Some philosophical issues relating to identity, personhood, ethics, knowledge, language, culture, and education

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss some philosophical issues that fall within the intersection of analytic philosophy and education, arising out of my long-standing involvement in Philosophy for Children and Community of Inquiry. I begin with an important point of clarification over the concept of *identity* which has been appropriated by the social sciences and media to defend the idea that our identities are given by our affiliation with various "identity groups" (nations, religions, ethnicities, cultures…). I argue that this idea is confused and has led to the politicization of identity and support for a destructive "us and them" mentality. I reject both a "collectivist" and an "individualist" sense of what being a person means, in favor of a *relational* conception by each person sees her/himself as *one among others*. I then move to consider the ethical, epistemological, linguistic, cultural, educational and socio-political dimensions of this conception of personhood, and offer a brief defence of several theses, including: the *Principle of Personal Worth* (persons are morally superior to non-persons including so-called "identity groups"); persons are members of language communities that underpin our own subjective awareness; the skills and dispositions that constitute what I call "powerful thinking" depend upon internalizing overt forms of communication, most notably *dialogue*; thus understood, the imperative to engage children in dialogue is universal rather than culturally-relative (a point of specific significance in "Confucian Heritage Countries" such as Japan); and powerful thinking and dialogue play a key role in a democratic society that is not dominated by "populist" forces.

Key words: identity, persons, dialogue, powerful thinking, democracy

Introduction and background comments

My academic career has proceeded through several stages. Prior to the mid-1980s, I was a student, then a teacher, of Anglo-American analytic philosophy (and, as an undergraduate, pure mathematics). My "discovery" of Philosophy for Children ("P4C") in 1982 precipitated a major shift of emphasis, not from philosophy itself, but toward the practice of philosophy in elementary and secondary schools. I pioneered the development of P4C in Australian schools and have been actively involved in the field, both nationally and internationally. I relished opportunities to do philosophy with younger students, as well as their teachers (professional development is a major component of P4C), partly because I bore witness to the impact that philosophical thinking could have on how children think and talk about ideas that are important to them, but also because I came to appreciate the importance of such moral and affective values as care, compassion, trust, and empathy which are built into the pedagogic framework underpinning P4C. This framework is

based on an idea which actually predates P4C, one which may be found in the work of Vygotsky (1986), Dewey (1910) *et al*: that of transforming classrooms into *thinking communities* or *communities of inquiry* (CoI). In this idea, I found not just an ideal framework for teaching and learning, but an environment which avoids the extremes of seeing oneself as an isolated individual, and seeing oneself as a member of a collective or group to which one is, somehow, subservient. Even more than P4C itself, it is the idea of the community of inquiry and its essential role in how we become *persons in the world*, which has driven most of my own writing and research for the past 35 years. Reflecting both on my philosophical upbringing in contexts that were often far from caring, compassionate and empathetic, and the present-day state of a world characterized by increased tribalism, nationalism and the hollow rhetoric of "populist" thinking, I find myself challenged by the prospect of connecting P4C and the community of inquiry, on the one hand, with making a genuine contribution to making the world a better place, on the other.

Accordingly, after many years of immersing myself in the "real world" of teachers, schools and classrooms, I have recently sought to make connections between the analytic tradition to which I was so committed in my student years, and the world of P4C and education more generally. In the remainder of this paper, I shall give some examples of this connection and of how it has led me to address a number of issues in education as well as more generally. I am looking forward, not just to my year in Japan, but to reflecting on how this new experience might influence my thinking.

Making sense of "Identity"

My book entitled *Identity and Personhood: Confusions and Clarifications across Disciplines* (Springer, 2015) relies on a simple but often overlooked distinction between two kinds of identity to address a number of epistemological, ethical, social and educational issues. Although both kinds address such questions as "Who am I?" and even "What am I?", the distinction in question is crucial if we are to understand the discourse about identity that has become increasingly problematic in socio-political (and educational) contexts.[i] It is between "numerical (or subject) identity" and "qualitative (or predicate) identity", as illustrated in the following pair of statements:

(1) (Parent to child) "You can't wear that same jacket again; it's too dirty!"

(2) (Socialite at party): "Oh no, s/he is wearing the very same jacket as me!"

(2) exemplifies qualitative identity (in this example, the identity of a brand or type of jacket) that applies in contemporary political and social discussions ("the politics of identity"), whereby we *identify with* others who are like us in certain ways. However, this assumes that the entities in question *already exist* and have what logic refers to as literal or numerical identity, as in (1). Both parent and child understand that there is a single shirt which has existed for several days (at least), irrespective of how much it might have altered in that period (it is certainly dirtier!). When we understand that it is numerical identity which guarantees and underpins our own existence both *at* a given time and *over* time, we can see that the nature and role of qualitative identity have been exaggerated, on the grounds that everyone needs "an identity". The tragic narrative of a person who is forced to flee his country as a refugee and (hopefully) find a "new life" elsewhere is, for all that, the story of a *single, individual, persisting* person, notwithstanding such crucial qualitative changes as change of nationality. Likewise, the increasingly common accounts whereby a person who is born of one gender undergoes gender reassignment, are accounts of individual persons who endure through such changes.

When we mistakenly locate our literal identities in our qualitative identities, we confront such pointless questions as "How many identities do I, or can I, have?" and "Which of my identities is most crucial to who I really am?" These questions are not merely confusing but genuinely troublesome, because in tying our identity to one or more particular qualities and, thereby with the groups, classes and associations that are defined by such qualities (e.g. nations, religions, ethnicities, cultures,), we are apt to give too much prominence to these collectives, and too little prominence to the person

who possesses them. This leads to divisions and schisms among people who see themselves and others as defined, existentially and morally, by the groups to which they belong. Conversely, when we realize that our identities, hence our very existence, are determined, in literal numerical terms, we see that what we have in common and from where we derive our moral sense, is that we are all (human) *persons*. I reject the "collectivist" views of what makes me *me*.

On the other hand, I also reject an *individualistic* conception of persons, of the kind stereotypically associated with Western thinking, a conception that yields an inflated sense of self-importance. This is because the very idea of being an individual presupposes that each of us is *one individual among others*. Here we have a *relational* conception of personhood, which avoids the extremes of both collectivism and individualism. I recently heard a discussion over identity politics between two well-known American social commentators which was deficient precisely because neither one acknowledged the possibility of such a relational view of who we each are. Where one extolled *rationality* as the key driver behind decision-making – traditionally the key concept for Western individualism – the other appealed to an *emotional* component which binds people together in virtue of the various "tribes" (families, nations, cultures, religions...) which are of most importance to them. I do not deny the importance of rationality or emotion in characterizing the kind of persons we are, but both individualism and tribalism, especially when given a *moral* dimension, lead to trouble, as I have indicated.

A relational conception of personhood has important ethical, epistemological, linguistic, cultural, educational and socio-political implications. I shall offer a brief explanation of each.

Ethical implications

The familiar concept *person* – of which human beings are the most well known but perhaps not the only exemplars – is governed by what I term "The Principle of Personal Worth" (PPW). PPW states that:

> *(A) Persons have a unique moral value or worth which places them above non-persons, irrespective of how the latter may be characterised or categorised; and (B) with respect to this moral value, all persons are equal – i.e. of equal value and worth.*

While the category of *non-persons* includes such things as rocks, insects, and mobile phones, more pertinent to my interests are entities which are *collectives, groups,* or *associations* of, or abstractions from, individual persons, including: nations, religions, ethnicities (or ethnic groups), cultures, tribes, corporations, clubs, cults, castes, clans, traditions, roles, gangs, the family, the budgetary deficit, the economy, ... There are numerous historical and contemporary examples of such collectives being accorded a moral status which overrides or subsumes that of the individual persons which belong to them. Take, for example: "To understand honor culture, one must think of oneself not as an individual but as a role. You are not John or Julia; you are a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a father or a mother,..." (Hamad, June 1, 2014); "...the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically *human goods* are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom" (MacIntyre 1984, 172); "The terrorist becomes fused with the group he represents, so much so that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to advance the group's agenda and purposes." (Schwartz, 2005, 304). Against this kind of divisive thinking, theories of ethics in the history of philosophy apply to *all* (and only) persons, where personhood designates a special category or type of being, not even synonymous with that of *human being*. Regardless of which particular ethical or theological theory we examine, we inevitably find that personhood and morality go together.

I do not deny the reality that the various groups, collectives and associations with which we *identify* (whether by choice or not) are often of great importance and emotional value to us. However, (i) it does not follow that they have any moral

prominence or authority in or over our lives (something with which we could readily agree if we think about such collectives as sports clubs, reading groups, etc.); (ii) one characteristic of a free society is that its members have a degree of choice when it comes to membership of these groups and collectives (albeit not in every case, such as ethnic, gender and sexuality groups), which suggests that their value is relatively *subjective*; (iii) accordingly, the prospects for constructing a (more) objective basis for morality and also for moral education, one which unites rather than divides people across boundaries – whether physical or other – depend on our ability to construct a cohesive, integrated account of what being a person in the world really means. The implications for moral education – indeed education more generally – are quite profound.

Epistemological implications

When we explore the connection between the idea that personhood is a relational concept and the Cartesian or modernist idea that personhood – or self-hood – is, first and foremost, a matter of *self-awareness* or *self-consciousness* (the latter contributing to the idea of the individualistic self who is the key player in a capitalist society), we find that the very possibility of self-awareness requires not merely a binary, but a *triangular* framework in which I (each of us) is also aware of others (i.e. others like me), *and* aware of a world which we share – a world which includes persons as well as other objects that we come to know and experience. Here we utilize a form of *transcendental* reasoning made famous by Immanuel Kant.   The premise of a transcendental argument is sufficiently common-place as to be generally accepted as true. The argument proceeds conceptually or *a priori* (rather than empirically) to conclude that if we accept the common-place premise(s), then something quite profound (i.e. definitely not common-place) *must* be the case, not so much as a consequence of the premise, but as a *pre-condition* of it.

The common-place premise which concerns us here may be stated thus: "We persons possess a concept of ourselves *as* persons; in other words, we are *self-aware*". A preliminary point to make about this apparently innocuous claim is that the use of the nominative term "self" does *not* imply that self-awareness is equivalent to being aware of an entity called "the self". Better to say that it points to my own *awareness of being aware*.

The interdependency of subjective attitudes and states – including self-awareness, belief, intention, desire… – on the one hand, and such normative aspects of rationality as truth, knowledge, concept development and judgment formation, on the other, is construed by the 20th Century analytic philosopher Donald Davidson in *triangular*, rather than dualistic or binary terms. …

> …the basic triangle of two people and a common world is one of which we must be aware if we have any thoughts at all. If I can think, I know that there are others with minds like my own, and that we inhabit a public time and space filled with objects and events many of which are … known to others. In particular I, like every other rational creature, have three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the objective world…; knowledge of the minds of others; and knowledge of the contents of my own mind. None of these three sorts of knowledge is reducible to either of the other two, or to any other two in combination. (Davidson 2001, 86-7.)

The triangulation of self-awareness and knowledge has powerful implications. If Davidson is right – and I will not review his argument here, which is transcendental in structure – then we need to rethink the basic distinction between *subjective* and *objective* (taking into account the *inter-subjective*). In brief, we cannot make sense of the former as a legitimate sphere of conscious thought without accepting that a great deal of what we believe is, in fact, objectively *true*. In particular, my existence as a subject of experience and knowledge necessarily places me in a relational framework in which I am *one among others*.

Linguistic, cultural and educational implications

We see that even the most subjective forms of self-awareness or "inner contemplation" presuppose that we are aware of others and of the world outside ourselves; moreover, we are aware that others are also aware in the same ways. But, as Davidson and others have argued, to be aware of others in this way requires that they articulate or express that of which they are aware in ways of which we, too, are aware. How do they – and we – achieve this? Through various forms of communication of which conversation – "talk" – must be primary. More than this, it is *the conversation which makes these forms of awareness possible*. In short, the relationship between awareness and thought, on the one hand, and communication and conversation, on the other, is one of *mutual interdependence*. Here we have, within the analytic tradition, a comprehensive rejection of the Cartesian paradigm which had dominated views of the mind for four hundred years. To think and, moreover, to be aware of oneself as a thinker makes sense if and only if we are aware of ourselves as members of a community of speakers and listeners. Thinkers must learn to navigate their way in the domain of *rational discourse*. They must have a good understanding both of how various claims and assertions are connected – as inferences, assumptions, etc. – and of how their own such claims are connected to those of others. We make these connections via language in general, and discourse or dialogue with others, in particular.

Having spent seven years teaching at university in Hong Kong and now finding myself in Japan with its own rich cultural heritage, I am very interested in learning about how the *thinking-talking* relationship is construed here. More specifically, given my abiding interest in imagining a world in which young people are taught to think for themselves, I want to explore the hypothesis that strengthening the commitment to *self-correcting dialogue* is, perhaps, the single most powerful means at our disposal to improve the quality of thinking.

The last fifty years has seen huge growth in the number of large-scale international studies (TIMSS, PISA, etc.) of student achievement across national, cultural and ethnic boundaries. Domains studied have included "core" subjects such as mathematics and language, hierarchies of thinking, class size and environment, pedagogic styles, moral and values dimensions, affect and disposition (motivation), and levels of student involvement and engagement. Policy makers in Western countries have been concerned that their students were "falling behind" in such crucial areas as mathematics and literacy, in comparison with students in/from East Asian countries (among a few others, most notably Finland). However, I am more interested in the relationship between students' classroom involvement through questioning, reasoning, challenging, self-correction and other ingredients of what I describe as *dialogue* – and their demonstration of various forms and levels of thinking. I am also interested in how the research has been interpreted by commentators, especially by those who now claim that we must not only abandon stereotypes about East-Asian teaching and learning (traditional, didactic, rote, low-level, etc.), but conclude that educators everywhere should consider the socio-cultural backgrounds of students before they rush to demand higher levels of verbal participation in classrooms from *all* students.

Familiar tensions surround the nature and power of *culture* in relation to such key educational concepts as *thinking* (particularly *critical, higher-level* or what I prefer to call *powerful thinking*) and *dialogue* and, more generally, to conceptual schemes in ethics, logic and epistemology (as previously noted). Are our ethical values and judgments culturally-relative? (and how important is the word "our" here?). Does what we know – or claim to know – vary across cultures? Is our very understanding of what constitutes knowledge – along with belief, justification and truth – culturally dependent? If culture is a genuinely over-riding factor here, does it follow that such comparative studies as PISA are literally meaningless because one cannot make comparisons across cultural boundaries?

I am concerned that the interpretations referred to are too generous with respect both to what *actually* happens in (and beyond) classrooms in East Asia, and what *might* happen if we applied certain normative ideals in these contexts.

I question some of the strategies and lines of reasoning that have led researchers to their conclusions; including: the easy acceptance of cultural and/or moral relativism; too great a reliance on the subjective views of students and teachers; and a stubborn commitment to a form of positivism which ignores the possibility that key issues in this field – notably, the inter-dependence of thinking and talking – are conceptual in nature, and cannot be easily overthrown by cultural or related findings.

A notable series of studies focusing on "the Chinese learner" – but applicable, more generally, to what the authors refer to as "Confucian Heritage Countries (CHC)" – was published by the Comparative Education Research Centre (Hong Kong) in three volumes (Watkins and Biggs, 1996, 2001; Chan and Rao, 2009). The impetus for these studies was the so-called "paradox of the [East] Asian learner" (Watson and Biggs, 1996, 49, 70), which juxtaposes the perception of CHC and their students as focused on low-level rote learning and memorization, with both the reality of higher achievement levels among these same students, and their own demanding expectations of themselves and their teachers. The latter often link the goal of moral, intellectual and even aesthetic perfection with high-level, meaning-based learning activities. I am especially interested in one key dimension of this alleged paradox: the perception of passive learning in students who do not speak up in class, ask very few questions and, most emphatically, almost never challenge either their teachers or one another in the classroom; set against the reality of high expectations and high achievement in subjects such as mathematics which, it seems, require higher-order thinking strategies.

One response to the "paradox", taken by most of the contributors to the series referred to above, is to suggest that earlier observers from non-CHC failed to realize that CHC students were deeply engaged in the kinds of thinking and learning that would facilitate high levels of achievement, notwithstanding their relative passivity in behavioural terms, and the persistence of what has been perceived as rote learning focused on memorisation and other low-level cognitive skills. This kind of finding has led, in turn, to cautionary claims about undertaking and interpreting cross-cultural studies, and to various forms of cultural relativism, e.g. that students from different cultures (most notably, "Western" and "East Asian") learn and think differently from one another, have different understandings of the role of student talk in classrooms, have different ethical expectations and values with respect to themselves and their teachers, and see differences in achievement as reflecting quite different parameters, e.g. ability in one case and effort (comprising resolve, diligence, endurance, perseverance and concentration) in the other; etc. (Watson and Biggs, 1996, 59-60; Watson and Biggs, 2001, 297; Chan and Rao, 2009, 52-3,74).

With respect to the specific place of discussion, questioning and other forms of verbal interaction in the classroom, there is an emerging consensus among researchers that where Western students are encouraged to be actively involved from an early age, East Asian students are encouraged to begin learning activities by careful listening, practice at memorisation and application (Chan and Rao, 2009, 45), and only later to participate in more collaborative activities, including critical discussion "once they have understood the issue and mastered the field" (Chan and Rao, 2009, 56). The same authors link such a measured approach on the part of student attitudes to specific aspects of East Asian culture, including the imperative of not losing face (for example, their own if they say something foolish or incorrect, but also the teacher's if they pose a challenge that she cannot meet), and the need to show intellectual humility rather than the pride they may feel in doing something well.

We need to be careful not to paint too rosy a picture of what happens in "Western" countries with respect to the nature and place of student talk in the classroom. I do not challenge the commonly-held belief that these classrooms – whether at primary, secondary or even tertiary level – are "noisier" than their East Asian counterparts but of course the important issue here concerns the *type* of noise produced and how (or if) it contributes to student learning and thinking. If we control for disruptive talk and chit-chat (a big ask in the case of crowded public schools in urban centres), and focus on the kinds of talk that teachers encourage because it facilitates learning, there is still the question of what *kinds* of

thinking are thereby produced or facilitated.

On the other hand, the relative absence of classroom talk among East Asian students does not mean that they do not talk about or discuss their schoolwork either among themselves out of class, or with the teacher (often on a one-to-one basis, Watson and Biggs, 1996, 59). This is consistent with features already noted, namely, the preference for learning in a quiet environment, and the desire to avoid losing face in a public place like the classroom.

The author of one detailed study hypothesized that the oft-cited relationship between thinking and talking – specifically, that the talk both allows the expression and communication of thought, and "creates, change and signifies" it – is not, in fact, universal to all persons, but is quite culturally specific (Kim 2002). The view that it is universal is, according to Kim, an unwarranted generalisation usually made by European and North American researchers. He cites Jerome Bruner as one example: "[the equivalence of thought and talk is thought to be] the nature of human nature" (Kim, 2002, 828). Kim points out that East Asian assumptions about language, thinking and talking – as reflected in Buddhist and Taoist teachings, for example – are different from those in the West, because in the former the verbal expression of both thoughts and feelings is less prominent. Kim also cites research which shows that the "mode of thinking" in Western and Eastern contexts is, itself, different, with Western thinking being more "analytic" and Eastern more "holistic" (Kim, 2002, 830). If, as Kim claims, analytic thinking is more easily verbalizable than holistic thinking, we already have some warrant for claiming that talking plays a more facilitative role with respect to thinking in the West but a more disruptive role in the East.

Kim is also sceptical of the idea that East Asian students should be pushed to speak up in classrooms. Student talk has its place, but so do silent reflection and forms of thinking that may not be linguistic in structure. In Kim's words, "…the meaning of students' silence can be the engagement in thoughts, not the absence of ideas" (Kim, 2002, 840).

This discussion about thinking and talking calls to mind the work of Lev Vygotsky, who famously proposed – and defended on empirical grounds – that at least some modes of thinking are the results of *internalization.* He is known for his ground-breaking theories about how children do think and learn – involving concepts like the *Zone of Proximal Development.* Here I am less interested in the historical question of whether Vygotsky's own views included the idea of dialogical thinking as "inner speech", than in focusing on the distinction between *dialogical* and *monological* thinking, where the latter is characterized as thinking directed in a fairly predictable manner toward a predetermined conclusion. One study suggests that Vygotsky's well-known *Zone of Proximal Development* actually supports monological thinking because of its inbuilt asymmetry between the novice student and the knowledgeable adult (or peer) (Cheyne and Tarulli, 2005). Epistemologically, the objective here is to move the former in the direction of the latter, consistent with a consensual or convergent view of learning and knowledge. East Asian learning and thinking styles, as characterized above, fit in nicely here: notwithstanding the somewhat misleading idea that what is being internalized is inner *speech*, it is a form of speech which leaves little room for the student's own voice; rather, what (s)he internalizes is the authoritative voice of the teacher and her/his own place as careful listener and learner. Taking this interpretation, Vygotsky's theories may still be understood universalistically, in the sense that while internalization always occurs, *what* is internalized with respect to speaking and thinking is quite culturally-specific.

It is instructive to juxtapose Vygotsky's views with those of his less celebrated compatriot Mikhael Bakhtin. Some commentators (see Cheyne and Tarulli 2005) argue that it was Bakhtin who emphasised the *dialogical* nature of "inner speech", albeit only in contexts where the external environment (where "outer speech" occurs) is itself dialogical. In a dialogue, each utterance is connected in some way to those which precede and follow it (dialogue is reflective as well as forward-looking), and it is directed to the "other" who must then respond to it (Cheyne and Tarulli 2005, 132). Dialogue has "a life of its own", but is driven by the desire of those involved "to get to the bottom of things". Here, what is internalized (and expressed) is not just inner speech but logically-structured dialogue, and while there is still room for

the Vygotskyan notion of *scaffolding*, this notion may now be regarded in more even-handed terms: not so much the smarter or more powerful assisting those who are less so, but a genuinely collaborative effort to assist one another in *the* face of a common problem or issue that all are trying to resolve. Following a Bakhtinian line of thought (also articulated by the Pragmatist philosopher G. H. Mead) highlights the prescriptive or value-laden dimension of dialogue which, in turns, points the way toward a conception of education – including moral education – based on *the strengthening of judgement* in young people. It is the value-laden dimension which makes dialogue so important to the cultivation of a "civil" society, based on principles of fair-mindedness and mutual respect, and a disposition toward open-mindedness (willingness to "self-correct").

One key component of dialogue (critical discussion) – particularly in contexts where students are still developing the associated skills and dispositions – is *questioning*, partly because dialogue is usually sparked by something we find puzzling or intriguing. Good questioning leads to powerful thinking, which is both expressed through and generated by dialogue. Consistent with the general line developed in the studies I have cited, several authors insist that Japanese teachers, in particular, quite often ask "provocative questions" and allow "reflection time" even though, when compared with their Western counterparts, East Asian university students believe that one mark of a good teacher is that she *has an answer* to their questions, regardless of their complexity (Watson and Biggs, 2001, 119). In the other hand, there is abundant research revealing that question and answer sequences in Western classrooms rarely go deeper than the notorious "QER" sequence (closed question, expected response, summary evaluation: "Right", "Good"", "Wrong", "No", etc.), which is more characteristic of monological than dialogical thinking. It is tempting to conclude that not much dialogue is prominent in either Western or East Asian classrooms.

Again, I am less interested in the distinction between Eastern and Western conceptions of the thinking-talking relationship than the distinction between forms of thinking and talking which are monological, on the one hand, and those which are dialogical, on the other. And I am claiming that educators everywhere should be aiming for more of the latter.

Where does this leave the claim that our normative judgements about what is good, better, excellent or powerful thinking cannot be made or even properly understood outside the broad cultural contexts in which thinkers are immersed? Far from empowering those from different cultures, such a relativistic mentality with respect to intellectual values threatens to ensure that they *remain* disadvantaged. Inquiry and dialogue engage participants in addressing complex problems that require taking multiple perspectives and a variety of cognitive and meta-cognitive moves (analytic, imagination, deductive, inductive, speculative…). In such situations, it may not even be clear *what* the problem or most appropriate question is without a good deal of *deliberation*. The kinds of powerful thinking called for can be undertaken by a single individual, but only if she has a strong grasp of what dialogical thinking is. It means, for example, coming up with ideas and tentative ways forward that may well have to be revised or even abandoned later. How could this person develop such an understanding without at least some prior – if not ongoing – involvement as a thinker *in a community of thinkers* who relate to and respect one another through dialogue? How, in short, could she think dialogically – as opposed to monologically, working in a roughly linear direction toward a predetermined solution – unless she has been engaged in dialogue? However we choose to characterize dialogue, it is at the very least an exchange among two of more individuals who are working together to understand and solve the problems at hand. Doubtless such a scenario might require the guidance or direction of a teacher, but in a genuinely dialogical or inquiry-based context he will be doing both more and less than playing the traditional teacher's role of expert; more because he will need to encourage students to *think* well by posing (and modelling) probing questions and having a strong understanding of the likely direction of the inquiry; but less because, student expectations notwithstanding, he very often will not know the solution and will need to assume the role of *co-inquirer*.

Coming back to my earlier discussion of Davidson's "triangulation" theory of awareness in which the very concept of self-conscious thought presupposes that thinkers must be members of linguistic communities, Davidson makes clear that none of the "vertices" of awareness (self-awareness, awareness of others, and awareness of the world we share) is *privileged* with respect to the other vertices. This provides conceptual reinforcement for the idea that strong or powerful thinking requires a sense of *balance, symmetry* or *harmony*, to avoid such scenarios as when my own thoughts are pushed aside in favour of the thoughts of others (as I perceive them), or *vice-versa*. It is within the nurturing but rigorous environment of a *thinking community* that young people have the best opportunity to develop patterns and habits of thinking that will enable them to deliberate on and articulate such "big" questions as "What does it mean to live a worthwhile life". Further, in linking such fundamental epistemological concepts as *awareness* and *belief* to language, Davidson is implicitly referring to *all* thinkers, speakers and knowers who are bound together in their common usage of these concepts (irrespective of their cultural or linguistic differences). His perspective as a Western philosopher in the Twentieth Century Anglo-American analytic tradition is surely irrelevant. He is laying down conditions by which we understand and apply such concepts, irrespective of our cultural or other affiliations. In calling attention to the importance of dialogue, Davidson reaches further back into our shared philosophical heritage:[ii]

> Writing may portray, but cannot *constitute*, the inter-subjective exchanges in which meanings
> are created and firmed. Socrates was right: reading is [also] not enough. If we want to approach
> the harder wisdom we must *talk* and, of course, listen. (Davidson, 1994, 432, emphasis added)

Socio-political implications

Recent political events have produced shock waves in and from several so-called democratic societies. Driving these events has been an increase in "populism", with large numbers of citizens rebelling, at the ballot box or more blatantly, against what they regard as the "elitism" of prevailing political institutions. Populists typically reject complex reasoning and the considered views of experts in favour of "bumper-sticker" messages and "tweets" in which there is no room for nuance or shades of grey. The world is divided into "us" and "them" and that's all there is to it. Both populists and their opponents often resort to versions of "identity politics" which, in my view, are based on confusions over the concept of *identity*, as I outlined earlier.

My interest in this issue, which is directly relevant to those I have been discussing, is what populist thinking implies and reflects about *education*. In the USA, for example, there is an alarming and growing tendency among certain groups in society to equate education – specifically higher education – with elitism. This is not an entirely new phenomenon of course – witness Margaret Thatcher's disdain for what she termed the "chattering classes" in 1980s Britain and, more contentiously perhaps, the Chinese "Cultural Revolution" under Mao Tse Tung in the 1960s and 1970s. Followers of Thatcher and Mao, like those of Donald Trump, would have little time or patience for cultivating *dialogue* among the younger members of society, *especially* if they accept the link between dialogue and *thinking for oneself*. But what does this mean for the long-term well-being of so-called *free* societies? What is the relationship between populism and *democracy*, given that the existence of both depends on the weight of numbers*?* And with what degree of confidence can we continue to make the link between democratic citizenship and a commitment to such ideals as making the world a better place and living lives which are judged to be *worthwhile*? It has been said that America is drifting toward a state of *neo-feudalism*, where – somewhat ironically – a genuine elite of immensely wealthy (overwhelmingly white) individuals controls the fate of the vast majority.[iii] I saw some disturbing signs of a similar trend in Hong Kong. I am interested in hearing from colleagues here if they, too, sense any movement in this direction in Japan.

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[i] Since writing these words, I have come to appreciate that there is an important difference between "What am I?" and "Who am I?". Where the former is short for "What *kind* of being am I?", the latter is open to several interpretations, including an invitation to specify what is (morally) important to me ("Where do I stand?").

[ii] The claim that East Asian students are culturally and historically bound to a tradition of non-dialogical learning is, itself, questionable. Witness the following comments, also made a long time ago: "The Master said, 'If a man does not ask "How is it? — How is it?" I can indeed do nothing with him.' (*The Analects*, 15, 15; 397, cited in Cheng 1990). "Let us discuss together in a friendly way. Forget our position and our age. I am but one of you, so let us express our ideas frankly and without reserve." (398). "He seemed to have recognized the principle that there is no impression without expression'... the discussion method which was constantly used by Confucius....[he] used very often the dialectic method" (398).

[iii] Edward Kleinbard, a USC law professor and author of *We Are Better than This: How Government Should Spend Our Money*, said the US undertaxed the very wealthy and underfunded education and other public services which could help the poor to move up. "Because we do that, those with great wealth can accumulate even more. We are drifting towards neo-feudalism. We're making wealth a hereditary gene."