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**ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION AS A TOPIC OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

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*Abstract: My paper's approach on assertive communication concerns the description of this topic not only as an opportunity to improve our critical thinking, but as an interesting topic to the area of philosophy of education, too. Assertive reasoning seems to be a very useful instrument in early education, although its theoretical roots are to be found in philosophy courses of some Western universities. My approach deals with theoretical issues, but also with applications of assertive communication's principles in our lives. The possible improvements could aim at solving some moral dilemmas, some arguments due to the linguistic misunderstandings, some differences in opinions or perspectives of the people involved etc. The final purpose of this approach is to bring more reasonability and cooperation among those involved in communication at different levels and in various social contexts.*

**Keywords:** *assertive communication, assertive character, critical thinking, pedagogy, philosophy of education.*

### **The *imago* epoch**

Our epoch and our society seem to be characterized by an increased cultural focus on image, and by a decreased focus on concepts, on rational thinking, on logics. There are specialists who connect this phenomenon with the one of culturally educating the new generations more by media, and less by reading books, or by teaching them the basic elements of correct reasoning.

Thus, the Italian scholar Giovanni Sartori launched the notions of “video-child”, who gradually evolved, in the postmodern Western culture, into *homo videns* – the “video-addicted” individual, not being capable of thinking rational, not being a good citizen, not being interested in the democratic society and its common values. (Sartori, 2005, 128).

Also, the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva noticed about the new generations that they lack skills in expressing their feelings. That is because they lack a proper vocabulary, due to the lack of a proper verbal communication among them. And generally their language is too poor for the requested therapy dialogue, due to their focus on images, on internet activity, on virtual worlds and identities. (Kristeva, 14-17).

In the same manner, the Italian journalist Alessandro Baricco is warning us, in his book called *Barbarians*, that the civilized barbarians – the new generations self-educated by internet – succeeded in “making abstraction of their soul” (Baricco, 2009, 117-121.)

Finally, the anthropological testimony stresses the same problems; the French David Le Breton observed a new dimension of reality: the “universality of show”, in which man becomes mainly staring and in which the images become the world (by media, top technology, photography, video etc.) (Le Breton, 2002, 121).

So the average knowledge and the all-round education tend to be surprisingly poor and minor, even irrelevant. For example, as a national American survey reported by the Cox News Service emphasized, 10 percent of the American teenagers in Philadelphia knew that the

president Abraham Lincoln came from Springfield, but 75 percent of them knew that the cartoon character Bart Simpson “lives” in Springfield. (Moore & Parker, 2000, 5).

The bad consequences are easy to be foreseen; the young will not be able to successfully interact with others, but also will not be able to know themselves. So the development of their personality will be seriously affected, and the future society will lack social and civic cohesion.

As I believe, given this situation of all-round education at a global level, there has to be found a solution, even a partial one, within the educational systems, and not outside them; because outside them the ground is definitely conquered by media and new media. It is what Gianni Vattimo called “the mass-media society”: a society inside which the information market is expanding and tending to incorporate all as communication subject. (Vattimo, 1995, 5-10). As a cultural effect, the world and history are not unitary conceived anymore, according to Western modern points of view, but they become subject to infinite multiplication of opinions and points of view. Of course, all these in a context of many subcultures, and of the lack of criteria in selecting, assuming or rejecting them by ordinary people.

In my opinion, if we were to take for granted the lack of interest in reading among the new generations of children, than the school should try saving at least their ability to think correctly. That’s because, even in the postmodern era, the reasoning and logics are not abolished, they remain important instruments for making this world bearable and our interactions rationalized and civilized. These are modern trophies, but perennial useful trophies of human reason.

So the main instrument which I think it should be used for improving children’s skills of reasoning is critical thinking. My plea is for introducing critical thinking courses in schools, not only in some humanistic faculties of a few universities.

This is the contribution which the faculties of Philosophy can offer to pedagogy and to philosophy of education – critical thinking courses.

### **What is critical thinking?**

According to some experts, it is “the careful, deliberate determination of whether we should accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim – and of the degree of confidence with which we accept or reject it. (...) Having both the desire and the ability to bring the needed information to bear on our decisions is part of the critical-thinking process. Critical thinking involves a lot of skills, including the abilities to listen and read carefully, to evaluate arguments, to look for and find hidden assumptions, and to trace the consequences of a claim.” (Moore & Parker, 2000, 4.)

The importance of this ability to think critically is vital, as the cited authors believe, because the ways we conduct our lives depend on what claims we consider to be true. The more carefully we evaluate any claim and the more fully we select issues that are relevant to it, the more critical is our thinking. (*Ibidem*).

So if the most frequent ideal in life for the latest generations is individuation – the higher stage of practically developing one’s skills, talents, and good initiatives – then the young should know their own personalities and they should effectively communicate with others.

Here appear the benefits of critical thinking which, in my opinion, could transform passive members of various communities into proactive citizens, could refresh the civil society, could eliminate a lot of misunderstandings due to the vocabulary differences, and also could solve moral problems by means of logic and argumentative approach. As the Romanian philosopher Andrei Marga writes, the critical thinking exercises teach us how to formulate rigorous coherent arguments as patterns in argumentation, and how to avoid four kinds of incorrect thinking:

- “opportunistic thinking”, the one based on what others think;
- “superficial thinking”, the one which doesn’t connect the facts;
- “wishful thinking”, the one replacing the real correlations with the desired ones;
- “mythical thinking”, the one turning data into myths. (Marga, 2010, 67).

### **Assertive communication**

Assertive reasoning and communication are possible only as a part of critical thinking. That is because critical thinking involves a certain moral attitude. This attitude is positive and most effective in dialogue, as it implies: cooperation; crediting the other’s goodwill; respecting the opponent’s opinions; looking for good reasons for believing anything; searching common grounds in argumentations and decisions; avoiding emotional and irrational reactions or interactions; clarifying the meaning of each term or concept used in dialogue, in order to avoid misunderstandings; detecting and clarifying the hidden assumptions which often disturb communication and correct understanding.

Steven J. Stein and Howard E. Book present three components of an assertive communicator which make us see that learning assertive reasoning means developing one’s personality and being always aware of the proximity of the other who can be different from oneself:

- 1 - the capacity of expressing one’s feelings, without being aggressive or abusive;
- 2 - the capacity of openly expressing one’s opinions and thoughts, even if they were opposed to the other’s opinions and thoughts;
- 3 - the capacity of standing for one’s rights, and not allowing others to interfere. (Stein & Book, 2003, p. 66-67)

The advantages of assertive character could be, as the two cited authors consider: the obvious liberation from passive or reluctant behaviours; the openness to making more friends; the chance to be honest and to improve any relationship; the diminishing of aggressivity; the developing of diplomatic skills; the ability to make the others feel good in your presence.

To be more practical, I should mention that assertive communication implies techniques of becoming aware and improving one’s language and body language, one’s visual contact, one’s voice tone and so on. (Stein & Book, 2003, 77-78). Such techniques are easy to learn and could be accessibly taught to children in schools, but also they can become part of continuous education projects.

As I believe, assertive communication is to be seen as a core value in a new approach in philosophy of education. Given the frequent cases of populations migration, the increased rhythm of human circulation and interaction in our societies, the value of assertive communication could be the solution for many cultural differences and conflicts. Anyway, if

some common ground education is to be articulated in the future, on our continent or globally, the critical thinking and assertive communication should be part of the curricula.

Let's not forget the initial problem stressed by so many specialists: the bad influence of the *imago* epoch on young people's minds. Given this trends, their chance to self-education or to individuation as a philosophical personal ideal will be diminished in the future. Even the one generally manifested – the ideal of happiness – is in danger, as the young people will become strangers to each other and to themselves, due to the lack of reflexivity. In time, reactions such as depression or aggressiveness are to be expected, too, in a world more and more falsified by images.

Somehow cynically, some specialists in theories of image and imaginary recognize that the purpose of communication based on images is to generate in our minds stronger and stronger sensations, emotions and memorable informations, and not to stimulate reasoning or reflexivity, not to enrich our vocabulary. (Joannès, 15).

Others notice that nowadays we witness “imagery inflation”, due to the various and very numerous meanings of images, which make us confused in decrypting them and comparing them with the meanings of words and texts. (Durand, 1997, 125).

In an expressive manner, Tzvetan Todorov named this captivity in iconosphere “the tragedy of human condition”. (Todorov, 192).

However, there are optimistic voices, too. Jean Baudrillard's opinion is that, although the moral and philosophical influences of modern culture on young people are nowadays fading, yet there is hope for a “happy end”, depending on the protagonists of the new digital era and image culture. (Baudrillard, 2008, 48-49).the educational systems should include critical thinking, and also teaching assertive communication courses to children in schools. This change could save the human ideal of reasonability in an epoch which generally ignore it.

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