

## OUTSIDE THE BOX

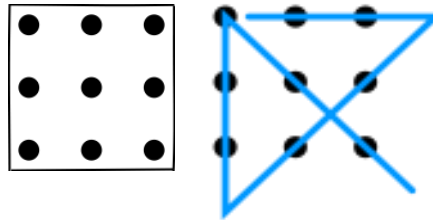
In my opinion, one of the most important and useful proverbs of the last half century has been the phrase “Think outside the box.” Whether in solving difficult problems, or in searching for a new career path, this maxim has been a real lifesaver for me. Especially, in the painful process of reinventing myself more than once since leaving my native homeland in 1960, being forced to think outside “the box” has helped me to survive and to become the man I am today.

But before I delve further into my own applications, let us pause for a moment and investigate the meanings of this helpful proverb. The origin of the phrase is unclear. “Think beyond the boundary” –metaphors that allude to thinking differently or with less constraints– seem to have an old history. For example, in 1888, *The Annual Register* records the phrase “think outside the lines.”

Since at least 1954, the nine-dots puzzle has been used as a metaphor of the type “think beyond the boundary.” Early phrasings include: *go outside the dots* (1954), *breakthrough thinking that gets outside the nine-dot square* (1959), and *what are the actual boundaries of the problem?* (1963). \*

In 1969, Norman Vincent Peale wrote in an article for *the Chicago Tribune*:

“There is one particular puzzle you may have seen [i.e., the “9-dots puzzle”]. It’s a drawing of a box with some dots in it, and the idea is to connect all the dots by using only four lines. You can work on that puzzle, but the only way to solve it is to draw the lines so they connect outside the box. It’s so simple once you realize the principle behind it. But if you keep trying to solve it inside the box, you’ll never be able to master that particular puzzle. That puzzle represents the way a lot of people think. They get caught up inside the box of their own lives... **Step outside the box** your problem has created within you, and come at it from a different direction.” \*



The goal of the “9 dots puzzle” is to link all nine dots using four straight lines or less, without lifting the pen.

As I have a natural propensity to philosophical inquiry, my first question at this point is: What is **the Box**?... What do we mean by “**the Box**”?

If we do a bit of research, it seems that since the 1970’s American thinkers like Martin Kihn and Mike Vance have enshrined the proverb onto a management consultancy environment or corporate culture in relation to human resources training and/or general planning and problem-solving. Along with other techniques like brainstorming and flow-charting, thinking outside the box helps a company to look beyond their immediate clientele, products and/or services to other potential market environments that may have been passed over or ignored.

For most of us, “the Box” is mainly a cerebral trap –usually germinated in the prefrontal cortex. This is why the 9-dots puzzle is a facile, two-dimensional solution for ordinary problems. However, when it comes to more complex existential dilemmas, **the Box** is rather a multidimensional labyrinth whose dots cannot be so easily connected.

Every infant starts his or her life with an inheritance of genetic strengths as well as weaknesses which becomes her or his personal baggage and/or toolbox that can improve or hinder his or her chances of “connecting the dots” –to use the 9-dot-puzzle analogy– in her or his future life. Very soon, the walls of **the Box** begin to go up, as the child is bred into the language, culture and ethics of her or his particular homeland, along with all its biases and taboos.

From kindergarten on, the child is educated as part of his or her race, class, and gender, to herd-like behaviour and to think with a hivemind. She or he is baptized in her or his country’s particular religion, along with all its panoply of ancient dos and don’ts. At an early age, the child begins to enjoy the entertainment technologies of his or her age –the pop music, radio, TV, movies, videogames, social media, virtual reality, etc.– that both free and enslave her or his mind in his or her country’s particular Weltanschauung and her or his generation’s fashionable ideology. The young mind is bombarded and bedazzled by clever ads that induce him or her to buy and consume the latest products, regardless of whether they be beneficial or dangerous. She or he may be lured into substance abuse or over-dependency on harmful remedies by both legal and illicit agents.

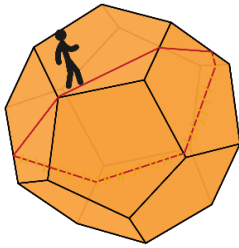
Returning now to my personal experience, as well as that of many refugees and immigrants like me, the challenge of circumventing or breaking out of **The Box** is particularly challenging. One is plunged into a new society with different parameters – different language, history, values, political system, biases, etc.– which are the more difficult to decipher, the further they be from one’s original Box. And the older the refugee or immigrant is, the more problematic the process of assimilation becomes. The new immigrant may be forced to leave his relatively comfortable Box and to enter into another, more oppressive one. Or he or she may try to cram the old Box into the new one –which may be like trying to force-fit a square peg into a round hole.

I was lucky to arrive in Montreal in my twenties, during the topsy-turvy era of the late 1960’s, and to become an active participant in my generation’s cultural revolution –which we labeled “the Underground”, though it was all very much above-board. Whenever you met someone new, you were asked: “What’s your bag?” –question which over time became generalized to try to identify one’s state-of-mind, ideology, profession or even one’s own particular hang-up. When Dr. Leary prescribed that we should “Tune in and drop out,” he was trying to teach us to tune into our True Inner Self and to break out of **The Box**. This inner revolution was very difficult; and many of us didn’t make it out.

For young men like me in 1967, the dots on **The Box** were: ● Finish school ● Get a diploma ● Find a good job ● Find a mate and get married ● Raise a family ● Buy a house with a pool and a garage ● Buy a late-model car ● Raise two-and-a-half kids; and ● Make sure they all get into a similar Box unto the third generation.

In North America and Western “developed” countries, this straightjacket model of what a good middle-class law-abiding young man was supposed to fit into, completely ignored the horrible reality of an ongoing “Cold” War, involving the death and mutilation of millions of human beings, and the very real danger of a nuclear war which would have annihilated all civilization along with all possible human “boxes.”

Although my **Box** was very tightly bolted together with years of complex and contradictory reasonings, I had also the fortune of meeting very wise friends and lovers who showed me the way out of self-imprisonment –especially to understand the words of the Buddha in his first sermon (The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* –i.e., the setting in motion of the Wheel of Dharma.) \*\* As I see it, the Wheel of Dharma is more like a geodesic dodecahedron where all the spokes are interconnected like electrons whirling around an atomic nucleus. The spokes or facets of this Buddhist atom are the



same as the words in the *Pratītya Samutpāda* \*\*\*

To wit:

Ignorance ↔ Karmic constructs ↔ Consciousness ↔  
Self-identity ↔ Perception/Sensation ↔ Contact ↔  
Feeling ↔ Desire ↔ Attachment ↔ Becoming ↔  
Birth/Rebirth ↔ Suffering.

(N.B. The double arrows indicate that causation can be read both forwards and backwards.)

I wind this down with a fervent wish that the reader may find my words helpful to some degree in finding his or her own particular path out of the labyrinth of her or his **Box**.

Written by © Pascual Delgado, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2023.

\* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking\\_outside\\_the\\_box](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking_outside_the_box)

\*\* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhammacakkappavattana\\_Sutta#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhammacakkappavattana_Sutta#):

\*\*\* The *Vibhanga*, *Abhidamma Pitaka*, *Pali Canon*