

## FINE POINT

### The Positive Philosophical Choice – Revisited

Thinking Environment

Nancy Kline

## THE POSITIVE PHILOSOPHICAL CHOICE – REVISITED

This was bound to happen. There was always something threateningly simplistic, and almost theological, about the assumption that by nature the human being is wholly (i.e., only) good, and that any non-good is a result of lived experience and of the untrue assumptions it produces. It was only a matter of time before science would peer comprehensibly enough into the exceptions to this assumption to make hanging onto it an act of denial rather than of intelligence.

Over the years I have peeked at this possibility. At the end of Chapter 14 in *More Time To Think*. I offered this foray:

But anyway, maybe we aren't sunk if we turn out to be wrong about human nature. We simply will have to figure out how to explain in some other way the phenomenon of brilliance that arises when we assume that human beings are by nature a cluster of good things. Finding that explanation might be fun, actually. It might, though, require quite a few baths.

And figuring this out did, for many of us, take quite a few 'baths' (for which read 'thinking without interruption'!) :-)

Now I think it is time to revisit the original definition of the Positive Philosophical Choice, and to address that question: 'How do we explain the brilliance that arises when we assume that human beings are by nature a cluster of good things'?

To do this is exciting, and for many of us, a relief. Best of all, an update in definition only enhances the Thinking Environment processes, easing Part III of the Thinking Session considerably, in fact.

First, here is what I think our experience of the Thinking Environment shows: if as we listen to someone, we focus on that person's capacity for 'good' (fine thinking, connection, choice, creativity and joy), they will think better than they will if we focus on their capacity for 'bad' (specious thinking, alienation, victimisation, repetition and misery).

From this experience we can theorise that although human beings by nature have the capacity for 'good' and for 'bad', we can choose where to put our focus as we listen, and thus what kind of impact to have on the person's thinking and inner life.

So even if the human being turns out to be in equal portions good and bad inherently, we can help increase the quality of thinking from people by choosing to focus as we listen on their capacity for 'good'.

But I think the news is better even than that. (And if you are someone who cheers for good to win out over bad, this will be encouraging.) Science has established that the brains of human newborns and infants arrive not fully formed, and in almost marsupial fashion need further 'processing' through the mother (or primary care giver). That 'processing' is attention born of connection, intelligent behaviour and joy.

So human beings need the 'good' from birth; whereas, no human being needs the 'bad' from birth. In fact, in the presence of this 'bad' the brain development of the infant begins to arrest, producing over time a stunted limbic system, and ultimately 'bad' (even sociopathic) behaviour.

So it seems that humans have the capacity for both the 'good' and the 'bad', but the need only for the 'good'. In this sense,

inherent 'goodness' wins out 2 to 1 against inherent 'badness'. :-)

And I think we can allow ourselves to let this informally deduced ratio serve as an injunction to focus on the human capacity for good as we listen, because although the 'good' is not the only inherent capacity in humans, the 'good' could be said to be our dominant (2:1) inherent nature.

## IMPLICATIONS

### THINKING ENVIRONMENT CULTURE

When we choose to focus on inherent human goodness in people, we begin the building of the Thinking Environment culture. And we now can do this without requiring people to choose the view that human nature is only 'good'. In that way, we can now avoid understandable resistance to that original basic assumption. Asking people to focus on the capacity and need for 'good' is very different from asking them to assume that there is no inherent 'badness' in human nature.

So I will continue to assert as the culture of the Thinking Environment the Positive Philosophical Choice, defined more accurately now as 'the choice to focus on the human being's dominant inherent capacity and need for 'good'.

### ASSESSING ASSUMPTIONS

Assessing the truth of an assumption, however, is another matter.

For many years we have used in Part III of the Session three criteria for assessing the truth of an assumption: information, logic and the Positive Philosophical Choice.

Occasionally Thinkers and Thinking Partners have not been willing to adopt the (original) Philosophical Choice as a criterion, asserting that the view is not supported by science or, in some cases, by their religion. In those moments we have resorted to asking them to adopt the Positive Philosophical Choice just for the duration of the session. This worked only sometimes and usually unconvincingly.

Over time some of us began to see that we could prevent this impasse and be more accurate ourselves by refreshing our definition to square with the developing science of human nature, and by not using the Philosophical Choice to assess an assumption.

And so as an experiment, we have been using only two of the criteria (information and logic) to assess the truth of an assumption. So far all of us report success with this change.

Here is an example of these two criteria adequately at work in Part Three of the Session:

T:

(Further goal: to feel proud of my life)

Key assumption: I am not a good person

TP

Do you think it is true that you are not a good person?

T

Yes, because people are not good until they have made a significant impact on someone else's life, because my 4th grade teacher said that I was bad deep down, and because I did not prevent my brother's suicide.

Actually, no. Thinking about it now, I don't think it makes sense that we are not good just because we haven't had a major impact on another person's life (and if I am honest, I probably have had a major impact on my partner's life). And just because someone tells you something is so does not make it so. And I was only a kid when my brother died. What could I have possibly done? Nothing.

So, no, I don't think it is true that I am not a good person.

Using only the criteria of information and logic, the Thinker (and Partner) could confidently assess that the Thinker had not proven the assumption to be true, or even possibly true. Invoking the Positive Philosophical Choice, even with our refreshed definition, was not necessary. Information and logic were enough.

And the session proceeded to the Incisive Question, brilliantly.

All good. But what about this question: does not proving an assumption to be true mean it is untrue? Yes, at least until counter evidence emerges. In good science, for example, the not-proven-true theory is regarded as untrue until the proof of its truth is established. (And even then its truth is considered tentative.)

So I propose that we redefine the Positive Philosophical Choice as:

*'the choice to focus on the human being's dominant inherent capacity and need for good'.*

And let's all see what happens if we no longer use the Positive Philosophical Choice as a criterion for assessing the truth of an assumption. Let's see just how adequate information and logic can be.

Let's also, through the Ten Components, build the culture and ethos of the Thinking Environment as an expression of our refreshed definition of the Positive Philosophical Choice.

And if this does not work well enough, we can have a few more baths.