To Colorize a Worldview Painted in Black and White
– Philosophical Dialogues to Reduce the Influence of Extremism on Youths Online

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Abstract

A recent report by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention in cooperation with the Swedish Security Service shows that the Internet has been extensively used to spread propaganda by proponents of violent political extremism, characterized by a worldview painted in black and white, an anti-democratic viewpoint, and intolerance towards persons with opposing ideas. We provide five arguments suggesting that philosophical dialogue with young persons would be beneficial to their acquisition of insights, attitudes and thinking tools for encountering such propaganda. The arguments are based on stated requirements for problem solutions given by experts in violent political extremism, recent research about the effects of philosophical dialogue in young persons' thinking skills, and parts of the basic theoretical framework of Philosophy for Children. Philosophical dialogues seem a promising way for young people to achieve a stronger democratic awareness and a more tenacious resistance against extremist views online.

Keywords: democracy, philosophical dialog, youth, philosophy, extremism, propaganda, online, internet

1. Introduction

Never before have young people had such extensive opportunities to orient themselves in the public debate on their own as we have today (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). As the Internet provides opportunities for global flows of information (Turner, 2007), modern information and communication technologies allow for global activities as well as the sharing of knowledge (Lor & Britz, 2007). Advances in online technology make global communication increasingly possible (Ward, 2008) and allow for minorities to make their voices heard (Hackett, 2006).

Because of the immense amount of information available on the Internet, we now have great opportunities to acquire a multifaceted picture of facts and events in order to autonomously develop our own positions and approaches to the ideas and messages we encounter. However, the availability of this vast amount of information has also imposed a greater responsibility upon each individual to critically assess information encountered.

Lately, it has been found that the Internet has been extensively used by proponents of political extremism to spread their ideas, worldviews, and what they claim to be truthful information (Korsell et al., 2009). "Political extremism" is in itself a wide and sometimes not easily interpreted term, which can include many different schools of thought of considerably varying sort. In the Swedish report *Violent political extremism – Anti-democratic groups on the outermost right and left wings* (our translation), henceforth called "the VA-report," by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention in cooperation with the Swedish Security Service (Korsell et al., 2009), two (Swedish) movements are discussed: the white power-movement and a movement called "the autonomous left". In the VA-report, three main elements common to these groups are noted, namely:

1. *A worldview painted in black and white*. The view of society that can be found in these groups can be described as both oversimplified and conspiratorial. The problems, injustices or oppression they perceive in society, are claimed to be derived from the influence of certain ethnic or religious groups, or a capitalistic system. The politics advocated by the extremist group in question is often claimed to be a solution to all problems and an infallible way to reach an ideal society or utopia.

2. *An anti-democratic viewpoint*. The white power-movement advocates establishing a dictatorship, while activists within the autonomous left claim to want to explore alternative forms of democracy. Common to both of them however, is the rejection of the established democracy and the (current) Swedish law. Both groups consider themselves to have the moral right to break laws and to violate democratic principles if they are considered to be standing in the way of their struggle.

3. *Intolerance towards persons with opposing ideas*. The political view shared by the members of the extremist group is considered the only one that is correct. Persons who disagree or think otherwise are not respected and it is considered legitimate to use violence against persons outside the own group, especially if they have political views that challenge the position of the group in question.

In studies about these movements in Sweden, it has been found that persons who are exposed to their messages, and sometimes decide to join the groups, to a large extent are young persons (Korsell et al., 2009). In the VA-report, one suggested explanation for this is that young persons to a larger extent than others are in search of friendship and identity, and therefore are drawn to associations they believe can provide them with this. Another suggested factor in explaining why these movements attract young persons is that many youths are attracted to the dichotomous worldview that these extremist groups depict, where simple solutions to difficult problems are provided, and where certain people or groups of people are identified as scapegoats responsible for the perceived problems in society. (It should be said, for clarity, that most youths that come in contact with extremism online dissociate themselves from the messages, but some persons however do decide to join an extremist group (Korsell et al., 2009).)

Against this background, we will discuss five arguments for that participation in philosophical dialogues would increase young persons' ability to encounter online extremist propaganda that expresses a worldview painted in black and white, an anti-democratic attitude, and intolerance towards persons with opposing views. We will limit our discussion to extremism that meets these three characteristics, as described above.

2. Philosophical Dialogues to Reduce the Influence of Extremism on Youths Online

In this section, we will present five arguments for why participation in philosophical dialogues is a good means for young people to develop insights, attitudes and thinking tools to reduce the influence of extremism encountered online, by achieving a stronger democratic awareness and a more tenacious resistance against extremist views.

2.1 Meeting Experts' Requirements about Dialogue with Non-Fostering Adults

In the VA-report, the following suggestion about how society ought to handle and prevent young persons' seeking and joining extremist movements and organizations is given by the authoring experts in the subject area of violent political extremism:

"A crime preventing strategy towards the youths who are in the risk zone of being drawn into violent extremism is to challenge the black and white worldview that these organizations offer. In this, both the society in general, in the form of media and elected officials, and adults living around the individual, share a responsibility. For adults in contact with the person, the task is to discuss and reason. The keyword in these talks is dialogue. The adult should not try to force the individual to uphold "correct" ideas, but to the contrary, it is important to listen and to take the individual's views and opinions seriously. The extremist groups use a black and white worldview with a strict border between friends and enemies, and oversimplified solutions to complex issues. By listening to and understanding the young person's experiences and dawning worldview, it is possible for an adult to make this oversimplified worldview more nuanced through a constructive dialogue." (Korsell et al., 2009, p. 145, our translation)

One central feature of philosophical dialogues with children is that the activity is not carried out in isolation but is rather practiced in conjunction with other participants in what is often called a "community of inquiry" (Lipman, 2003, p. 20), within which an active sharing of ideas occurs (Juuso, 2007). This encourages the participants to ask questions, formulate hypotheses, motivate and argue in favor of views and standpoints, and bring forward examples and counter-examples to different ideas together with the other participants, collectively taking the inquiry forward (Glina, 2009; Murris, 2008; 2014).

In contrast to most conventional pedagogical enterprises, the primary role of the facilitator in a philosophical dialogue is not to deliver fixed and ready-to-use answers to the questions under examination, but it is up to the participants in the community of inquiry themselves to collectively reason and work out answers and solutions to the (philosophical) problems and questions being investigated in the dialogue. The role of the facilitator is instead to motivate and encourage the participants in their own reasoning, to add structure and clarity to the conversation and through open-ended questions and suggestions incite the participants to explore new perspectives and ways of thinking that can enrich the conversation and deepen the inquiry (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980). The role of the facilitating teacher is described in the following:

"In this sense, the teacher is a gadfly, encouraging the students to take the initiative, building on what they manage to formulate, helping them question underlying assumptions of what they arrive at, and suggesting ways of arriving at more comprehensive answers." (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980, p. 83)

A majority of the methods and approaches suggested in the VA-report is, as we have seen above, already prominent in practices of philosophical dialogue with children. Within such a practice, it is emphasized that the young persons themselves reach their own views and positions about the questions being discussed. To listen to an adult announcing what is right or wrong does not give rise to the same elevated understanding of a point of view as does being provided the opportunity to formulate one's own reasoning and arguments, with support and input from other persons at a similar cognitive level, without being forced or fostered into accepting established views from an authoritative world of adults. (Gardelli, Alerby, & Persson, 2014)

2.2 Promoting Critical Thinking Ability

A person who searches the Internet for information often does this on her own. In comparison with direct discussions in a classroom environment, or with reviewed and accepted literature in books or other printed material, it is harder to assess and evaluate the underlying interests and reliability of the persons expressing themselves through anonymous discussion forums on the Internet. In contrast to the broad spectrum of individuals and opinions that are often found in a Swedish classroom, it is likely that the users on an Internet forum constitute a more homogeneous group. Such forums can therefore become gathering places for persons with similar interests and worldviews, where they attend in order to have their own beliefs strengthened and confirmed. The discussions that are conducted within these forums therefore run the risk of becoming uncritical. That a statement remains unchallenged on a forum can mistakenly be interpreted as a sufficient reason to hold the statement to be correct. If none of the writers on the forum has an interest in trying to challenge a certain statement, this can give rise to an incorrect belief that the statement must be reasonable. This suggests that individuals who spend time on the Internet need to both have and trust their own skills when it comes to judging the reliability and value of the information supporting the claims. Skills in critical thinking and a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem would therefore be of importance, since it would lead to that young persons on the Internet become more prone to challenge the one-sidedness and bias, and to question the trustworthiness of claims and arguments portraying a black and white worldview.

An aim of Philosophy for Children, stated by Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980), is closely connected to the above description. They write that the purpose:

"[...] is not to turn children into philosophers or decision makers, but to help them become more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate, and more reasonable individuals. Children who have been helped to become more judicious not only have a better sense of when to act but also of when not to act." (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1980, p. 15)

Accordingly, the participants in a philosophical dialogue are encouraged to explore new arguments, perspectives and alternative solutions to the problems discussed (Lipman, 2003). That participation in philosophical dialogues actually increases young persons' ability to think critically is supported by several studies (e.g. García-Moriyón, Rebollo, & Colom, 2005; Topping & Trickey, 2007). In research conducted in the UK and the USA, researchers have had students participating in philosophical dialogues in a community of inquiry for some time, and then tested their skills within critical thinking, amongst other skills. In every case studied within this research, the philosophizing students have displayed better or significantly better results in comparison to control groups (Trickey & Topping, 2004). It has also been noted that young persons who have participated in philosophical dialogues to a larger extent request arguments if they are to adopt others' views and opinions (Malmhester & Ohlsson, 1999). Moreover, previous research indicates that participation in philosophical dialogues gives rise to a larger degree of self-esteem (Trickey & Topping, 2004) and self-confidence (Malmhester & Ohlsson, 1999). We believe that the promotion of such a combination of critical thinking skills and personal traits leads to a better disposition to resist unwarranted extremist propaganda.

2.3 Rebutting Anti-Democratic Approaches

Creating opportunities for young persons to learn to found their own points of view and approach information with a critical attitude seems to give rise to many positive effects that can be of great use while encountering extremist opinions, maybe first and foremost on the Internet, where young persons often have to evaluate information on their own. And if these skills and dispositions to taking a critical stance are developed through philosophical dialogues within a community of inquiry, there seems to be even more benefits.

The nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill once said that we humans do not learn to read or write, ride a horse or swim through somebody telling us how to do it, but that instead, we learn by doing it. Mill applied the same reasoning on people's knowledge of democratic practice (Mill, 1973). One way to involve young persons in our democratic society is to introduce them to democratic principles and methods at an early stage, and to let the young persons themselves exercise their democratic power. The idea that they hereby get to learn to act democratically does not necessarily mean that they will act this way also in the future, but with such practical knowledge comes at least knowledge about how a democratic practice is carried out.

Several characteristics of philosophical dialogue within a community of inquiry are strongly connected to democracy and its practice (Cam, 2009; Gardelli, Alerby, & Persson, 2014; Tozzi, 2009). Philosophical dialogues are often structured by classical democratic principles where the participants first jointly choose philosophical questions to discuss by voting (such a democratic procedure is common in Swedish practices of philosophical dialogue) and thereafter are invited to respect and listen to each others' thoughts and opinions during the joint search for answers to the questions posed. To let young persons practice democratic methods and act in accordance with basic democratic values, such as equality and freedom of speech, can be a way to create understanding for the importance of these values and methods, and this may in turn facilitate legitimization of a democratic form of government in the participating youths. Research shows that already at an early age, students develop skills such as those listed above, if they are engaged in philosophical dialogues (Vansieleghem, 2005). Involvement in philosophical dialogues is a way of educating children to reflective citizenship (Tozzi, 2009).

2.4 Counteracting Intolerance

Many advocates for the democratic form of government have stated that a prerequisite for a society to function optimally is that a broad spectrum of ideas and views are accessible to serve as inspiration (Cam, 2009). The more voices that are being heard, the more aspects and perspectives are brought to the collective building of society, which thereby attains a broader knowledge base to rest upon.

This kind of thinking is also to be found within a community of inquiry. In a philosophical dialogue, the participants' personal opinions in the question for discussion can often be regarded as essentially irrelevant.

What is central is rather that the dialogue itself progresses, supported by the participants' different perspectives and arguments of various kinds (Murris, 2014). Hence, a person with a divergent opinion does not have to be considered a threat to the other participants' private positions or to the suggested answers advocated by a majority, but such a person can to the contrary be considered a great asset, who, through his or her unique opinions or reasoning, can contribute with a new perspective to the dialogue. Neither is it unusual that participants who actually hold a certain position also put forward arguments against their own view, since the main aim in the dialogues is to explore the issues and questions, and not to convince other participants about the superiority of one's own position.

This pluralistic perspective is contrary to the attitude in the extremist movements, where it is common to consider certain solutions to problems superior already from the start, and where persons with divergent opinions and perspectives are considered enemies with ideas that have nothing to contribute (Korsell et al., 2009). If the attitude of the community of inquiry, where different views are considered assets rather than threats, can be generalized to the society in general, then this could lead to increased respect, understanding and tolerance towards individuals with other views than one's own. Matthew Lipman described the practice within a community of inquiry as a practice where:

"[s]tudents listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions." (Lipman, 2003, p. 20)

A prerequisite for all this is that the participants actively try to understand each other's ways of thinking, to thereby be able to use and be inspired by the different ideas that stem from different kinds of premises and reasoning. Then the participants can make use of the common knowledge that is thereby put at their disposal and together take the philosophical investigation forward. To be encouraged to understand other persons' perspectives and ways of thinking would likely contribute to increased tolerance towards persons with different opinions. Accordingly, there is previous research suggesting that young students who have participated in philosophical dialogues show more tolerance and appreciation towards persons with opposing viewpoints than equally aged students not participating in philosophical dialogues (Malmhester & Ohlsson, 1999).

2.5 A Forum for Dialogue about Ideology

In the VA-report, it is declared that, among the different types of personality of the young individuals that seem especially sensitive to extremist ideologies, there are the "pondering" youths who have a great interest for politics and ideology. It is stated that:

"In the same way as those who act out, the ponderers have difficulties finding their places in society, but instead of becoming externalizing they turn inwards, searching answers to the questions by reading and thinking. [...] Studying on your own and discussions are encouraged in the family, which early on awakens some interest for politics, ideology and religion. Therefore, an intellectual way into extremism lies near at hand. Literature and own thoughts about injustice in society, combined with a feeling of frustration, make ponderers sensitive to radicalization, which often happens after an experience of insight or a transformational incident." (Korsell et al., 2009, p. 148, our translation)

The practice of philosophical dialogue in a community of inquiry can be dedicated to ideological questions about, for instance, the concept of democracy, the importance of equality, or how ideas about justice should best be understood. These issues would then moreover be discussed in-depth and from several different perspectives. Within a community of inquiry, questioning of commonly acknowledged values and attitudes is not considered controversial, but rather, critical and curious attitudes towards ideas of all kinds are encouraged, since this contributes to greater depth in the dialogue.

With this in mind, we believe that philosophical dialogues could offer an encouraging and neutral platform where youths with interest in politics and ideology could participate to share their thoughts. To discuss ideological questions within a community of inquiry could thereby function as a non-biased substitute or complement to other forums where similar questions are discussed with a more biased point of departure. If youths that participate in Internet-based discussion contexts where extremist ideas are advocated were provided the opportunity to illuminate the questions under discussion from other perspectives, then it would likely result in the youths becoming less affected by the extremist ideas, since these would have been scrutinized within the community of inquiry and have been compared to alternative points of view.

The positions put forth in the forums for extremist debate would likely also appear less convincing concurrently with that more perspectives are introduced and the worldview painted in black and white loosens up.

3. Summary

In this text we have provided five arguments suggesting that philosophical dialogue with young persons would be beneficial to their acquisition of insights, attitudes and thinking tools for encountering the messages of extremist movements, which are characterized by a worldview painted in black and white, an anti-democratic attitude and intolerance towards persons with opposing ideas. This has become especially relevant considering youths' increased use of the Internet. Since biased or doubtful information spread on the Internet is not always traceable and often stands uncontested, the individual needs to be skilled in independently considering the reasonableness of the mediated information.

Experts in violent political extremism consider respectful and non-fostering dialogues where youths' own opinions are taken seriously as effective in regard to successfully making youths question the worldview painted in black and white provided by extremist movements. This corresponds well to the pedagogy typically applied in philosophical dialogues, where participants are encouraged to elaborate on their ideas and opinions against the background of their own reasoning; reasoning that is explored and gets its reasonableness contested within the community of inquiry.

Previous research indicates positive effects on critical thinking in young persons that participate in philosophical dialogues. We believe that such effects are appropriate for preparing them to effectively judge and criticize extremist messages. Participating in philosophical dialogues would likely also contribute to developing a positive attitude and understanding for democratic principles, which is partly achieved through the democratic procedure of the dialogue, but also by inviting different opinions and perspectives, which are appreciated and welcomed within the community of inquiry. Furthermore, if this positive attitude towards different ways of thinking would be generalized to include a greater part of society, this would likely contribute to diminished conceptions of a "we and them" perspective, counteract intolerance, and contest the worldview painted in black and white that is often put forth by extremist groups. Finally, specific questions about justice and democracy can be discussed thoroughly and without condemnation during the dialogues, something potentially leading to that extremist points of view related to these questions appear unreasonable after having been contested through critical scrutiny within the community of inquiry.

Acknowledgements

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