

# Improvisation, Dialectics, and One-dimensional Thinking

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**Abstract:** Different forms of thinking lay out their own principles and rules to guide the thinkers, but if there is an overreliance on those rules and principles, thinking becomes one-dimensional. One-dimensional thinking restricts the thinker to its own standards by trying to impose predetermined principles on the thinking itself. However, dialectics take its object within its interrelations, interdependence, and its relation to the whole. The movement of improvisation in thought, which shows us the antithesis of the shortcomings of one-dimensional thinking, will enliven creativity, emotions, and spontaneous thought processes. It can also establish a relationship between critical and creative thinking.

**Key Words:** One Dimensional Thinking • Creative Thinking • Improvisation • Dialectics • Theodor W. Adorno

## 1. Introduction

The act of questioning is generally understood as asking questions about what we think. This can be a case, a subject, or an event. But we can also ask questions about the way we question, the way we think. The importance of questioning how we think can be understood if we consider how influential it is within human life. The way we think is the method that we use everyday to make decisions, to do something, and believe in something. Think about the importance of the method in scientific research, and how a change in the method can impact results. Within this perspective, questioning the way we think becomes a must. The task of being critical of the styles of our thinking becomes tricky because the way we think is conditioned by cultural, philosophical, educational, historical, and psychological conditions. Since this is a short and philosophical work, I will focus on philosophical conditions.

How we think may help us to generate creative ideas, but at the same time, it may exclude other ways of thinking, thus rendering one limited. Limits are necessary for thinking. Limit means defining a closure in

our perspective or thinking which gives us a framework in which we can perceive or make a judgment. But in some cases, those limits can be dominating, that is, a way of thinking may dominate and exclude other ways of thinking, so that it necessarily influences outcomes, ideas, and possibilities. In that sense, we must ask how thinking can go beyond itself. How can it realize its limits and transform itself? When I say limit in a reducing way, I refer to people who adopt a certain way of thinking and constrain themselves in it so that it makes their thinking one-dimensional. It is like sticking to one way of thinking which extends its influence over every decision or judgment one makes. One may be stuck in a scientific or artistic way of thinking, and this will cause one to interpret everything to the conclusion that best fits the method of one's thinking.

Below, I explain what one-dimensional thinking is and discuss its consequences. Then, I discuss how dialectics and the concept of improvisation may help us to go beyond one-dimensionality. The significance of this paper stems from the influence of our thinking methods on academic disciplines, politics, and overall, our lives. Every decision we make goes through a process of thinking determined by how we think. It is fundamental for thinking to critique itself in order not to fall into the trap of one-dimensionality.

I first discuss the limits of one-dimensional thinking. After that, I will argue that dialectical thinking with reflective features paves the way for a more emancipated way of thinking. Lastly, I will discuss how the phenomena of improvisation can contribute to our capacity to think critically and the possible connections between creativity and criticality.

## **2. One-dimensional Thinking**

There are standards, rules, and principles for every different way of thinking. These standards are important and beneficial to think critically. But in the case of overreliance on them, we may see that standards constrain thinking. In other words, having standards is not the problem. The problem is to prioritize standards over the thought itself. How you do it becomes more important than what you are doing. Thus, the authority of rules overrules the autonomy of the thinker. In that way of thinking—let's call it *one-dimensional thinking*—every criticism or creative thought that can overreach those standards is condemned as uncritical. The prescriptive character is followed by procedural thinking. It is assumed that the thinking process gradually develops step-by-step in a

linear fashion. This is followed by the idea of a complete, closed system of thinking. We can see projections of this kind of thinking in philosophy, politics, and business models of capitalism. In philosophy, schools or ideas that adopt fundamentalist epistemologies which try to ground every possibility of knowledge on one, absolute, and solid ground advocate this way of thinking. Think of the divide between analytic and continental philosophy. If a philosopher limits herself to one tradition and reads the other tradition from its supposedly solid ground, she falls into the trap of one-dimensionality. We may even see a pseudo-recognition of other ways of thinking by pointing out some other ways of features, but if there is no self-reflection of a thinker towards her adopted way of thinking, she can still be counted as one-dimensional.<sup>1</sup> In politics, we can observe that a fascist political ideology rests on this way of thinking, too. Lastly, any managerial institution, whether public or private, utilizes and promotes a complete, closed, hierarchical, and linear way of thinking whose sole duty is to bring the most plausible result.

The one dimension that is adopted is generally seen as the perfect one. The perfectness of the adopted dimension lets thinkers have only that perspective and evaluate cases, events or arguments only from that perspective. We can see examples of this in our everyday life. Extremists generally adopt a one-dimensional way of thinking. Think of political extremists who support one party blindly. This one-dimensional thinker is incapable of self-criticism, and hence criticizes other ways from the absolute pre-supposed ground. One-dimensional thinking is not only about form, because we know that form influences the content of our thinking.<sup>122</sup>

Another example could be a moral extremist. By deducing universal moral principles from one absolute ground, that person advocates the universality of that morality. And that person wishes to impose that morality on everyone by excluding other moral systems. Of course, these cases are extremes and differ in content, but the form of thinking behind them is common. One of the other examples is logical positivists. What makes them one-dimensional is the over-reliance on rules of formal logic when philosophizing. They claim that a meta-language of philosophy must be established through mathematics. This meta-language must be the only way of philosophizing because they claim that only then can we objectively make argu-

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<sup>122</sup> Form refers to how we think, and content refers to what we think.

ments and assess their truth values accordingly. When it comes to critical thinking, we may see the same situation of one-dimensionality, too.

### 3. Dialectics and Adorno

First, Adorno warns us that dialectics is neither a method nor a recipe for how to think. What must be done then? How are we going to think regarding dialectics? In the *Introduction to Dialectics*, Adorno repeatedly points out the close relation that must be preserved between experience and thought, to remind us of the lively process of experience. According to Adorno, thought must go hand-in-hand with experience itself to understand its complexities. Adorno suggests that we must not impose abstract rules on experience as in the one-dimensional way of thinking, but rather method must be inferred from the particular experience itself.

For example, if we are going through an ecological crisis, we must focus on this particular case. We must investigate the changing dynamics of the experience that could lead us to think of different definitions of nature that would help us deal with the issue. In other words, if the existing definition of nature does not fit with the current case at hand, we must reconsider our definition of nature. According to Adorno, definitions must not exclude other meanings but must comprehend them. The definition must not exclude anything about the case but instead magnetically bind other meanings into one definition. It must open a field of force in which the movement of experience and thought are not arrested, and definition is recognized as a process. Static definitions necessarily try to freeze the concept so that it can be used according to the context of utilization. Adorno gives Walter Benjamin's definition of fate as an example of a dynamic definition. Benjamin says that '*fate is the nexus of guilt among the living.*'<sup>123</sup> The definition covers general information about fate such that it is construed as random moments, that there are hazardous events in it, and that there are interconnections between those events. But it does not close the concept to those aspects only. On the contrary, it magnetically binds together those meanings and creates a force field in which we can add or subtract something from it. It does not exclude but comprehend. Thus, the concept is not frozen and

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, 1978 as cited in Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, Translated by Nicholas Walker (Malden: Polity Press, 2017), Lecture 19.

can participate in the dynamic reality as a process.

Of course, while focusing on particular cases, we must not forget their relation to the whole. The reciprocal and dialectic relation between whole and particular is important since it prevents concepts from petrifying. And, it has the potential to diffuse what is petrified. In other words, one of the tasks of dialectics is to diffuse the concepts that are petrified and make them move again with the flux of experience.

Another fallacy that one-dimensional thinking causes is the problem of contradiction. In one dimensional thinking, it is a must to think in a dichotomic fashion. Suppose that there are A and -A. And we know that something cannot be both A and -A because it would be a contradiction. However, when you consider the processual characteristic of experience, we may encounter situations where both A and -A do exist. Think of a person who is born and raised to the age of 20. And let's say that she had an angry character at the age of 10 and now, at the age of 20, she is very calm. But from time to time, she gets angry and acts like she was 10. Now, we see that this person has a calm character, but also, she is angry too. So, she contains both characters of 10 and 20 even though those two characters are contradictory. In this case, angry and calm characteristics do not destroy each other, rather they coexist in one person. In our short example, we see that contradictory factors do exist in experience. So instead of categorizing the world in a dichotomic fashion, interconnectedness and reciprocity of experience must be counted and the way we think should not make the fallacy of reduction to solve the problem of contradiction. Every time we are faced with two opposites, two contradictory propositions, we must not immediately try to eliminate one and pick the other. This would reduce the case into the belief that oppositions are exclusive. What we must try to focus on is the relation between opposites that could show us that two opposing factors can co-exist. In Adorno's words:

One might say that the priority of contradiction which prevails in the dialectic is actually nothing but an attempt to break the primacy of logic, understood as the realm of pure non-contradiction.... to point out, that is, that the world is not simply mere thought, is not the mere operation of logical thinking as the world is presented to us in accordance with logical rules<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., Lecture 8 and 17.

#### 4. Improvisation

The phenomenon of improvisation is generally attributed to the artistic fields. It is believed that it has a random, spontaneous, and disorganized nature. Hence, only artistic geniuses can use it without any explanation. And it is believed that there is no role of reason within the process of improvisatory creation and that it is purely irrational. When we accept these assumptions about improvisation, it becomes close to mystic power. To cleanse the term from its misunderstandings, and show its true potential, I will try to investigate the term from the perspective of dialectics.

While trying to place improvisation within philosophical discourse, we must be careful how it exists in thought—how within our process of thinking we are already using it. The act of giving meaning to a symbol contains a very complex thought process. There are numerous factors such as the social and historical set of meanings and categories, psychologically adopted perspectives, past experiences, emotions that are developed through those experiences, the style, and ability of interpretation, degree of understanding and comprehension, etc. All these factors are interconnected and dialectically move in our minds when we try to give meaning to a symbol. If we set out to explain how all factors engage with each other, we would have to stop its movement and try to induce a rule or principle to explain the mind's functioning.

What I suggest here, however, is that there is an improvisatory movement going on in our minds. Within the process of giving meaning, all factors in our mind move according to *what?* According to the moment, the particularity of the case in which we find ourselves with every different case. So, the relations of these factors are re-determined every time we set out to give meaning. That is why human thinking should not be fixed in regard to prediction. The combination of all factors is improvisatory in the process of giving meaning.

One can inquire here into the difference between randomness and improvisation. This question must be answered to further understand the term at hand. It must be understood that the act of improvisation is not random, and requires a great deal of mastery. No one can improvise and end up with something beautiful without prior practice, experience, and knowledge. We know that behind great live performances lie years of practice. There is also an intention, not an aimless and purposeless act. Although it is prone to change, there is an intended way in which the artwork goes.

There are also significant roles of imagination and emotions which lead to creativity: triggered and incited emotions to motivate our imagination to engage in the process of creation. Imagination helps reason to establish connections that are not thought of before. Thus, novelty is created out of what we have, and what we encounter within that particular case. At this point, we must consider dialectics, because encountering something new with what we have requires a dialectical process to create novelty. By “what we have” I mean our current state, including past experiences, practices, knowledge, emotions, etc. What we encounter is the situation, case, symbol, artwork, or anything which requires us to create novelty either by interpretation or judgment. Through this encounter of the self and the foreign object, new creations arise on both sides.

First, the self has been disclosed to the object. and all its complexities are prone to transformation by the new experience of the object. The old self is negated—and from this negation, a new self is forged. But this new self is not completely disassociated from the old self, since the concept of negation refers to transformation with preservation. In other words, the old self and experience do form the new self. Second, the object must be interpreted. On that side, what is already recognized about the object is negated again from the encounter between the object and the self. And new interpretation or meaning is born out of the encounter. In that process of thinking, we can sense the improvisatory character. Improvisation in thinking is itself inherent to these processes of negation and creation.

Unfortunately, we cannot even mention improvisation when it comes to one-dimensional thinking. Because the process and development of thinking are ignored; instead, rules and principles are imposed to get the most accurate and efficient outcome. In that sense, further investigation on the nature of improvisation, and its connection with thinking, must be made to get rid of one-dimensional thinking and improve how we think.

Improvisation is an act of overstepping. It oversteps the conventional rules and principles, because it operates without any determined rules. It extracts it from both the subject and the object according to the singularity of the case. Engaging with objects without a fixed state of mind paves the way for the undetermined process of interpretation. This starts a dynamic process of thinking in which creation and re-creation of the case in hand are possible. Improvisational thinking may sound chaotic and as if it has no boundaries, but this is not so. It is not an uncon-

strained process, since we are all subject to social, historical, and psychological contexts. Hence, constraints and pressures coming from our context are generative for improvisation. We are not able to create something *ex nihilo*. It is necessary for the movement of thinking to have constraint and contradictions. We must be confronted with reality so that we can transform it.<sup>125</sup> The response to the confrontation is the beginning of the critical ideas.

In other words, improvisation is not boundless and contextless. It functions within the old framework to create something novel from it. We need the old framework to understand the novelty of our ideas, because it is novel according to the existing paradigm. It might not be novel within a different framework, because novelty is recognized as discontinuity of the old framework. Improvisation is a radical departure from the existing framework but not in a destructive fashion. On the contrary, it is generative. Its productivity comes from its relation to dialectics. This is about being both traditional and revolutionary, both productive and destructive. Dialectics let us go beyond these dichotomies by dissolving the one-dimensionality of picking one over the other. And improvisation is the form of doing this.

Lastly, to show how fundamental improvisation is, I will give an example that Nelson Goodman discusses in his remarkable book *Ways of Worldmaking*.<sup>126</sup> He mentions a set of experiments on the motion of human perceptions done by Paul A. Kolars. In the first instance, some dots are successively flashed, and the subjects who are seeing them say that the flash moves from one direction to another. So, successive flashing dots are perceived as moving from one point to another. In a more complex instance, there are 8 shapes rather than dots. Kolars broadens the experiment to see what results will come. Shapes are shown like this in the *Ways of Worldmaking* as the figure 1<sup>127</sup>:

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<sup>125</sup> It can be noted here that a critical act is what reflects and transforms reality according to Freire. See Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (Continuum International Publishing, 2000), p. 131.

<sup>126</sup> Goodman, Nelson, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Harvard University Press), 1978.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.



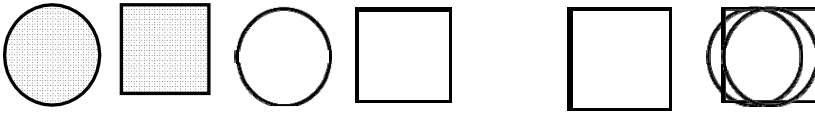


Figure 1

The test is simple: the group on the left flashes, and then the right group flashes. It is expected that circles and squares will transform into each other, and each circle will become a square while squares become circles. However, this was not the case. The right three shapes of the left group moved as a unit to become the left three shapes of the right group. And the leftmost circle of the left group moved around to the rightmost shape of the right group.

In another experiment with the same setup, the rightmost shape of the right group changed with square and as the successive flashes went on, the leftmost shape of the left group became square too. Goodman's comment on this instance is '*I suspect that the visual system, while having fun making a world to suit itself, takes incidental glee in frustrating our search for a theory*'.<sup>1287</sup> There are different attempts to find a good theory for the movement of perception but, according to Kolars and Goodman, no theory is fit to do that since, in every experiment, perception improvises its movement.<sup>1298</sup> And it lets no generalization get in.

We can see now that, in every way, human perception, understanding, and thinking benefit from improvisation that inherently strives for novelty. The process of dialectical thinking is creative, in that it cannot move without generating new connections, new meanings, and new perspectives. The improvisatory character of the human mind is enough to show us the interconnection between critical and creative thinking. To create, one must first negate, and upon that negation, one can create novelty. To be able to make a good criticism, one must be able to understand the situation or state one is in. And to understand, one needs to establish new connections between different pieces of information. This requires creativity. To put it simply, to understand, one needs creativity, and to create novelty, one needs criticality.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>129</sup> For full discussion see Ibid., Chapter V.

## 5. Conclusion

Form is as important as content, and vice versa. Because there is a dialectical relation between form and content, how we think and what we think affect each other. In that sense, if we are to improve our way of thinking, both aspects are equally important and must be investigated. In this paper, I have argued that every way of thinking carries the risk of being one-dimensional. Two key concepts, dialectics and improvisation, may help us to dissolve this one-dimensionality. Although further investigation is needed, this paper has tried to show fundamental problems of one-dimensional thinking and confront them with their anti-thesis through an inquiry into dialectics. Dialectics in that sense is neither a method nor a tool to solve problems. It is a way of thinking in which experience and dynamism of life are respected. It lets no dogmatism stay intact and, within the flow of time, recognizes that concepts and ideas change. It calls itself to self-criticism by reflection. If one takes the self as a dialectic entity, one must also perpetually call oneself to criticism. Self-reflection is so important that we could argue that it is the prerequisite of being critical. Being able to open one's ossified thoughts to the dialectical movement of thinking requires self-reflection. This can be best depicted with a circle in which thought always returns to itself and thus perpetually criticizes itself. On the other hand, a linear depiction of thinking misses the critical movement and always tries to go forward without questioning itself. In other words, it values quantity over quality in thought.

Improvisation is one of the phenomena that resist the mechanical understanding of one-dimensional thinking. Its restless and dynamic character stands against fixed rules and principles and paves the way for novelty. Its dynamism and circular movement always try to create new perspectives. That is why we witness it best in arts and sciences. These are the best places we can recognize an intentional discontinuity in trends and paradigms. Improvisation also indicates to us that critical thinking and creative thinking are interconnected. To create, one must negate. Confrontation with prevailing ideas generates the necessary motivation for the movement of thinking. That is what we call critique. By the dissolution of the old, novelties are born in the creative act. In other words, both creativity and criticality depend upon each other. My aim in this paper is to criticize one-dimensional thinking and dissolve it via dialectics and improvisation.