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[Hans Geir Aasmundsen]

Hi, you are listening to REFIL, the podcast about religion, philosophy and view of life.

[Alessandro Falcetta]

A podcast series from the University of Stavanger.

[Geir]

My name is Hans Geir Aasmundsen. I am a religious scholar and I am most interested in religion and philosophy in societies in politics, culture, religion and science.

[Alessandro]

And my name is Alessandro Falcetta. I am a theologian and I am most interested in religion and philosophy at school, in everyday life, in religious life and in the local community.

[Alessandro]

Welcome to today's episode, when we dive into one of the school's most important and perhaps most misunderstood areas of competence, critical thinking. In a time when extreme ideas are becoming normalized, when emotions challenge scientific knowledge, how do we teach children to distinguish between opinion and fact?

Today, we explore what critical thinking really means in primary and lower secondary education, and why it's so much more than source criticism and fake news. Our guest is Aurélie Cintori, philosopher and teacher in philosophy and French at the Helmo, University College in Belgium. Welcome, Aurélie.

[Aurélie]

Thank you. Welcome, Alessandro.

[Alessandro]

Thanks. Now, we are going to talk about critical thinking with focus on school. Critical thinking is more important than ever, and now I have a kind of Donald Trump accent, Donald Trump's accent, a sort of, because we know that politicians and other actors challenge established truths and ways of thinking and so forth, and maybe can be an idea to, in some way, have some control and knowledge about important concepts in critical thinking within this field. One of these concepts is the normalization of extreme ideas.

You have written about this, you studied this topic and what the normalization of extreme ideas is about.

[Aurélie]

Yes, it's right. We can see that actually some political discourses are normalizing extreme views. By example, Donald Trump is promoting unthinkable extreme ideas, claiming by example that Haitian immigrants were eating pets, stuff like that.

[Alessandro]

Exactly, that's true. He said that. Yeah.

[Aurélie]

So we see that some people are really extreme and we can say that they can sort of open the Overton Window because they think it's acceptable for the public or the mainstream population.

[Alessandro]

Can I stop there? You talk about the Overton Window, what is this?

[Aurélie]

Yes, it's the range of subjects and policy acceptable to the public and it's also known as the window of discourse and the key of the concept is that the window changes over time. It can shift or expand and it exemplifies how the public opinion is evolving.

[Alessandro]

Okay, so you might say that what was normal and acceptable to say 50 years ago may not be acceptable any longer. And then the Overton Window has changed.

[Aurélie]

Exactly, yes.

[Alessandro]

For instance, I can think about some really racist statements which I have read in encyclopedias written 100 years ago. They are not possible any longer because the window has changed.

[Aurélie]

Yeah, the window, the opinions and the time.

[Alessandro]

So what's happening to this Overton Window today?

[Aurélie]

So today, the public debate is being distorted by this extreme view. By constantly promoting exaggerated ideas, finally we went up to accept some views that were initially unacceptable. These ideas finally become familiar and even popular.

Speeches are no longer based on accurate and precise facts. The precision doesn't matter anymore. And what matters is generating emotion. That's the new speech.

[Alessandro]

Okay, so before you had, for instance, you have to be precise in your statements. They had to be verifiable, accurate, but today people can accept that you just talk, even if you don't know anything about what you are talking about, as long as you are outrageous, people get maybe angry and so forth, and for instance accuracy is not important any longer. This is an example.

[Aurélie]

Exact, exact. So the most important thing is not to be sure or to be precise about what you talk, it's to generate an emotion. And that's a new way to talk or to inform.

[Alessandro]

Because you generate emotions, then you generate clicks on social media and attention.

[Aurélie]

Yeah, by example, and you get attention and you get more importance.

[Alessandro]

Then this can give us the opportunity to go to another concept which is quite important and this is post-truth. What is it?

[Aurélie]

Yes, the post-truth meaning that emotions are more important than the truth. The primary goal is to create emotional reactions regardless of how accurate the information is. In that situation, the objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals.

[Alessandro]

Post-truth, it means that emotions are more important than facts, and that is something which we experience every day, for instance, on social media, but you help us to have the concepts to understand, to give us a name for all these things which we experience, but we don't have the words to define them. So you help us to have words to define what we experience, like post-truth and the Overton Window. And what does this mean for children, for young people?

[Aurélie]

Yeah, but with things like deep fakes and fake news, it's becoming so difficult to manage what's true and what's false. So people and young people are tired of separate true

information from false information and also they must constantly question what they see. They always have to take care and to ask questions about what's in my smartphone, what I can see. So the truth is obscured because we cannot longer have access to the facts.

So I think in such a situation, it's essential and it's important to provide to the students and to the young children the tools to evaluate the world around them and to be capable to distinguish what's true and what's false.

[Alessandro]

Well, this means that we have to move on to really the role of school, of education, what happens at schools. Now, we know that schools usually work with critical thinking, but you are a bit skeptical about the way this is done at school and you come from Belgium but from what I've read in your research and from what I know of the Norwegian situation there is not so much difference between what we do in Norway and what you do in Belgium. So what do you do about critical thinking in Belgium and why are you skeptical?

[Aurélie]

At school, we observe in Belgium, we observe a tendency to reduce the concept of critical thinking to an attitude of media skepticism. Most of the activities proposed are focused on media literacy skills which helps students to analyze news or images or advertisement and even online information. But that's just a part of the critical thinking. It's not the whole thing.

[Alessandro]

What you say, Aurélie, it's very interesting because you say that it is true, we work with critical thinking applied to the criticism of sources. This is called in Norwegian, kildekritikk.

And you say, well, it's okay, it's fine, but it's not enough. And then you may have the illusion or delusion as a teacher that you have done your job, but you really would say, wait, wait a moment. There is more than just source criticism.

[Aurélie]

Yes, this approach is reductive because we only teach students to spot errors in reasoning, stereotypes or even manipulations. This type of lessons points of

misinformation or disinformation, but that doesn't prepare students to protect themselves against it or to deal with its consequences. So it's just a part of the job. It's not enough, exactly.

And it also creates the illusion that this mindset can be acquired for much like a static knowledge and it can be memorized. But it's something you have to learn all the time and it's not a one-shot.

[Alessandro]

So it's more complicated than what normally you believe it to be. So you must be careful. It's in fact quite an advanced kind of work. It requires knowledge and it requires practice over a long period of time.

[Aurélie]

Yes, exactly. To develop a truly critical mind, you have to be able to question things. And it's not a one-shot. It's something you have to learn to do regularly. So several philosophers have recommended this method. And it's something the children and the students have to learn.

[Alessandro]

I suppose it is what we are trying to do in this podcast, isn't it? To open up to new perspectives which maybe are not that well known so that we understand that it's not just about critical thinking as applied to sources, but it's critical thinking in a wider way. And we're trying to work with this. So critical thinking we can say as a broader practice.

What can you tell us about the most important things about this critical thinking in the way you intend it?

[Aurélie]

Yes, the philosophical doubts involve adopting an approach that questions our own opinions. A lot of philosophers like Socrates or Descartes or Nietzsche have talked about this doubt and it's an attitude we try to teach to the children and to the students to help them to deal with their own opinion and not to assume this opinion.

[Alessandro]

What can we do in a classroom to help children to train the philosophical doubt?

[Aurélie]

Accepting doubt means being willing to questions and it means be able to question your own opinions. And after that, you are able to engage yourself in a discussion or in an exchange with other people. Thanks to that, you are ready to encounter viewpoints different from your own and in conclusion, the doubt makes it possible to connect yourself with other people.

[Alessandro]

Yes, of course, because if I doubt my own opinions, then I can say maybe I'm wrong, maybe the other person is right. And this makes it easier to connect with other people because we have to discuss together and find out maybe both of us are wrong, both of us are right in some ways. We need to discuss together in order to find out.

[Aurélie]

Exactly. When you accept that your opinion, it's not something true forever, you open the door to other things, other opinion, and you open the door to something different and some point of view different.

[Alessandro]

This is the philosophical doubt.

[Aurélie]

Exactly.

[Alessandro]

But there is a risk with this doubt that you can have too much of it. And philosophers write about and speak about skepticism. What is it?

[Aurélie]

Effectively, the skepticism must be extreme because you will think that everything might be false. The students may doubt the very existence of the truth. As an example, a survey conducted in France shows that more than 15% of the young people believe that 9-11 was a conspiracy. So as we see, a lot of students can be extreme and can be extremely skeptic, thinking that some people are hiding the truth from them and then they cannot trust the media.

[Alessandro]

So this skepticism applied to what media say on 11 September. And the skepticism, we can say, is ungrounded. But this is exactly the problem when you doubt too much. It's good to doubt. You have to doubt, but as for everything, it's important to keep a good measure. But there is also the opposite, because if you have too much doubting, which is called absolute extreme skepticism, too much doubting is extreme skepticism, you can have also the opposite problem.

[Aurélie]

Exactly.

[Alessandro]

Which is dogmatism.

[Aurélie]

Absolutely.

[Alessandro]

What is it? Yeah, dogmatism is the opposite. Because another thing is to jump, to accept something as true very quickly. Because uncertainty makes us feel insecure. And it's not pleasant to be insecure. So to be more secure, we will think that everything is true and some people will deny the existence of any false. And that's the opposite, effectively.

[Alessandro]

So you have your own truth and these truths are unquestionable.

[Aurélie]

Exactly, exactly.

[Alessandro]

But you say also in your writings that you have this form of dogmatism which is called the positive dogmatism. You can also have negative dogmatism. Yes. Negative dogmatism means that for some people, they will deny the existence of any truth. For them, the truth is elusive and nothing can be known for sure. So in that position, it's really insecure and the thinking it's not possible anymore.

[Alessandro]

Well, if you have negative dogmatism, yes, then you stop thinking because anyway, you say, I will never get the truth out of this situation. You will never find the truth. So we have to stop thinking. And if you have to just stop, if you stop thinking, then I think, I think, who decides? The person who has power, I suppose. What else?

[Aurélie]

Yeah.

[Alessandro]

Because if you don't have truth, then you have only power, which is left. Right.

[Aurélie]

Yes, exactly. You don't do your own job. You don't do your own thinking. So you let that pour to other people.

[Alessandro]

You know, in some ways, dogmatism, when it's positive, which is, I have my truth, and this is, I don't question it. You don't do your thinking because you say, this is my truth, I

don't question it, so you don't do any thinking. And if you say, with negative dogmatism, it's impossible to find the truth, you don't do any thinking either.

[Aurélie]

Exactly.

[Alessandro]

Anyway, you don't think.

[Aurélie]

Exactly. The way it's different, but the result is the same. The result is the same.

[Alessandro]

So we are collecting these tools to understand the world of critical thinking and then we have now some knowledge about dogmatism, positive dogmatism and negative dogmatism.

But there is another concept which is very fashionable, I suppose now, even if people don't really maybe don't use it or are not aware of it, which is relativism.

[Aurélie]

Yes.

[Alessandro]

Can you explain?

[Aurélie]

Yeah, relativism, it's a good intention at the beginning because it says that everyone has his own truth. So finally, some people believe that everything is of equal value and that everyone is free to think what they want. And there is no hierarchy between facts and opinion. Everything values the same.

Everything is on the same level. Every information is treated as equal. By example, if you want to believe that the Earth is flat, that's your opinion and everyone is allowed to have his one.

So we see that this position could be extreme too.

[Alessandro]

Too much relativism. It's good, some relativism, because it means you put a question mark on things. And you can also say, well, my opinion is important, your opinion is important. Maybe relativism is also a way to acknowledge the opinion which other people have, don't discard it and say, that's not really, what you're talking about? What you're talking is just of no value. Now, nobody can say, no, but you have your opinion, I have my opinion. But the problem is that, because if I think about that, we really don't do that. I mean we think that we can use that concept relativism and say well my opinion is as much important as your opinion so there is no way, there is no reason here to begin to think, to reflect, to try to find out who is right, who is wrong. Again, you don't use your thinking. You stop thinking because you say everything.

[Aurélie]

Exactly. Again, the result is the same because finally everyone thinks that everything is the same value and you don't start to exchange with others. You don't start to exchange about what you think, what the other thinks. So... that block the dialogue.

[Alessandro]

Well, if it stops the dialogue, then you cannot find also a common understanding about situations, about problems, how to address them, because you need some truths, anyway, some political truths or historical truths to try to understand problems and to address them. Otherwise, again, what really matters is power and force because there is nothing left. If you don't have thinking, then the only thing which can decide what to do is force. The most powerful decides.

So really, it's about the democracy, really, isn't it?

[Aurélie]

Of course, absolutely. Finally, the big deal is the democracy. How can I be part of the decision? How can I be involved in the whole thing?

And if you neutralize the discussions, you cannot be part of the whole. So, yes, it's important to be involved.

[Alessandro]

Now, we go back to school. What can schools do to build this? Let us call it some genuine critical thinking.

[Aurélie]

I think the teachers must create a learning environment that then promotes the development of the critical thinking. The first way, by example, should be the cross-disciplinary activities. By example, it's if we want to teach critical thinking, it's necessary to consider the multidisciplinary activities. The epistemological questioning concerns all the subjects area and it's important to point this out to students by involving them in projects.

For example, we led a project to create a fake news video and that project involved various academic disciplines like philosophy, digital technology, social science, writing. So in that kind of project, the students may be part and they can learn they can see how it works.

[Alessandro]

So to work, you suggest that we have to work across disciplines. In Norwegian we said *tverrfaglig*, to work across different disciplines in order to have a better understanding of this critical thinking.

[Aurélie]

Yes, yes, yes.

[Alessandro]

And then, you also write about how important it is for students and pupils, of course, to be able to discuss, to challenge one's own opinion and so forth without losing your face. What do you mean?

[Aurélie]

The discussion is a way to allow students to engage in a respectful dialogue. When you have a discussion, the divergent opinion can emerge and enrich each other. So yes, it's true, the discussion may be a way to involve the students and to work about the critical thinking.

[Alessandro]

Without the student being afraid of losing one's face and then feeling embarrassed because maybe you say something, oh, this was wrong, I shouldn't have said that. And then if you are afraid, then it's difficult to dialogue.

[Aurélie]

Yes, exactly, because the dialogue is mutual. So we work together and all the participants, they... they are trying to answer a question, a philosophical question, so they try together to achieve the question. And there is no good or bad answer. Everyone is part of the whole thing.

[Alessandro]

Because, in fact, it is not a debate.

[Aurélie]

No.

[Alessandro]

It's a competition. Then you can lose your face if you lose the debate. But it's not that.

[Aurélie]

It's why some people prefer to call that a discussion and not a debate.

[Alessandro]

Well, in this philosophy, as you say, Socrates, you mentioned, would be the tradition of Socrates and Plato to put the center of philosophical work, in fact, the dialogue and mutual questioning, working together to find truth which we can agree about, we can live with.

Do you have some suggestions to conclude our discussion? Do you have some suggestions, a way to go forward?

[Aurélie]

Yes, maybe we can have a first idea, like the teacher can be the model. It can serve as a role model for the students. They must have the, they must explain why they think, why do I think that? Is it a fact? Is it an opinion? Is it a belief? So, showing students that the knowledge is constructed helps students to understand how they have to do. That's a way to teach.

[Alessandrourélie]

Well, beautiful, beautiful, I think, because it's just a model and how knowledge is constructed, which is not knowledge, it's only a construction, but it's the result of process in a way.

[Aurélie]

Exactly.

[Alessandrio]

We have to work together in a common process.

[Aurélie]

Yes, and students like this can understand that they don't have to memorize and reproduce knowledge. They have to construct it and they have to think about it. Where is it from? Why do I think that? And is it my own knowledge or is it something that I heard somewhere? So all this stuff helps.

[Alessandro]

Well, it's a beautiful way of looking at it because it brings out the importance of individual reflection and of collective, social collaboration. Both of them are important in this perspective, in this critical thinking. You think as an individual, you don't give up on thinking, and at the same time you collaborate with other people. It's not something which you can do alone. You must do it with somebody else. Yes, yes.

[Aurélie]

Yes. The purpose is to avoid a single way of thinking and prevent from the students to become trapped in their own conviction or in their own truth.

We will be able to live together if we engage ourselves in dialogue and the dialogue requires diversity of truth. So that's the way how the school can help to build the living together.

[Alessandro]

But Aurélie, I think these words can also work as a kind of conclusion to our discussion, which I think it was very enriching. And thank you so much, Aurélie, for being with us, for helping us going through the field of critical thinking at school.

[Aurélie]

Thank you to you and thank you for the invitation.

[Alessandro]

It was great that you could accept this invitation. And then I thank our listeners for listening to us and see you soon with another episode of our podcast.