade it. This type of internal dialogue might be "represented" in the following examples:

"I'm not clear about what this person is trying to communicate to me. I need to ask questions of clarification so that I can understand what she means. I should ask her to elaborate on her point. I think I need an example of what she is talking about to understand her better."

"I am trying to figure out whether what she is saying is relevant to the issue at hand, whether her information is relevant to the question we are trying to solve, whether her question is relevant to the question which is the focus of this meeting."

"It seems that there is something illogical about the way I have interpreted this situation. Perhaps I have jumped to some conclusions before gathering all the relevant information. Perhaps I have come to this conclusion based on inaccurate information. Perhaps my interpretation is based strictly on my self-interest. It could be that my egocentric mind does not want to rethink my conclusion because then I will be forced to consider another person's feelings and desires and I will not get what I want in the situation."

"I am beginning to realize that I don't want to hear what this other person is saying because then I will have to rethink my position. Whenever I feel this type of defensiveness I know that I am being egocentric, that my mind is not allowing me to enter the other person's point of view because if I think within his or her view, I will have to alter my self-indulgent position. My mind will recognize its absurdity in pursuing its

own desires at the expense of other's needs and desires. I must force myself to rationally consider this opposing position, to operate in good faith rather than try to hide from something my egocentric mind doesn't want to see."

I see what my mind is doing. Instead of trying to resolve a conflict, I am trying to force this other person to accept my views. I want to make him do exactly what I say, even if that means I must hurt him to do so. I detect my dominating ego at work, and I know that whenever I am thinking within this logic I am being irrational, and I am likely to hurt someone. I must recognize my dominating ego as a hurtful mode of thinking and reject it in any form."

"I wonder why I am allowing this person to intimidate me. I feel like I must submit to his will in order to function. Whenever I am being submissive, I need to ask myself what I am trying to achieve in the situation. What is it that I want from this other person? Why do I let him treat me like this? Why do I think I must be submissive, instead of being rational, in this circumstance? Perhaps I am not willing to admit that I am simply manipulating him to get what I want. If I told him the truth would I still be able to get what I want, or would I detect absurdity in my desires?"

In the advanced stage we are becoming skilled at this sort of inner dialog, and we understand its value, although it is not yet completely intuitive to us. We recognize that we must give active voice to what is going on in our minds because of our natural tendency toward deception. We routinely write down our thoughts so that we can better analyze them. We articulate our thoughts to other rational people as a check to ensure that we are not illogically interpreting the situation, to ensure against our unconsciously thinking in a self-centered manner.

Because the mind is tremendously complex, to reach this stage of development normally takes many years of practice. The more committed the person, the more active the practice, the more likely, and more quickly, we are to move to this advanced stage.