

From Toxic Paranoia to Charity's Metanoia

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Consistent with Sidorkin's line of scholarship, his essay is interesting, insightful and daring. Sidorkin makes several compelling moves. First, he diagnoses how the paranoid style (a conspiratorial turn of the mind) is more prevalent than ever. He then illuminates that far from anti-critical, paranoid thinking is actually steeped in critical thinking. Given that, more enlightenment, more education, will not address this threat. The real problem, Sidorkin contends, is "much deeper; it concerns the human mind and its experiences with transcendence." We are persistent meaning-seeking beings. Yet with the rise of a secular age our quest for meaning flattened out. The transcendent meaning afforded by religious traditions is no longer available on a public scale.

Nature, however, abhors a vacuum. Our predisposition "to look for hidden order persists . . ." but we "have forgotten how to produce good conspiracy theories, while remaining as open to bad conspiracy theories as ever." As a consequence, we have replaced "great" transcendence theories with "intermediate" or "little" transcendence theories (conspiracies of all stripes). Our inability to institutionalize "great transcendence," Sidorkin contends, "is the major contributor to the rise of the paranoid mind, which presents a threat to democratic institutions." This conclusion, in turn, grounds Sidorkin's ambitious proposal for education: public schools should institutionalize great transcendence in a quasi-religious fashion.

I agree with the larger problem Sidorkin diagnoses (the rise of paranoid thinking and the threat it poses) but I see three major areas of concern with his overall argument. First, Sidorkin mischaracterizes crit-

ical thinking by underestimating its potential as a force against paranoid thinking. Second, Sidorkin's ultimate proposal, in which public educational institutions institutionalize transcendence, raises several concerns, including to what extent should public schools attempt to embrace and promote strong metaphysical claims. Finally, Sidorkin mistakenly equates paranoia with spiritual transcendence, describing both as simply different conspiracy theories. While paranoia breeds egotistical insularity and *ressentiment* that contracts the world one inhabits, transcendent faith, at its best, cultivates a selflessness and a humility that expands the world one sees.

CRITICAL THINKING

"The paranoid mind," Sidorkin contends, "is exactly what we want an educated person with critical thinking skills to be . . . ; it analyzes claims, employs critical thinking, seeks evidence, evaluates it according to its own standards, and makes its own conclusions based on that evidence." While the paranoid mind does do this, it does so within a narrow frame. It is caught within what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as the "danger of a single story."¹

Given this, paranoid thinking is but a mere semblance of critical thinking. The paranoid person's mind moves, as G.K. Chesterton notes, "in a perfect but narrow circle . . . A small circle is quite as infinite as a large circle. [The paranoid explanation is] ". . . as complete as the sane one, but it is not so large."² Such a person is in the "clean and well-lit prison of one idea . . . sharpened to one painful point . . . without [the] healthy hesitation and healthy complexity" that characterize a sane person.³ In the paranoid mind, there is a striking combination of "logical completeness and . . . spiritual contraction."⁴ Such a person is not one "who has lost reason," Chesterton contends, but rather one "who has lost everything except . . . reason . . ." unhampered "by a sense of humor or charity" or

by the uncertainties that plague all experience.⁵

Genuine critical thinking, as opposed to paranoid thinking, involves an ability to see through multiple lenses, to appreciate multiple stories. Critical thinking, I contend, is more robust than Sidorkin suggests. Nevertheless, I agree that it is not robust enough. Well-educated people, as Sidorkin himself confesses, are prone to paranoid thinking, especially so when we are tired, stressed, anxious, and hungry.

GREAT TRANSCENDENCE ACADEMY

Turning to Sidorkin's ultimate proposal (the great transcendence academy), I find this vision, which is admittedly just a sketch, somewhat frightening. Education, taking upon itself the charge of great transcendence, with quasi-religious rites and ceremonies, is particularly worrisome given that education (particularly in a U.S. context) is largely regulated by the state. Images of a global-state religious complex come to mind. Perhaps my own paranoia is kicking in.

Imagining Sidorkin's great transcendence academy, with Sidorkin as the Dean, I wonder how this would work for students with Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, atheistic, or other convictions about transcendence? Will the great transcendence proclaimed at the transcendence academy complement or be at odds with other notions of transcendence? Recall that the Catholic school movement was largely fueled by concerns that "neutral" public schools were, in fact, propagating Protestant notions of transcendence. Horace Mann, attempting to ameliorate this fear, insisted that the public school is "debarred by law from inculcating the peculiar and distinctive doctrines of any one religious denomination ..."⁶ Instead, Mann notes, the public school only welcomes "the religion of the Bible; [and the Bible, Mann asserts, is allowed] to do what it is allowed to

do in no other system,—to speak for itself ...”⁷⁷ This is precisely what Catholics feared—that a Protestant Lutheran reading of the Bible, *sola scriptura*, would speak for itself and would undermine Catholic notions of transcendence.

Rather than elevating a particular ideal of great transcendence, perhaps public education, partially aiming to fill our metaphysical void, can affirm how religious traditions are not arcane relics from a juvenile and ignorant past but perennial attempts to address the human desire for ultimate meaning and purpose. This is a much more modest aim than Sidorkin’s for public education, but I do not see how we can do much more, given our pluralistic context. Nevertheless, Sidorkin’s serious affirmation of the longing for transcendence, as an essential part of the human condition, I find to be both important and valuable. Whether intended or not, public schooling school does impart ideas about transcendence. I concur with Sidorkin’s suggestion to make this more explicit.

PARANOIA VS. TRANSCENDENT FAITH

Paranoia, Sidorkin explains, is a form of metaphysical thinking. “The difference between a benevolent God and an evil conspiracy,” Sidorkin suggests, “is not as large as one may suspect; both are metaphysical entities, both transcend regular human perception and experience.” Following Sidorkin’s logic Ted Kaczynski (aka the Unabomber) and Martin Luther King Jr. are both paranoid conspiracy theorists who simply adhere to different theories. Kaczynski believes the world has been corrupted by tech-savvy elites, who must literally be blown off the face of the earth; MLK Jr., on the other hand, sees a corrupt world, yet also sees a universe with a moral arc that bends towards justice, that calls him to love his enemies and practice non-violence.

To describe MLK Jr. and the Unabomber as both paranoiacs, but with different theories, strikes me as a categorical mistake. Kaczynski, a classic example of paranoia, lives within the prison of one idea; King, by contrast, lives within the spaciousness of a narrative of benevolent faith that seeks to understand all stories through the prism of non-violent love. Paranoia contracts Kaczynski's vision and inflicts the danger of one story; King's transcendent faith, by contrast, expands his vision through striving to understand and affirm the stories of others. King's faith calls him to embody an extraordinary, superhuman, kind of love that the apostle Paul speaks about, which is patient, kind, "does not envy ... does not put on airs ... is not proud ... does not dishonor others ... is not self-seeking ... is not easily angered ... keeps no record of wrongs ... [and] does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." This love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."⁸

The trajectory of a paranoid personality, by contrast, moves in the opposite direction. The International Classification of Diseases' (ICD) definition of paranoia is worth quoting. The paranoid personality is:

characterized by excessive sensitivity to setbacks, unforgiveness of insults; suspiciousness and a tendency to distort experience by misconstruing the neutral or friendly actions of others as hostile or contemptuous; recurrent suspicions, without justification ... and a combative and tenacious sense of personal rights. There may be excessive self-importance, and there is often excessive self-reference.⁹

This portrait (especially with respect to excessive self-importance and excessive self-reference) sounds a lot like some of the personalities we encounter in the academy, which you can read about in my upcoming book. Ted Kaczynski, you may recall, was a math professor at the Uni-

versity of California, Berkeley, who resigned his post after just two years.

Kaczynski's paranoia, while extreme, I would venture to say is far more recognizable to us than King's transcendent compassion. Paranoia is an all-too-familiar, all too-tempting way of thinking that feeds our natural tendency towards egoism and narcissism. It is, as David Foster Wallace illuminates, "the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities."¹⁰ I suspect many of us have had the experience of walking into a room full of people and feeling as though all eyes are upon us. In truth, this is most often not the case, and this way of thinking begs Chesterton's question, "Are there no other stories in the world except yours; and are all [people] busy with your business?"¹¹

Wallace notes that we "rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default-setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth."¹² Genuine liberal education, genuine critical thinking, takes up the difficult and ceaseless task of "choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default-setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self."¹³

While I agree with Sidorkin that great transcendence is the solution for paranoia's egocentrism, the great transcendence required is not another version a paranoia, but a different way of being altogether that draws to us into a different kind of freedom, which involves, as Wallace illuminates further, "attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom."¹⁴ The alternative to this is paranoia, "unconsciousness, the default-setting, the "rat race,"— the constant gnawing sense of having

had and lost some infinite thing ... ”¹⁵

1 See Chimamanda Adichie's *Ted Talk* (July, 2009). Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

2 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, UK: Bradford and Dickens, 1908), 33.

3 Ibid. 33

4 Ibid., 38.

5 Ibid., 32.

6 Horace Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report of the Massachusetts State School Board" (1848), in *The American Nation: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), 248.

7 Ibid.

8 From Paul's first letter to the Corinthians; *The Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

9 See the *The International Classification of Diseases*, available at: <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2016/en#/F60.0>

10 David Foster Wallace, "This is Water" (commencement address, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, May 21, 2005). Available at: <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

11 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 34.

12 Wallace.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.