

<https://TheVirtualLibrary.org>

On Noise

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by Rudolf Dircks

From Book "Essays of Schopenhauer", Walter Scott, London, 1890

On Noise.

Kant has written a treatise on The Vital Powers; but I should like to write a dirge on them, since their lavish use in the form of knocking, hammering, and tumbling things about has made the whole of my life a daily torment. Certainly there are people, nay, very many, who will smile at this, because they are not sensitive to noise; it is precisely these people, however, who are not sensitive to argument, thought, poetry or art, in short, to any kind of intellectual impression: a fact to be assigned to the coarse quality and strong texture of their brain tissues. On the other hand, in the biographies or in other records of the personal utterances of almost all great writers, I find complaints of the pain that noise has occasioned to intellectual men. For example, in the case of Kant, Goethe, Lichtenberg, Jean Paul; and indeed when no mention is made of the matter it is merely because the context did not lead up to it. I should explain the subject we are treating in this way: If a big diamond is cut up into pieces, it immediately loses its value as a whole; or if an army is scattered or divided into small bodies, it loses all its power; and in the same way a great intellect has no more power than an ordinary one as soon as it is interrupted, disturbed, distracted, or diverted; for its superiority entails that it concentrates all its strength on one point and object, just as a concave mirror concentrates all the rays of light thrown upon it. Noisy interruption prevents this concentration. This is why the most eminent intellects have always been strongly averse to any kind of disturbance, interruption and distraction, and above everything to that violent interruption which is caused by noise; other people do not take any particular notice of this sort of thing. The most intelligent of all the European nations has called "Never interrupt" the eleventh commandment. But noise is the most impertinent of all interruptions, for it not only interrupts our own thoughts but disperses them. Where, however, there is nothing to interrupt, noise naturally will not be felt particularly. Sometimes a trifling but incessant noise torments and disturbs me for a time, and before I become distinctly conscious of it I feel it merely as the effort of thinking becomes more difficult, just as I should feel a weight on my foot; then I realise what it is.

But to pass from genus to species, the truly infernal cracking of whips in the narrow resounding streets of a town must be denounced as the most unwarrantable and disgraceful of all noises. It deprives life of all peace and sensibility. Nothing gives me so clear a grasp of the stupidity and thoughtlessness of mankind as the tolerance of the cracking of whips. This sudden, sharp crack which paralyses the brain, destroys all meditation, and murders thought, must cause pain to any one who has anything like an idea in his head. Hence every crack must disturb a hundred people applying their minds to some activity, however trivial it may be; while it disjoins and renders painful the meditations of the thinker; just like the executioner's axe when it severs the head from the body. No sound cuts so sharply into the brain as this cursed cracking of whips; one feels the prick of the whip-cord in one's brain, which is affected in the same way as the mimosa pudica is by touch, and which lasts the same length of time. With all respect for the most holy doctrine of utility, I do not see why a fellow who is removing a load of sand or manure should obtain the

privilege of killing in the bud the thoughts that are springing up in the heads of about ten thousand people successively. (He is only half-an-hour on the road.)

Hammering, the barking of dogs, and the screaming of children are abominable; but it is only the cracking of a whip that is the true murderer of thought. Its object is to destroy every favourable moment that one now and then may have for reflection. If there were no other means of urging on an animal than by making this most disgraceful of all noises, one would forgive its existence. But it is quite the contrary: this cursed cracking of whips is not only unnecessary but even useless. The effect that it is intended to have on the horse mentally becomes quite blunted and ineffective; since the constant abuse of it has accustomed the horse to the crack, he does not quicken his pace for it. This is especially noticeable in the unceasing crack of the whip which comes from an empty vehicle as it is being driven at its slowest rate to pick up a fare. The slightest touch with the whip would be more effective. Allowing, however, that it were absolutely necessary to remind the horse of the presence of the whip by continually cracking it, a crack that made one hundredth part of the noise would be sufficient. It is well known that animals in regard to hearing and seeing notice the slightest indications, even indications that are scarcely perceptible to ourselves. Trained dogs and canary birds furnish astonishing examples of this. Accordingly, this cracking of whips must be regarded as something purely wanton; nay, as an impudent defiance, on the part of those who work with their hands, offered to those who work with their heads. That such infamy is endured in a town is a piece of barbarity and injustice, the more so as it could be easily removed by a police notice requiring every whip cord to have a knot at the end of it. It would do no harm to draw the proletariat's attention to the classes above him who work with their heads; for he has unbounded fear of any kind of head work. A fellow who rides through the narrow streets of a populous town with unemployed post-horses or cart-horses, unceasingly cracking with all his strength a whip several yards long, instantly deserves to dismount and receive five really good blows with a stick. If all the philanthropists in the world, together with all the legislators, met in order to bring forward their reasons for the total abolition of corporal punishment, I would not be persuaded to the contrary.

But we can see often enough something that is even still worse. I mean a carter walking alone, and without any horses, through the streets incessantly cracking his whip. He has become so accustomed to the crack in consequence of its unwarrantable toleration. Since one looks after one's body and all its needs in a most tender fashion, is the thinking mind to be the only thing that never experiences the slightest consideration or protection, to say nothing of respect? Carters, sack-bearers (porters), messengers, and such-like, are the beasts of burden of humanity; they should be treated absolutely with justice, fairness, forbearance and care, but they ought not to be allowed to thwart the higher exertions of the human race by wantonly making a noise. I should like to know how many great and splendid thoughts these whips have cracked out of the world. If I had any authority, I should soon produce in the heads of these carters an inseparable nexus idearum between cracking a whip and receiving a whipping.

Let us hope that those nations with more intelligence and refined feelings will make a beginning, and then by force of example induce the Germans to do the same.(1)

Meanwhile, hear what Thomas Hood says of them (Up the Rhine): "For a musical people they are the most noisy I ever met with" That they are so is not due to their being more

prone to making a noise than other people, but to their insensibility, which springs from obtuseness; they are not disturbed by it in reading or thinking, because they do not think; they only smoke, which is their substitute for thought. The general toleration of unnecessary noise, for instance, of the clashing of doors, which is so extremely ill-mannered and vulgar, is a direct proof of the dulness and poverty of thought that one meets with everywhere. In Germany it seems as though it were planned that no one should think for noise; take the inane drumming that goes on as an instance. Finally, as far as the literature treated of in this chapter is concerned, I have only one work to recommend, but it is an excellent one: I mean a poetical epistle in *terzo rimo* by the famous painter Bronzino, entitled “De’ Romori: a Messer Luca Martini” It describes fully and amusingly the torture to which one is put by the many kinds of noises of a small Italian town. It is written in tragicomic style. This epistle is to be found in *Opere burlesche del Berni, Aretino ed altri*, vol. ii. p. 258, apparently published in Utrecht in 1771.

The nature of our intellect is such that ideas are said to spring by abstraction from observations, so that the latter are in existence before the former. If this is really what takes place, as is the case with a man who has merely his own experience as his teacher and book, he knows quite well which of his observations belong to and are represented by each of his ideas; he is perfectly acquainted with both, and accordingly he treats everything correctly that comes before his notice. We might call this the natural mode of education.

On the other hand, an artificial education is having one’s head crammed full of ideas, derived from hearing others talk, from learning and reading, before one has anything like an extensive knowledge of the world as it is and as one sees it. The observations which produce all these ideas are said to come later on with experience; but until then these ideas are applied wrongly, and accordingly both things and men are judged wrongly, seen wrongly, and treated wrongly. And so it is that education perverts the mind; and this is why, after a long spell of learning and reading, we enter the world, in our youth, with views that are partly simple, partly perverted; consequently we comport ourselves with an air of anxiety at one time, at another of presumption. This is because our head is full of ideas which we are now trying to make use of, but almost always apply wrongly. This is the result of [Greek: *hysteron proteron*] (putting the cart before the horse), since we are directly opposing the natural development of our mind by obtaining ideas first and observations last; for teachers, instead of developing in a boy his faculties of discernment and judgment, and of thinking for himself, merely strive to stuff his head full of other people’s thoughts. Subsequently, all the opinions that have sprung from misapplied ideas have to be rectified by a lengthy experience; and it is seldom that they are completely rectified. This is why so few men of learning have such sound common sense as is quite common among the illiterate.

From what has been said, the principal point in education is that one’s knowledge of the world begins at the right end; and the attainment of which might be designated as the aim of all education. But, as has been pointed out, this depends principally on the observation of each thing preceding the idea one forms of it; further, that narrow ideas precede broader; so that the whole of one’s instruction is given in the order that the ideas themselves during formation must have followed. But directly this order is not strictly adhered to, imperfect and subsequently wrong ideas spring up; and finally there arises a

perverted view of the world in keeping with the nature of the individual — a view such as almost every one holds for a long time, and most people to the end of their lives. If a man analyses his own character, he will find that it was not until he reached a very ripe age, and in some cases quite unexpectedly, that he was able to rightly and clearly understand many matters of a quite simple nature.

Previously, there had been an obscure point in his knowledge of the world which had arisen through his omitting something in his early education, whether he had been either artificially educated by men or just naturally by his own experience. Therefore one should try to find out the strictly natural course of knowledge, so that by keeping methodically to it children may become acquainted with the affairs of the world, without getting false ideas into their heads, which frequently cannot be driven out again. In carrying this out, one must next take care that children do not use words with which they connect no clear meaning. Even children have, as a rule, that unhappy tendency of being satisfied with words instead of wishing to understand things, and of learning words by heart, so that they may make use of them when they are in a difficulty. This tendency clings to them afterwards, so that the knowledge of many learned men becomes mere verbosity.

However, the principal thing must always be to let one's observations precede one's ideas, and not the reverse as is usually and unfortunately the case; which may be likened to a child coming into the world with its feet foremost, or a rhyme begun before thinking of its reason. While the child's mind has made a very few observations one inculcates it with ideas and opinions, which are, strictly speaking, prejudices. His observations and experience are developed through this ready-made apparatus instead of his ideas being developed out of his own observations. In viewing the world one sees many things from many sides, consequently this is not such a short or quick way of learning as that which makes use of abstract ideas, and quickly comes to a decision about everything; therefore preconceived ideas will not be rectified until late, or it may be they are never rectified. For, when a man's view contradicts his ideas, he will reject at the outset what it renders evident as one-sided, nay, he will deny it and shut his eyes to it, so that his preconceived ideas may remain unaffected. And so it happens that many men go through life full of oddities, caprices, fancies, and prejudices, until they finally become fixed ideas. He has never attempted to abstract fundamental ideas from his own observations and experience, because he has got everything ready-made from other people; and it is for this very reason that he and countless others are so insipid and shallow. Instead of such a system, the natural system of education should be employed in educating children. No idea should be impregnated but what has come through the medium of observations, or at any rate been verified by them. A child would have fewer ideas, but they would be well-grounded and correct. It would learn to measure things according to its own standard and not according to another's. It would then never acquire a thousand whims and prejudices which must be eradicated by the greater part of subsequent experience and education. Its mind would henceforth be accustomed to thoroughness and clearness; the child would rely on its own judgment, and be free from prejudices. And, in general, children should not get to know life, in any aspect whatever, from the copy before they have learnt it from the original. Instead, therefore, of hastening to place mere books in their hands, one should make them gradually acquainted with things and the circumstances of human life, and above everything one should take care to guide them to a clear grasp of reality, and to teach them

to obtain their ideas directly from the real world, and to form them in keeping with it — but not to get them from elsewhere, as from books, fables, or what others have said — and then later to make use of such ready-made ideas in real life. The result will be that their heads are full of chimeras and that some will have a wrong comprehension of things, and others will fruitlessly endeavour to remodel the world according to those chimeras, and so get on to wrong paths both in theory and practice. For it is incredible how much harm is done by false notions which have been implanted early in life, only to develop later on into prejudices; the later education which we get from the world and real life must be employed in eradicating these early ideas. And this is why, as is related by Diogenes Laertius, Antisthenes gave the following answer: [Greek: *erotaetheis ti ton mathaematon anankaioataton, ephae, “to kaka apomathein.”*] (Interrogatus quatenam esset disciplina maxime necessaria, Mala, inquit, dediscere.)

Children should be kept from all kinds of instruction that may make errors possible until their sixteenth year, that is to say, from philosophy, religion, and general views of every description; because it is the errors that are acquired in early days that remain, as a rule, ineradicable, and because the faculty of judgment is the last to arrive at maturity. They should only be interested in such things that make errors impossible, such as mathematics, in things which are not very dangerous, such as languages, natural science, history, and so forth; in general, the branches of knowledge which are to be taken up at any age must be within reach of the intellect at that age and perfectly comprehensible to it. Childhood and youth are the time for collecting data and getting to know specially and thoroughly individual and particular things. On the other hand, all judgment of a general nature must at that time be suspended, and final explanations left alone. One should leave the faculty of judgment alone, as it only comes with maturity and experience, and also take care that one does not anticipate it by inculcating prejudice, when it will be crippled for ever.

On the contrary, the memory is to be specially exercised, as it has its greatest strength and tenacity in youth; however, what has to be retained must be chosen with the most careful and scrupulous consideration. For as it is what we have learnt well in our youth that lasts, we should take the greatest possible advantage of this precious gift. If we picture to ourselves how deeply engraven on our memory the people are whom we knew during the first twelve years of our life, and how indelibly imprinted are also the events of that time, and most of the things that we then experienced, heard, or learnt, the idea of basing education on this susceptibility and tenacity of the youthful mind will seem natural; in that the mind receives its impressions according to a strict method and a regular system. But because the years of youth that are assigned to man are only few, and the capacity for remembering, in general, is always limited (and still more so the capacity for remembering of the individual), everything depends on the memory being filled with what is most essential and important in any department of knowledge, to the exclusion of everything else. This selection should be made by the most capable minds and masters in every branch of knowledge after the most mature consideration, and the result of it established. Such a selection must be based on a sifting of matters which are necessary and important for a man to know in general, and also for him to know in a particular profession or calling. Knowledge of the first kind would have to be divided into graduated courses, like an encyclopædia, corresponding to the degree of general culture which each man has attained in his external circumstances; from a course restricted to what is necessary for

primary instruction up to the matter contained in every branch of the philosophical faculty. Knowledge of the second kind would, however, be reserved for him who had really mastered the selection in all its branches. The whole would give a canon specially devised for intellectual education, which naturally would require revision every ten years. By such an arrangement the youthful power of the memory would be put to the best advantage, and it would furnish the faculty of judgment with excellent material when it appeared later on.

What is meant by maturity of knowledge is that state of perfection to which any one individual is able to bring it, when an exact correspondence has been effected between the whole of his abstract ideas and his own personal observations: whereby each of his ideas rests directly or indirectly on a basis of observation, which alone gives it any real value; and likewise he is able to place every observation that he makes under the right idea corresponding to it.

Maturity of knowledge is the work of experience alone, and consequently of time. For the knowledge we acquire from our own observation is, as a rule, distinct from that we get through abstract ideas; the former is acquired in the natural way, while the latter comes through good and bad instruction and what other people have told to us. Consequently, in youth there is generally little harmony and connection between our ideas, which mere expressions have fixed, and our real knowledge, which has been acquired by observation. Later they both gradually approach and correct each other; but maturity of knowledge does not exist until they have become quite incorporated. This maturity is quite independent of that other kind of perfection, the standard of which may be high or low, I mean the perfection to which the capacities of an individual may be brought; it is not based on a correspondence between the abstract and intuitive knowledge, but on the degree of intensity of each.

The most necessary thing for the practical man is the attainment of an exact and thorough knowledge of what is really going on in the world; but it is also the most irksome, for a man may continue studying until old age without having learnt all that is to be learnt; while one can master the most important things in the sciences in one's youth. In getting such a knowledge of the world, it is as a novice that the boy and youth have the first and most difficult lessons to learn; but frequently even the matured man has still much to learn. The study is of considerable difficulty in itself, but it is made doubly difficult by novels, which depict the ways of the world and of men who do not exist in real life. But these are accepted with the credulity of youth, and become incorporated with the mind; so that now, in the place of purely negative ignorance, a whole framework of wrong ideas, which are positively wrong, crops up, subsequently confusing the schooling of experience and representing the lesson it teaches in a false light. If the youth was previously in the dark, he will now be led astray by a will-o'-the-wisp: and with a girl this is still more frequently the case. They have been deluded into an absolutely false view of life by reading novels, and expectations have been raised that can never be fulfilled. This generally has the most harmful effect on their whole lives. Those men who had neither time nor opportunity to read novels in their youth, such as those who work with their hands, have decided advantage over them. Few of these novels are exempt from reproach — nay, whose effect is contrary to bad. Before all others, for instance, *Gil Blas* and the other works of Le Sage (or rather their Spanish originals); further, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and to some extent the novels of Walter Scott. *Don Quixote* may be regarded as a satirical

presentation of the error in question.

Notes

(1) According to a notice from the Munich Society for the Protection of Animals, the superfluous whipping and cracking were strictly forbidden in Nuremberg in December 1858.