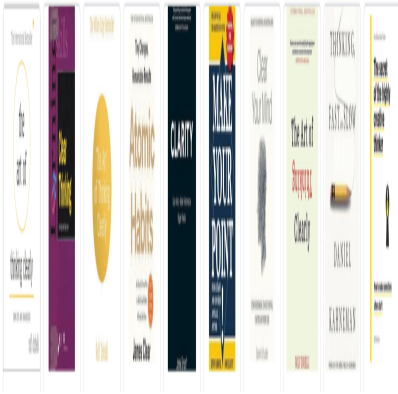




Unclear thinking

Description

It came upon a midnight clear. Clarity and its converse *unclear* are in the air this season: as people seek *clarity* on what they can and cannot do during this phase of the pandemic.

Clarity is about optics. Something is clear if the perception of it is unobstructed by darkness, fog, blur, glare, distortion or a jumble of other things that get in the way. After several definitions pertaining to vision and light, the OED offers others: “Of words, statements, explanations, meaning: Easy to understand, fully intelligible, free from obscurity of sense, perspicuous.”

I recall that at school we had a textbook in the English class called *Clear Thinking* though I can’t yet find it online. There are many other books advocating clarity though.



On the subject of my current interest in cryptography, according to the OED the word “clear” also has uses when someone wishes to distinguish between messages in code compared to messages in clear text.

To be perfectly clear

And who would not seek clarity in passing on and receiving messages, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and debating? *Clarity* is one of the drivers of organisational, bureaucratic, academic and educational process. Administrators and scholars need to speak, write, express and think clearly to demonstrate that they understand and to assist their audience’s understanding.

How can we be sure that we understand a message? I can tell people that all is now clear, or that I now understand. But the strongest indication that I am on the path to understanding comes when I undertake some action that follows from the message.

In a previous post ([Place is the code](#)) I recalled the *tools metaphor* of language. Texts and utterances have meaning in so far as they can be used, and in the context of their particular use. This pragmatic view of language is captured nicely in the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's arguments that conflate *understanding*, *interpretation* and *application*.

the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly i.e. according to the claims it makes must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application (320).

The quest for clarity equates to a desire to understand. *Clarity* holds a privileged position due to the legacies of the Enlightenment: exposing what was once occluded by ignorance and shedding light on truth. To seek clarity is undoubtedly on the side of virtue. It's a quest, a journey, a mission, with goals and an outcome that edifies.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The words *clear*, *clarity* and *clarify* have assumed some interesting applications. Most words and the concepts they purport to represent get applied, used and even weaponised. That's especially the case with clarity.

I assume that a great deal of unclarity, confusion, injustice and intellectual elitism has been promoted under the guise of making things clear. Here, what is clear may be simply what is obvious within a particular framework of thinking, usually the framing of those with the power. Here are some more localised tactics for deploying *clarity*. See post: [On being clear and distinct](#).

Clarity as weapon

There's promise of clarity, even though it is not assured. Some people undoubtedly are led astray and manipulated by false assurances of some distant promise of clarity: Don't worry for now. Everything will be clearer when you are inducted into the community, finish the course, buy the product or donate to the cause.

The request for greater clarity in an instruction, order, explanation, or justification provides an excuse: It was never clear to me what was required therefore you will have to excuse my failure. There's comfort in that.

Clarity serves as a way of passing on responsibility, and hence blame: It's your fault as you are not clear about what you want from me. You haven't explained yourself adequately.

Clarity can serve in a power games where one party requires the other to dedicate yet more time to the labour of delivering clarification. There's the joke about the employee who with some malice insists on greater and greater clarity on the boss's instructions. Exhausted by the process, the only way the boss manages to communicate with the precision required comes when she carries out the task herself.

Unclarity weaponised

Unclear carries certain benefits for various parties. When you don't know the rules, you weren't told, they aren't formally expressed or they were delivered unclearly, then there's scope for doing what you think is the best course of action independently of the messaging. See posts: [Least commitment principal](#), [Secret norms](#), [Haze](#) and [Oblivion](#).

Reference

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2013. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall. London: Bloomsbury Revelations. Originally published in German in 1960.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. Gadamer
2. hermeneutics

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