

Thinking and sociology

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Abstract

This paper attempts to introduce the topic of thinking into current sociology and to raise the question whether a *sociology of thinking* might be possible and, if so, what such a sociology could look like. Thinking is typically seen as something intensely private and fleeting in nature, two qualities that make it resistant to sociology's efforts to get a grip on it. Earlier attempts to make a sociological analysis of thinking are surveyed, from Durkheim over the sociology of knowledge to today's sociology of ideas and other approaches. An argument is made that a sociology of thinking could get some important inspiration from philosophy, especially when it comes to topics to analyze and the setting of an agenda. To exemplify this argument, some writings on thinking by Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger are presented. The paper ends with some reflections on the normative dimension of thinking and a sociology of thinking.

Keywords

Heidegger, Kant, Kierkegaard, sociology of knowledge, thinking

The two phenomena to which the title of this paper refers – *thinking* and *sociology* – have both inspired important but separate literatures. Philosophers and cognitive scientists have, for example, produced a large number of writings on thinking. And sociology has inspired a minor library during its existence over more than a century. Thinking and sociology, however, are rarely discussed together; and there may be good reasons for this.

Sociology, as we know, is the science of social action, institutions, and societies – all collective activities that are far away from the process of thinking that goes on in the mind of the individual. All of us *think*; and we all know the intensely private character of our thoughts. Some of these thoughts no-one gets to know; others we forget or cannot articulate. That what we *say*, on the other hand, can be turned into sociology seems clear. One reason for this is that what we say is openly available; another, that when we speak we have to use terms that are understandable to others. That what we *know*, to take another example, can be turned into sociology is equally clear; and roughly for the same reasons. As a result, there is a sociology of knowledge as well as a sociological strand of conversational analysis. But the fleeting and private nature of thought is something else; and we realize well why there is a tenuous and difficult relationship between thinking and sociology.

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This was all understood by the founders of sociology. The one person who was most interested in exploring the relationship between thought and society was Émile Durkheim; and in *Rules of Sociological Method* (1964 [1895]) he issued a series of warnings against studying thinking. First of all, the sociologist must not analyze a topic exclusively through thinking. Using introspection in this manner will lead to armchair sociology *à la* Spencer or to the ideological type of social science analysis that economists such as John Stuart Mill have produced. Neither can the sociologist apprehend the thoughts in the minds of other people; these are much too fleeting and evasive for that. What the sociologist *can* do, on the other hand, according to Durkheim, is to study thoughts that have become social facts, meaning by this that they are coercive and approachable from the outside. The sociologist, in short, can analyze the products of thinking – books, laws, and so on – but not the process of thinking itself.

Other social scientists at the end of the nineteenth century agreed with Durkheim's diagnosis of thinking as something fleeting and difficult to study. In 1890, for example, the expression 'stream of consciousness' was launched by William James in *Principles of Psychology*. What posterity has remembered as 'stream of consciousness' was to James identical to thinking. 'Let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness or of subjective life', as he put it (James, 1950 [1890]: 239).

Consciousness is always present, James suggested; 'it thinks' and 'thought goes on' (James, 1950 [1890]: 224–225). If you want to get a sense for what thinking is, he also said, imagine a bird that flies and occasionally sits still. Since it is hard to capture its flight, people have analyzed it sitting still.

As the twentieth century continued, the evasive nature of what goes on in the human mind has continued to fascinate. This phenomenon is, for example, at the very center of the literary work by Virginia Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse* she describes the stream of consciousness as a voice that speaks so quickly that it is impossible to write down everything that it says. What goes on in your mind, she says, is as elusive as a swarm of insects. We read: 'All of this danced up and down [in Lily's mind], like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net' (Woolf, 1951 [1927]: 43).

Virginia Woolf is better known for her attempts to give a literary expression to what goes through people's minds ('the stream of consciousness') than to the way that people think. But she was also very much interested in the latter topic, and she discusses the relationship between the two in *A Room of One's Own*. When you want to think and get an idea, she says in the opening pages of this essay, you as it were throw out a fishing line into your stream of consciousness and hope to catch something. 'Thought,' she writes, 'had lets its line down the stream' (Woolf, 1984 [1929]: 5). You then wait for 'the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of [your] line'; and then 'cautiously' haul in the catch (Woolf, 1984 [1929]: 5). But how small the fish looks! 'The sort that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter.' For this is how it works, when you develop a thought, Woolf says. You throw the fish back into the water. And once this fish is 'put back into the mind,' with 'the mysterious properties of its kind' it becomes 'at once very exciting, and very important,' darting and sinking, flashing hither and thither, and setting up 'such a wash and tumult of ideas that it [is] impossible to sit still' (Woolf, 1984 [1929]: 5).

Three philosophers

Given the elusive and private character of thought, one may raise the question whether there really is some way that a sociology of thinking could be created and, if so, what such an analysis would look like. One way to get an enterprise of this type going may be to look outside of sociology. Two obvious candidates for inspiration in this respect are philosophy and cognitive science. The latter in particular has made important progress during the last few decades. I will, however, turn to philosophy, which not only has a much longer tradition to draw on but also addresses a much broader range of questions. This is especially true for the type of philosophy that existed before the birth of the modern academic division of labor. I have singled out three thinkers who all have made important contributions to the understanding of thinking. These are Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. There are many others – just think of Pascal, Peirce, and Wittgenstein – but the three I have selected here will suffice for purpose of this paper.

Kant

Let me begin with Kant. In discussing Kant, one naturally turns to his main work, the first *Critique* from 1781. The reason for this is clear: this is where he presents his ‘Copernican Revolution,’ or the argument that the mind does not reflect reality but helps to shape it. This is also where Kant addresses the question, ‘What can we know?’, and the role played by the categories of understanding, such as quantity, quality, and causality. In this paper, however, I shall not draw on the first *Critique* but on some lesser writings by Kant, writings that are more centered on the activity of thinking than the structure of the mind. The ones I have selected are ‘What is Enlightenment?’ from 1784 and ‘On the Power of the Mind to Master Its Morbid Feelings by Sheer Resolution’ from 1798.

‘What is Enlightenment?’ is a very short article, written in response to a question by a Prussian official and addressed to a broad audience. It is a very famous article, and one reason for this is its attempt to define what is meant by the Enlightenment. Michel Foucault has also emphasized that it is of much interest for an understanding of the critical attitude that emerged in the West together with society’s ‘governmentalization’ (Foucault, 1990: 34). In this paper, however, I will single out a different quality of Kant’s article, namely its discussion of *thinking*: what it means to think, why we should think, and what the consequences of thinking are. Before introducing Kant’s argument, I should also mention that when he refers to thinking, he does not mean the thinking of the philosopher but the thinking of the common person.

Kant starts the article by providing a concise answer to the question, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ It is: ‘*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred tutelage*’ [*Unmündigkeit*; Kant, 1970 [1784]: 54].¹ That this definition is important is also clear from the fact that it is set in italics and repeated, word for word, a few times later in the text.

Kant carefully spells out the meaning of the key terms in his definition of what constitutes Enlightenment. ‘Tutelage,’ the reader is told, means ‘the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.’ That this condition is ‘self-incurred’ means that ‘its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to

use [one's understanding] without the guidance of another.' Kant concludes the first section of his article by citing what he thinks should be the motto of the Enlightenment: 'Have courage to use your *own* understanding!' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 54).

It is important to understand why Kant uses the term 'tutelage' or *Unmündigkeit*. Implicit in his choice of this term is the notion that adult human beings *should* be able to think for themselves. To be an adult, and not think for yourself, means that you deserve to be declared *unmündig* – just as children, those who are mentally ill or old and weak-minded. Kant also indicates how people can get out of their self-incurred *Unmündigkeit*, namely through *courage* and *resolution*. It is difficult and frightening to think for yourself; and you have to focus and make up your mind to do so. Still, the single individual can do something about his or her unthinking condition; and this is positive.

Kant then discusses the situation of those who do not think for themselves and do not want to do so. He says that they behave in this way because it is pleasant and comfortable. 'Laziness and cowardice' explain why so many people 'gladly' forsake to think for themselves and instead live like 'domesticated animals' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 54).

Kant also notes that there are certain individuals who like to take on the burden to think for other people. These so-called 'guardians' (*Vormünder*), as he calls them, discourage others to think for themselves and also tell them that it would be very dangerous to do so. But this is wrong, and unthinking people are fully capable of thinking for themselves, Kant says. They may fall on their face the first few times they try it – but that is all.

Kant supplies several concrete examples of how people avoid thinking in everyday life. You can, for example, read a book so you do not have to figure something out for yourself. You can let a 'spiritual adviser' make decisions for you in matters that concern your 'conscience' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 54). And you can let your medical doctor decide on your 'diet' (Kant had plenty of stomach problems and may have grown tired of getting bad advice from his doctor). More generally, there is also the rule that 'I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 54).

Kant states that it is 'the duty of all men to think for themselves.' He also raises the question: how do you get non-thinking people to start thinking (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 55)? His answer is that while a very small number of people may succeed in liberating themselves, 'there is more chance of an entire public enlightening itself.' And for this to happen, the public first of all needs '*freedom*.' There is also the fact, according to Kant, that the process of going from not thinking for yourself to thinking for yourself cannot take place overnight. It is slow process and it takes time. A revolution may get rid of a despot, Kant notes, 'but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 55).

In his article Kant pays homage to Frederick the Great, and this is something modern readers may find difficult to understand. The motto of the King, he says, is '*argue* as much as you like and about whatever you like, but *obey*' (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 55). Kant defends the position that a person should be able to say and write what he wants, but that he or she must also obey under certain circumstances. It would be counterproductive for an officer or a tax payer to start thinking in some situations; they just have to obey.

'What is Enlightenment?' ends with Kant summing up his position. He says that it is 'paradoxical' that it was Frederick the Great and not some Republic that introduced the freedom to think and speak (Kant, 1970 [1784]: 59). But human affairs usually are paradoxical,

he adds. He also refers to 'man's inclination and vocation *to think freely*' and proclaims this to be 'the germ on which nature has lavished most care.' This last formulation contains, among other things, an argument to the effect that people are born with a natural capacity to think for themselves. Thinking is finally closely related to action. 'To *think freely*,' Kant says, will eventually translate into 'to *act freely*' (Kant, 1970 [1784] 1970: 59).

The second piece by Kant on thinking that I want briefly to discuss is little known; and its title is 'On the Power of the Mind to Master Its Morbid Feelings by Sheer Resolution' (Kant, 1979 [1798]). This work consists of a very long letter in response to a medical doctor called Hufeland. You may recall Kant's reference in 'What is Enlightenment?' to letting your medical doctor decide your diet, and this work elaborates on this and similar themes. It is of interest to this paper primarily because it relates thinking to everyday concrete concerns, with which we easily can identify.

One's capacity to think is closely related to the body, according to Kant. He warns, for example, that it is unwise to study in 'artificial light,' unless one is used to it (Kant, 1979 [1798]: 199). One should also not eat and do serious thinking at the same time. Nor should one think deeply while walking. When you go for a walk, Kant says, you should let your imagination roam free and wander from topic to topic, just as your eyes move from object to object. If you have insomnia, he adds, you should in contrast focus your thought on 'some neutral object' – and this will ensure that you fall asleep (Kant, 1979 [1798]: 193–194).

The idea that dieting and thinking go together is also true metaphorically for Kant. In a handsome formulation in 'On the Power of the Mind,' he writes that 'thinking ... is a scholar's food; and when he is awake and *alone*, he cannot live without it' (Kant, 1979 [1798]: 199). By thinking, when it comes to a scholar, Kant means two things: 'reading books' and 'reflection.' The latter is specified as 'meditation and discovery.'

Kierkegaard

Let us now proceed to Kierkegaard and his view of thinking. Students of Kierkegaard rarely discuss what he has to say about thinking, but this topic nonetheless holds a very special place in his authorship. This is especially true for the trilogy that is associated with Johannes Climacus, one of the many pseudonyms he assumed. The three works are the following: the unfinished *Johannes Climacus*, *Philosophical Fragments*, and *Postscript*. These were all written between 1842 and 1846 and therefore belong to Kierkegaard's first period as a writer, when most of his work appeared under various pseudonyms and when he also engaged other topics than religious ones. It is often noted that Kierkegaard probably took the name of Johannes Climacus from a seventh-century monk and theologian, who was the author of a book called *The Ladder to Paradise*. The central metaphor in this work is that of ascending on a ladder to heaven; and the argument is that the believer can reach perfection by gradually overcoming his/her vices and acquiring Christian virtues.

The work entitled *Johannes Climacus* (1842–1843) is not considered very important. It is known to most readers of Kierkegaard for one particular passage, which is regarded as autobiographical in nature. Climacus says at one point that when he was a child and wanted to go out for a walk, his father, instead of agreeing to this, took him on an imaginary

walk inside the house. The father asked where the son wanted to go, and then described in vivid detail every building that they passed and every person whom they met.

This story is usually told to illustrate the special type of home that Kierkegaard grew up in as well as the character of his father. But as we soon shall see, it also has another meaning. First, however, it should be emphasized that the work entitled *Johannes Climacus* is unique in all of Kierkegaard's authorship through its lyrical celebration of thinking. Kierkegaard would often mention the joy that he felt when thinking, but it nowhere comes to such exultant expression as here.

The work begins as follows: 'Some years ago in the city of H . . . there lived a young student by the name of Johannes Climacus' (Kierkegaard, 1985a [1842–1843]: 118). This young man was in love, the reader is told – but not with a woman:

In love he was, ardently in love – with thought, or, more accurately, with thinking. No young lover can be more intensely moved by the incomprehensible transition that comes when erotic love [*Elskov*] awakens in his breast, by the stroke of lightning with which reciprocated love bursts through in the beloved breast's, than he was moved by the comprehensible transition in which one thought connects with another.

(Kierkegaard, 1985a [1842–1843]: 118)²

Johannes Climacus also attempts to explain why its main character ended up as such a skillful thinker. The author says that Johannes Climacus had a 'natural disposition' for thinking, but he also points to 'favorable circumstances' (Kierkegaard, 1985a [1842–1843]: 119). One of these circumstances was the interaction between Climacus and his father, and it is in this context that the imaginary walks are mentioned. The author also mentions Climacus' fascination with his father's skill in suddenly overturning the argument of his opponents.

Experiences at school seem to have been less important to Climacus' development as a thinker, even if it is noted that he enjoyed grammar in particular. What appealed to him about grammar was its rules. Apart from this, the reading of books was not particularly helpful: 'He [Johannes Climacus] did not like to read: he had not been developed by reading philosophical books. It was something far more original' (Kierkegaard, 1985a [1842–1843]: 238).

The two works that are authored by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus – *Philosophical Fragments* and *Postscript* – contain a different view of thinking than in the work just considered. In *Postscript* Kierkegaard describes, among other things, how and why he decided to become an author. We live in an age, he explains, in which the individual as well as existence have been forgotten and need to be restored (for example, Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 249, 355). In our modern age, he also notes, thinking has 'become something strange, something secondhand' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 308).

People in particular have forgotten 'what it means to exist,' an expression that that is repeatedly used (for example, Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 194, 205, 249). Existence, of course, is one of Kierkegaard's central concepts, to which many of his other concepts are related, such as dread, passion, and fear. Existence can also be described as the condition that all human beings face, in their capacity as particular individuals. 'To exist signifies first and foremost to be a particular individual' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 326).

Thinking is part of existence; 'a human being thinks and exists' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 332). Thinking does not dominate existence; the two go together harmoniously. 'Existence itself is the sphere of reflection ... and an existing person is in reflection' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 421). Thinking is similarly not superior to imagination and feeling, but works together with them (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 347).

All human beings have been given the capacity to think by God, we read in *Postscript*, even if their capacity to think may currently be limited or blocked:

Every human being is by nature designed to become a thinker (all honor and praise to the God who created man in his image!). God is not to be faulted if habit and routine and lack of passion and affection and chatter with neighbors right and left gradually corrupt most people, so that they become thoughtless.

(Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 4)

Postscript also contains an important attempt by Kierkegaard to present and discuss two very different types of thinking – what he calls objective thinking and subjective thinking. Abstract thinking and concrete thinking are two related, but not identical concepts. 'We live in an objective age,' Kierkegaard says; and this means that objective and abstract thinking predominate (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 194, 204).

The objective thinker is not aware that he exists (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 72–81). He is of the opinion that thinking is the same as being; and he ignores that he is a particular human being. He is disinterested in existence and, as a result, he is a 'stunted' human being. 'The existing person is [in contrast] infinitely interested in existing' (Kierkegaard, 1994 [1846]: 302).

The Hegelian philosopher is an example of an objective thinker, not only because he thinks that being and thinking are one and the same thing, but also because of the importance that he attaches to categories, systems, and logic – all of which are indifferent to the existence of the individual (for example, Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 110). Also the historical thinker is an objective thinker. The main reason for this is that he only finds History important and regards the individual as insignificant.

The subjective thinker, in contrast, understands that 'subjectivity is truth' and 'truth is subjectivity' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 189, 343; cf. 349–360). This means that 'in all his thinking ... he has to include the thought that he himself is an existing person' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 351). It also means that he must not think outwards, as it were, but instead develop himself inwards. Truth has to be 'appropriated,' not just known (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 22). 'The Socratic secret ... is that the movement is inward, that the truth is the subject's transformation within himself' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 38).

The subjective thinker is not objective but passionate. Passion is essential and it emerges when the individual for a moment coincides with the universal. The subjective thinker also knows that everything is uncertain; and he embraces uncertainty. He similarly knows that thinking is deeply paradoxical and he delights in paradoxes. 'The paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow' (Kierkegaard, 1985b [1844]: 37).

Thinking is by no means the highest value for Kierkegaard as a religious thinker. You can solve certain things through thinking, but what first of all matters to the believer is

that he or she faces up to the reality of faith. And here thinking is of little help. 'What is extra hard about Christianity is precisely that it is beyond thought' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 507). This means that the individual, at one point, must let go of his thinking and give himself up to faith. 'The individual [must] risk his thought, venture to believe against understanding (the dialectic)' (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 429).

To struggle with faith is an intensely private affair to Kierkegaard, and it leads to the isolation of the individual. But it is the only possible way; and it ultimately leads to a different type of community, to membership in 'the invisible Church' of God (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 54). To Kierkegaard, Christianity is a community of individuals, who all experience and struggle privately with faith. It is also a community with little place for the type of thinking that the young Johannes Climacus delighted in.

Heidegger

Our third philosopher is Heidegger. His most important work on thinking is a volume called *What is Called Thinking?*, which appeared in 1954 and consists of notes for a course that Heidegger taught in 1951–1952. There also exist a few other writings by Heidegger that deal with thinking, but I will rely less on these (for example, Heidegger, 1966 [1959], 2008a [1946], 2008b [1969]).

The opening lines of Lecture 1 in *What is Called Thinking?* are very important. They read as follows:

To succeed in the enterprise of thinking, we have to think ourselves. To succeed in this, we have to learn to think. As soon as we allow ourselves to become involved in such learning, we have also admitted that we are not yet capable of thinking.

(Heidegger, 1954: 1, my translation)

The first theme in these opening lines is that all human beings can think; this is why the word 'we' is repeatedly used. All human beings have received a gift or a 'dowry' – the gift of thinking (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 132, 142). The type of thinking that philosophers engage in is, however, somewhat different in nature (for example, Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 126).

The thinking that we all have the capacity to engage in is also differentiated from the type of thinking we usually engage in. The latter is called 'one-track thinking' and 'thoughtless chatter' (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 32–33, 198). They express the kind of thinking that we use in our everyday lives, living in a technological society. We have opinions, Heidegger says, rather than engage in thinking. 'Reflection' is the opposite of this type of thinking in technological society (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 27).

The second theme in the opening lines of *What is Called Thinking?* has a liberating message and represents to my mind one of Heidegger's most important contributions. This is that we can *learn how to think*. We are not simply born with a certain capacity to think. But how can one learn to think? Heidegger's answer is that it is a bit like swimming: you learn it by doing it. You cannot 'read a treatise on swimming'; you have to open yourself up to the 'adventure' and 'leap into the river' (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 21, 169).

If you read a book by a philosopher, you can learn thinking by studying the way that the author asks questions. Summarizing and repeating the ideas in a book does not represent

thinking. One should also try to locate and work with what the author does *not* say – what has been left ‘unthought’ (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 54). And once this exercise is over, and you have ‘found’ the thinking of the author, you have also to ‘lose’ it (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 52–53). Freeing oneself from somebody’s thinking, Heidegger says, is harder than to find it.

The third theme in the opening lines of Heidegger’s work is that we are not yet thinking. Again and again he repeats the phrase, ‘[the] *most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking*’ (for example, Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 6, 28, 37). If we already knew how to think, Heidegger notes, why would we have to learn it?

Kant, to recall, had called for thinking already in ‘What is Enlightenment?’, and Heidegger’s argument can be seen as a comment on the failure of Kant’s enterprise. *What is Called Thinking?* also contains an explicit critique of the Enlightenment and the type of thinking it ended up ushering in. Heidegger especially attacks the Enlightenment for reducing thinking to logic and dialectics.

Heidegger also says that people have been acting too much and thinking too little. What he means by this is that action has often replaced thinking, a bit rather as Pascal had argued.³ But he also has in mind the common notion that thinking is simply what comes before action and that it lacks value unless it is followed by action. Thinking, to Heidegger, is a type of action and has a value in itself.

As Heidegger’s course proceeds – it contains two cycles of lectures or twenty-one lectures in all – he further develops the themes of the introductory lines. He also adds some new themes, one of which deals with the relationship of thinking to science. The most fundamental point here is Heidegger’s argument that one should not try to define what thinking is with the help of science. From a scientific viewpoint, man is seen in a very special way – as an ‘organism.’ But from a different and more fundamental perspective he or she is a ‘*human being*’ (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 148–149). Thinking should similarly be defined in a non-scientific manner.

Heidegger says that ‘science does not think’ (for example, Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 8). This should be understood less as an attack on science than as an attempt to introduce a new and more fundamental attitude to thinking. Science has its own goals and methods for how to proceed, according to Heidegger; and these do not coincide with those of thinking. As many things today, he clarifies, thinking is primarily given a scientific interpretation, but this does not help us to understand it. Once we realize this, and science has been assigned to its rightful place, we realize that science complements thinking.

Heidegger advances beyond Kant and Kierkegaard in that he explicitly tries to theorize the relationship of thinking to language. Traditional thinking and traditional language, he says, belong together. One has to push conventional meanings to the side if one is to understand what thinking truly is – just as the poet pushes everyday meanings of words to the side in order to invest them with new meanings. The poet and the thinker are related and have a similar relationship to language (see Vendler, 2004).

In the beginning of this paper I cited a description by Virginia Woolf of how she proceeded when she wanted to think and get an idea. She said that she threw a fishing line, as it were, into her stream of consciousness and hoped that a fish would bite. The small fish was then thrown back into the stream of consciousness, to grow big and fat. It so happens that also Heidegger uses the fish as a symbol for thought, but with a different goal in

mind. In his 'Letter on Humanism,' he says that to judge thinking by logic would be as if you were to judge 'the essence and powers of a fish by seeing how long it can live on dry land' (Heidegger, 2008a [1946]: 219).

In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger elaborates on this image, equating water and its different currents with words and their different meanings. He writes:

To use an image: to a fish, the depths and expanses of its waters, the currents and quiet pools, warm and cold layers are the elements of its multiple mobility. If the fish is deprived of the fullness of its element, if it is dragged on the dry sand, then it can only wriggle, twitch, and die. Therefore, we always must seek out thinking, and its burden of thought, in the element of its multiple meanings, else everything will remain closed to us.

(Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 71).

To Heidegger, thinking is closely related not only to language but also to memory. While science primarily sees memory as 'a capacity to retain,' Heidegger says, it should be viewed from a different perspective (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 151). His argument on this point is similar to how he viewed man – as something more than an organism. Heidegger suggests that memory is related to what we have thought; it is 'thinking back' (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 11). He also speaks of memory as 'keeping,' a term that indicates that the mental process involved takes place in the present even if it points to the past (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 151).

What is Called Thinking? is, to repeat, not written as an ordinary book but consists of notes from a lecture series. Heidegger wants the reader to advance lecture by lecture, under the guidance of a teacher who 'lets [the student] learn' how to think (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 15). As the student advances, he or she is also repeatedly confronted with the question what it is that ultimately makes us think. Heidegger suggests two answers. The first is that thinking naturally gravitates towards questions of Being. Thinking, as he puts it, is in relation to Being. This part of Heidegger's answer links up his ideas on thinking to *Being and Time*.

But Heidegger also gives a second answer; and according to this, thinking is to be understood as a craft of its own. 'Thinking ... is a craft,' a craft you need to master if you want to be able to think (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 16, 23). The carpenter cannot learn his craft in some abstract manner; he must develop his skill by working on wood and by sensing what he can make of this material. The wood contains shapes, Heidegger says, and it is the carpenter's task to sense these and bring them out of the wood.

The idea of hidden forms means that the person should use thinking to understand Being. But there is also a general and independent quality to thinking that Heidegger wants the reader to be aware of. This independent quality – the quality of thinking as an activity of its own – is similarly present in Heidegger's well-known summary of what thinking *cannot* accomplish:

1. Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences.
2. Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom.
3. Thinking does not solve cosmic riddles.
4. Thinking does not endow us with the power to act.

(Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 159)

A sociology of thinking?

While the three philosophers who have been discussed so far have all made important contributions to the understanding of thinking, their arguments lack a sociological dimension. Kant and Kierkegaard lived before modern sociology was created; and Heidegger is explicitly critical of sociology in *What is Called Thinking?* (Heidegger, 1976 [1954]: 21–22). The reason for this is that sociology, just like psychology and psychoanalysis, has become a science; and science does not deal with thinking in Heidegger's sense.

How then do sociologists conceive of thinking, from the generation who pioneered sociology in the 1890s to the sociologists of today? The general answer is that there exist some attempts to analyze certain aspects of thinking sociologically – but not very many. In particular, the sociology of knowledge has tried to grapple with this issue.

Of the classics, especially Émile Durkheim showed an interest in thinking.⁴ A 'social fact' consists, among other things, of 'ways of thinking,' according to *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1964 [1895]: 2–3). This means that these ways of thinking exert a distinct form of coercion on us and make us think in special ways. Like all social facts, the ways of thinking should preferably be studied in their external form, which in this case means in the form of books, laws, and so on.

According to Durkheim, social facts are created by the collectivity. This is also why he uses expressions such as 'collective thinking,' 'social thinking,' and 'society thinks' and 'the group thinks' (Durkheim, 1964 [1895]: xlix, lii, 104). The individual plays a very subordinate role in Durkheim's work, and most of what goes on in his or her mind belongs to the science of psychology, not sociology.

Durkheim never undertook a study of the ways of thinking that he refers to in *Rules*. He was, however, deeply influenced by Kant and very much interested in his categories of the understanding. In some of his later writings, Durkheim suggested that these categories were not inherent in the human mind but created by society. They were what he termed collective representations. What had created the collective representations of time, space, and causality, Durkheim argued, was the way that major groups had been positioned *vis-à-vis* one another in early society (Durkheim, 1965 [1912]; Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1903]). This explanation is fully in line with the dictum in *Rules* that you explain fundamental social facts by looking at 'the internal constitution of the social group' (Durkheim, 1964 [1895]: 113).

The classics did not view the sociology of knowledge as a special subfield of sociology; this part of sociology was instead the creation of the first generation of sociologists after the classics. In an important statement about this new field from 1931, Karl Mannheim suggested that 'the sociology of knowledge has set itself the task of solving the problem of the social conditioning of knowledge' (Mannheim, 1936 [1931]: 237). He emphasized the role of the collectivity and collective forces in producing knowledge and thought, roughly along the lines of Durkheim.

Like other contemporaries who were interested in this new area, Mannheim conceived of 'knowledge' in a very broad way. Not only did this concept cover political ideas and ideology in Marx's sense, but also 'thought,' 'thought-models,' and 'thought-types' (Mannheim, 1936 [1931]: 240–250). One of Mannheim's most famous essays in the sociology of knowledge is, for example, entitled 'Conservative Thought' (Mannheim, 1951 [1927]).⁵

What happened in the area of the sociology of knowledge during the time after Mannheim until the 1960s has been discussed by Robert Merton in various essays (see especially Merton, 1968 [1945], 1970 [1959]). In one of these he summarizes existing studies in the sociology of knowledge in a famous table as a paradigm. From this we can see, among other things, how Merton conceives of thinking in relation to knowledge. It turns out that he views thinking just like Mannheim, namely as one of the many types of knowledge that are analyzed in the sociology of knowledge. Thinking, in other words, is not singled out as a special category that demands its own concepts, its own methods of study, and so on.

Since the days of Merton, the sociology of knowledge has been fragmented and lost some of its vitality (for example, Camic, 2001). Several of the topics that were initially covered by the sociology of knowledge have become distinct fields of their own, such as the sociology of science. Others have become part of new but less distinct fields, such as the sociology of ideas (Camic and Gross, 2001).

Several of the studies in these 'new' fields are of much interest to the sociology of thinking. In one of the classics in the sociology of science, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* by Ludwik Fleck, the concepts of 'thought style' and 'thought collective' play important roles (Fleck, 1979 [1935]). The way they are conceptualized, however, reminds very much of the French tradition in the sociology of knowledge, to which Fleck also approvingly refers. The tendency to focus on the role of the collective also seems to be strong in contemporary sociology of science. As an illustration one can mention Karin Knorr Cetina's well-known concept of 'epistemic culture' (Knorr Cetina, 1999).

The idea that there can be a sociological study of thinking has been hinted at in contemporary sociology, but not very much more. The expression 'sociology of thinking' can, for example, be found in Randall Collins' important study of philosophy (Collins, 1998: 46–53). Thinking is understood as internalized conversation along the lines of Mead, something that means that it is inherently social in nature.⁶ Collins also analyzes the way that philosophers think with the help of networks.

A recent work by Michèle Lamont, entitled *How Professors Think* (2009), also falls within the general area of a sociology of thinking. Its main subject is what type of research is considered excellent and selected for funding in the social sciences. The type of thinking that is analyzed is that of evaluation; and the author introduces the concept of 'evaluative culture.' An interesting study of how academics manage their time has also been produced, with the title 'No Time to Think' (Menzie and Newson, 2007).

While some interesting ideas about thinking have been developed in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge and in contemporary sociology, a broad discussion of the sociology of thinking as a distinct subject area of its own is still missing. It would also seem natural that such a discussion would address several related strands of work. One such strand, for example, comprises the studies that have been produced in economics, on topics such as the search for knowledge, incomplete information, and asymmetric information (for example, Akerlof, 1970; Stigler, 1961; Stiglitz, 2001). It is also clear that a modern sociology of thinking would have to follow closely what is happening in the many branches of modern cognitive science, such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience. This literature contains pioneering research on various mechanisms that are part of the human mind, such as memory and the learning of language (for example, Holyoak and

Morrison, 2005). What is perhaps less known is that this literature has also developed its own 'sociology.' As examples of this one can mention attempts to see how the use of different faculties of mind varies across cultures (for example, Holyoak and Morrison, 2005: 529–683).

In this paper, however, I will primarily focus on another non-sociological branch of study that to my mind has something fundamental to contribute to the sociology of thinking. This is philosophy. To illustrate the usefulness of philosophy in this context, I will return once more to Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. This time I will try to show that what they say on thinking can be turned in a sociological direction, and, in this way, contribute in an important way to the sociology of thinking.

The main advantage of drawing on philosophy in this way, I argue, is that one gets in a better position to let sociology set its own independent agenda. I have earlier referred to Heidegger's argument that just as philosophy is interested in man as a human being and not as an organism, as defined by science, so the philosopher is interested in thinking as a human activity, and not as defined by psychology.

Today, in my view, there is a temptation to start the sociological analysis of thinking by drawing on the important insights that have been produced in cognitive science. This is done, for example, in the popular study *How Doctors Think* (2007) by Jerome Groopman, which takes a close look at the way that doctors make diagnoses. The main argument is that doctors, in doing so, typically make a number of errors in their diagnoses of the type that have been studied in cognitive psychology. If a doctor, for example, has come across a very special illness several times, he or she may think it is more common than it actually is. What you see first tends to stick in the mind, and so on.

By looking at people as human beings and the way they think as one's point of departure, in contrast, one gets to raise a very different set of questions. We already know some of these from the accounts of Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. These include the relationship of thinking to democracy, politics, and authority (Kant); to existence and religious faith (Kierkegaard); and to ontological questions and the issue of learning how to think (Heidegger). Presumably the actor who is concerned with these issues will also make the errors that have been mapped out by, among others, Jerome Groopman in *How Doctors Think*. But these errors are now subordinate to other issues.

Once it is realized that sociology needs to develop its very own agenda for the sociology of thinking, one is in a position to get some inspiration from the works of people such as Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. But what they have to say should also be complemented with the type of analyses that have been developed in sociology, especially in such fields as the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of science. Studies of how certain professional groups think – such as lawyers, therapists, and priests – belong here. So do studies of how different types of scientists think, from economists to nuclear physicists.

Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger all agree that thinking represents its own special activity or, to phrase it differently, that one should focus the analysis directly on thinking. This is an approach that sociology may want to follow. It would also appear that sociology should try to study *thinking*, which is a process, rather than *thought*, which is a product. Heidegger's argument that thinking should be independent of knowing as well as of action raises further interesting questions for sociologists.

Sociology argues strongly that what should be studied are collectivities or collective forces/structures. The individual is more or less avoided in modern as well as classical sociology. Among our three philosophers, however, the situation is the opposite. To Kant, it is essential that every individual thinks for him- or herself, and the reason for this has to do with his political and democratic view of people. Kierkegaard makes a similar argument, giving religious and existential reasons. And so does Heidegger, but in his case it is Being that matters.

There exist important political, religious, and ontological arguments, in brief, for focusing on the single individual – and this can perhaps be seen as a challenge to mainstream sociology. Theodor Adorno, after having studied Kierkegaard, spoke about the need to create a ‘sociology of inwardness’ (Adorno, 1989 [1933]: 47–51). And Marcel Mauss has shown that the individual is closely linked to the social; ‘persona’ means ‘mask’ (Mauss, 1985 [1938]). There currently also exists an attempt in French sociology to develop a ‘sociology of the individual.’ The key idea is to focus not only on the way that sociology influences the individual, or the individual influences society, but on ‘the work of the individual on the individual’ (Martuccelli and De Singly 2009: 51; see also, for example, Hirschhorn, 2007). Maybe the sociology of thinking can draw on some of these ideas and add some of its own.

A related topic in our three philosophers is a concern with forces that prevent the individual from thinking on his or her own. Kant mentions how people happily turn over the task of thinking to a book, to a doctor, or to some religious person. Or they simply pay some person so that they will not have to think for themselves. Kant also mentions the relevance of laziness and cowardice, plus the fact that ‘the guardians’ like to do the thinking for others. Kierkegaard, as we earlier showed, explains the lack of thinking by referring to the impact of such forces as ‘habit and routine and lack of passion and affection and chatter with neighbors’ (Kierkegaard, 1992 [1846]: 4). And Heidegger blames technological society with its deification of science.

Kant’s analysis illustrates once more the need to redefine the role of the individual and the collective in the sociological analysis. Guardians represent a collective force, but he also suggests that the individual has to act in some special way in order not to think. The individual, he says, often fails to show courage and resoluteness. To Kant’s examples of what we do to in order *not* to think, one may add one more. There exist certain things that we avoid thinking about. It is not so much, in other words, that we assign the thinking to someone else; we instead repress the impulse in ourselves to think. The topics are plentiful: from our own death and painful experiences in general, to genocide or fire bombings of the type that Dresden and Tokyo experienced in World War II.

Heidegger argues that language and memory are organically linked to the process of thinking. The sociologist of thinking needs to explore these connections. He or she may similarly want to find out more about a topic that Kierkegaard was passionate about: the clash – but also affinity – between faith and thinking.

In discussing what type of methodology is needed to study thinking, one may want to start from Weber rather than Durkheim. The reason for this is that Weber was very concerned with the issue of how the sociologist can get into the head of the people he or she studies – a concern that is crucial to anyone who wants to study thinking (see Reich, 2003). While this problem is impossible to solve in principle, Weber famously suggests a few

ways in which it can be approached. One may enter into someone else's mind, according to *Economy and Society*, through rational understanding, emotional empathy, and artistic intuition (Weber, 1978 [1922]: 5). Other methods exist as well, and the modern sociologist would, for example, add the interview, various unobtrusive measures, and perhaps also the autobiographical method, which was once popular in sociology. New methods may finally be needed if the project of a sociology of thinking is to get off the ground.⁷

Concluding remarks: Sociology and how to think

To think deeply has lost all the dignity of its form: the ceremony and solemn gestures of thinking have become ridiculous, and an old-style wise man would be considered intolerable. We think too fast, even while walking or on the way, or while engaged in other things, no matter how serious the subject. We require little preparation, not even much silence: it is as if we carried in our heads an unstoppable machine that keeps working even under the most unfavorable circumstances.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*⁸

By tradition sociology is concerned not only with analysis but also with practical application. This usually means an advocacy of some type of social policy; and one may want to proceed in a similar manner also with the sociology of thinking. Learning how to think (Heidegger) should, for example, be part of the educational system, at all levels. Thinking for oneself on political issues (Kant) should be part of the democratic process. And a membership in some voluntary organization cannot replace the individual's need to struggle directly and on his/her own with some ethical issue (Kierkegaard).

But it is also important to develop a practical approach to the way that individuals engage in thinking on an everyday level. One can, for example, develop a personal technique for how to think, perhaps drawing on the many types of meditation that have been developed in Asian cultures. These latter often involve exercises in solitude, silence, and mental concentration. It is easier to think in certain places, just as it is easier to think in certain postures. There exists an architecture of thinking as well as a body technique.

My own way for how to think is to spend one hour early in the day sitting still and focusing on some topic that needs to be thought through. I do not write, and I do not try to empty my mind so much as to focus it. It is an exercise in thinking, not in meditation. I usually find that my thinking proceeds step by step, and it comes natural to memorize each step.

For a long time I was puzzled by Kierkegaard's insistence that thinking has an existential dimension. I first began to understand what he meant by this when I started to set aside some time for thinking also at the end of the day. It was impossible to engage in thinking when the day was over, I found, without directly connecting broader issues to personal ones. The link between thinking and subjectivity was in this way established in a very natural fashion. A day that has passed in your life – what does this mean?

In discussing the practical applications of sociology, it is often noted that values assume a larger role than they do in an abstract analysis, and also that they need to be dealt with in an explicit fashion. This applies to the sociology of thinking as well, on a collective as well as an individual level. Two people who have discussed the link between

individual thinking and ethics in a suggestive fashion are Hannah Arendt and David Foster Wallace.

Arendt, in following the trial against Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, came to feel that what was at the bottom of Eichmann's inhumanity was a lack of empathy when it came to thinking. Eichmann was incapable of relating not only to what other people felt but also to what they thought. Arendt writes:

Whether writing his memoirs in Argentina or in Jerusalem, whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he [Eichmann] said was always the same, expressed in the same words. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.

(Arendt, 1965:49)

David Foster Wallace discussed a similar connection between ethics, on the one hand, and thinking as an empathetic activity, on the other, in a celebrated commencement address that he gave at Kenyon College in 2005. Each person, he said on this occasion, has a tendency to believe that 'I am the absolute center of the universe' (Wallace, 2005:2). This feeling is something that we all have, and it may well be 'hard-wired into us':

Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

(Wallace, 2005: 2)

The way to counter this 'hard-wired' focus on ourselves, Wallace says, is to learn how to think, and 'learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think' (Wallace, 2005: 2).

What characterizes *empathetic thinking*, in Arendt's version as well as in that of Wallace, is that it is not focused on the individual's capacity to think more or less well. It starts instead from the realization that we all need to think, for ourselves as well as from the perspective of others. Their message is that we are thinking beings and that we are spending our lives together.

Notes

For helpful comments I thank Lambros Roumbanis and Justin Dyer.

1. While I will generally be using H.B. Nisbet's translation of Kant's article, I have translated '*Unmündigkeit*' as 'tutelage' rather than as 'immaturity.'
2. Many thinkers have expressed the affinity between thinking and love in the form of Eros, including Aristotle and Tocqueville. In one of his writings, Kierkegaard says of his fiancée, Regine Olsen, that she was 'light as a bird and bold as a thought' (cited in Eberling, 1910:1495).
3. In the section on 'Diversion' in *Pensées*, Pascal notes that 'the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room' (Pascal, 1995 [1670]: 37).

4. Max Weber's concept of social action does not leave much of an opening for the study of thinking, despite its focus on meaning. This is because of its strong emphasis on action and behavior by the actor (Weber, 1978 [1922]: 4ff.). G.H. Mead provides a definition of thinking in one of his works, but does not seem to have been interested in this topic beyond this. Mead's key idea is that thinking has to do with the inner dialogue in each person, between the self and the generalized other. Thinking, to cite Mead's definition, is

... a process of conversation with one's self when the individual takes the attitude of the other, especially when he takes the common attitude of the whole group, when the symbol that he uses is a common symbol, so that it has a meaning to the entire group, to everyone who is in it and anyone who might be in it. It is a process of communication with participation in the experience of other people.

(Mead, 1964: 38)

Is Mead correct in his view that the process of thinking is primarily to be understood as a conversation? One way that an answer may be approached would be to study what areas of the brain are activated when a person engages in conversation with some other person, and then compare this to what happens when a person thinks.

5. It can be mentioned that Mannheim uses the expression 'sociology of thinking' in some unpublished writings from the 1920s that did not become known until more than half a century later (for example, Mannheim, 1982: 182–183). His stance in these writings, however, does not differ from the earlier characterization of Mannheim's view of thinking (that is, as a diffuse category that falls under the broader and more important notion of 'knowledge').
6. For Mead on thinking, see note 4.
7. The mind reader fascinates because he or she gives the illusion of being able to look straight into somebody else's mind. There is also the notion of the God who knows every thought of the believer, and the classical novelist who writes as if he or she understands everything that happens in the story that is being told. A modern fantasy along these lines is the idea that people one day will be able to invent a machine that can 'think.'
8. Nietzsche (1974 [1882]: 81). While Kaufman translates *Nachdenken* twice as 'reflecting' in the first sentence of this quote, I have used 'think deeply' and 'thinking.'

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