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Thinking for Oneself

Arthur Schopenhauer

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The largest library in disorder is not so useful as a smaller but orderly one; in the same way the greatest amount of knowledge, if it has not been worked out in one's own mind, is of less value than a much smaller amount that has been fully considered. For it is only when a man combines what he knows from all sides, and compares one truth with another, that he completely realises his own knowledge and gets it into his power. A man can only think over what he knows, therefore he should learn something; but a man only knows what he has pondered.

A man can apply himself of his own free will to reading and learning, while he cannot to thinking. Thinking must be kindled like a fire by a draught and sustained by some kind of interest in the subject. This interest may be either of a purely objective nature or it may be merely subjective. The latter exists in matters concerning us personally, but objective interest is only to be found in heads that think by nature, and to whom thinking is as natural as breathing; but they are very rare. This is why there is so little of it in most men of learning.

The difference between the effect that thinking for oneself and that reading has on the mind is incredibly great; hence it is continually developing that original difference in minds which induces one man to think and another to read. Reading forces thoughts upon the mind which are as foreign and heterogeneous to the bent and mood in which it may be for the moment, as the seal is to the wax on which it stamps its imprint. The mind thus suffers total compulsion from without; it has first this and first that to think about, for which it has at the time neither instinct nor liking.

On the other hand, when a man thinks for himself he follows his own impulse, which either his external surroundings or some kind of recollection has determined at the moment. His visible surroundings do not leave upon his mind one single definite thought as reading does, but merely supply him with material and occasion to think over what is in keeping with his nature and present mood. This is why much reading robs the mind of all elasticity; it is like keeping a spring under a continuous, heavy weight. If a man does not want to think, the safest plan is to take up a book directly he has a spare moment.

This practice accounts for the fact that learning makes most men more stupid and foolish than they are by nature, and prevents their writings from being a success; they remain, as Pope has said,

“For ever reading, never to be read.”— *Dunciad* iii. 194.

Men of learning are those who have read the contents of books. Thinkers, geniuses, and those who have enlightened the world and furthered the race of men, are those who have made direct use of the book of the world.

Indeed, it is only a man's own fundamental thoughts that have truth and life in them. For it is these that he really and completely understands. To read the thoughts of others is like taking the remains of some one else's meal, like putting on the discarded clothes of a

stranger.

The thought we read is related to the thought which rises in us, as the fossilised impress of a prehistoric plant is to a plant budding out in spring.

Reading is merely a substitute for one's own thoughts. A man allows his thoughts to be put into leading-strings.

Further, many books serve only to show how many wrong paths there are, and how widely a man may stray if he allows himself to be led by them. But he who is guided by his genius, that is to say, he who thinks for himself, who thinks voluntarily and rightly, possesses the compass wherewith to find the right course. A man, therefore, should only read when the source of his own thoughts stagnates; which is often the case with the best of minds.

It is sin against the Holy Spirit to frighten away one's own original thoughts by taking up a book. It is the same as a man flying from Nature to look at a museum of dried plants, or to study a beautiful landscape in copperplate. A man at times arrives at a truth or an idea after spending much time in thinking it out for himself, linking together his various thoughts, when he might have found the same thing in a book; it is a hundred times more valuable if he has acquired it by thinking it out for himself. For it is only by his thinking it out for himself that it enters as an integral part, as a living member into the whole system of his thought, and stands in complete and firm relation with it; that it is fundamentally understood with all its consequences, and carries the colour, the shade, the impress of his own way of thinking; and comes at the very moment, just as the necessity for it is felt, and stands fast and cannot be forgotten. This is the perfect application, nay, interpretation of Goethe's

“Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast

Erwirb es um es zu besitzen.”

The man who thinks for himself learns the authorities for his opinions only later on, when they serve merely to strengthen both them and himself; while the book-philosopher starts from the authorities and other people's opinions, therefrom constructing a whole for himself; so that he resembles an automaton, whose composition we do not understand. The other man, the man who thinks for himself, on the other hand, is like a living man as made by nature. His mind is impregnated from without, which then bears and brings forth its child. Truth that has been merely learned adheres to us like an artificial limb, a false tooth, a waxen nose, or at best like one made out of another's flesh; truth which is acquired by thinking for oneself is like a natural member: it alone really belongs to us. Here we touch upon the difference between the thinking man and the mere man of learning. Therefore the intellectual acquirements of the man who thinks for himself are like a fine painting that stands out full of life, that has its light and shade correct, the tone sustained, and perfect harmony of colour. The intellectual attainments of the merely learned man, on the contrary, resemble a big palette covered with every colour, at most systematically arranged, but without harmony, relation, and meaning.

Reading is thinking with some one else's head instead of one's own. But to think for oneself is to endeavour to develop a coherent whole, a system, even if it is not a strictly complete one. Nothing is more harmful than, by dint of continual reading, to strengthen

the current of other people's thoughts. These thoughts, springing from different minds, belonging to different systems, bearing different colours, never flow together of themselves into a unity of thought, knowledge, insight, or conviction, but rather cram the head with a Babylonian confusion of tongues; consequently the mind becomes overcharged with them and is deprived of all clear insight and almost disorganised. This condition of things may often be discerned in many men of learning, and it makes them inferior in sound understanding, correct judgment, and practical tact to many illiterate men, who, by the aid of experience, conversation, and a little reading, have acquired a little knowledge from without, and made it always subordinate to and incorporated it with their own thoughts.

The scientific thinker also does this to a much greater extent. Although he requires much knowledge and must read a great deal, his mind is nevertheless strong enough to overcome it all, to assimilate it, to incorporate it with the system of his thoughts, and to subordinate it to the organic relative unity of his insight, which is vast and ever-growing. By this means his own thought, like the bass in an organ, always takes the lead in everything, and is never deadened by other sounds, as is the case with purely antiquarian minds; where all sorts of musical passages, as it were, run into each other, and the fundamental tone is entirely lost.

The people who have spent their lives in reading and acquired their wisdom out of books resemble those who have acquired exact information of a country from the descriptions of many travellers. These people can relate a great deal about many things; but at heart they have no connected, clear, sound knowledge of the condition of the country. While those who have spent their life in thinking are like the people who have been to that country themselves; they alone really know what it is they are saying, know the subject in its entirety, and are quite at home in it.

The ordinary book-philosopher stands in the same relation to a man who thinks for himself as an eye-witness does to the historian; he speaks from his own direct comprehension of the subject.

Therefore all who think for themselves hold at bottom much the same views; when they differ it is because they hold different points of view, but when these do not alter the matter they all say the same thing. They merely express what they have grasped from an objective point of view. I have frequently hesitated to give passages to the public because of their paradoxical nature, and afterwards to my joyful surprise have found the same thoughts expressed in the works of great men of long ago.

The book-philosopher, on the other hand, relates what one man has said and another man meant, and what a third has objected to, and so on. He compares, weighs, criticises, and endeavours to get at the truth of the thing, and in this way resembles the critical historian. For instance, he will try to find out whether Leibnitz was not for some time in his life a follower of Spinoza, etc. The curious student will find striking examples of what I mean in Herbart's *Analytical Elucidation of Morality and Natural Right*, and in his *Letters on Freedom*. It surprises us that such a man should give himself so much trouble; for it is evident that if he had fixed his attention on the matter he would soon have attained his object by thinking a little for himself.

But there is a small difficulty to overcome; a thing of this kind does not depend upon our own will. One can sit down at any time and read, but not — think. It is with thoughts as with men: we cannot always summon them at pleasure, but must wait until they come. Thought about a subject must come of its own accord by a happy and harmonious union of external motive with mental temper and application; and it is precisely that which never seems to come to these people.

One has an illustration of this in matters that concern our personal interest. If we have to come to a decision on a thing of this kind we cannot sit down at any particular moment and thrash out the reasons and arrive at a decision; for often at such a time our thoughts cannot be fixed, but will wander off to other things; a dislike to the subject is sometimes responsible for this. We should not use force, but wait until the mood appears of itself; it frequently comes unexpectedly and even repeats itself; the different moods which possess us at the different times throwing another light on the matter. It is this long process which is understood by a ripe resolution. For the task of making up our mind must be distributed; much that has been previously overlooked occurs to us; the aversion also disappears, for, after examining the matter closer, it seems much more tolerable than it was at first sight.

And in theory it is just the same: a man must wait for the right moment; even the greatest mind is not always able to think for itself at all times. Therefore it is advisable for it to use its spare moments in reading, which, as has been said, is a substitute for one's own thought; in this way material is imported to the mind by letting another think for us, although it is always in a way which is different from our own. For this reason a man should not read too much, in order that his mind does not become accustomed to the substitute, and consequently even forget the matter in question; that it may not get used to walking in paths that have already been trodden, and by following a foreign course of thought forget its own. Least of all should a man for the sake of reading entirely withdraw his attention from the real world: as the impulse and temper which lead one to think for oneself proceed oftener from it than from reading; for it is the visible and real world in its primitiveness and strength that is the natural subject of the thinking mind, and is able more easily than anything else to rouse it. After these considerations it will not surprise us to find that the thinking man can easily be distinguished from the book-philosopher by his marked earnestness, directness, and originality, the personal conviction of all his thoughts and expressions: the book-philosopher, on the other hand, has everything second-hand; his ideas are like a collection of old rags obtained anyhow; he is dull and pointless, resembling a copy of a copy. His style, which is full of conventional, nay, vulgar phrases and current terms, resembles a small state where there is a circulation of foreign money because it coins none of its own.

Mere experience can as little as reading take the place of thought. Mere empiricism bears the same relation to thinking as eating to digestion and assimilation. When experience boasts that it alone, by its discoveries, has advanced human knowledge, it is as though the mouth boasted that it was its work alone to maintain the body.

The works of all really capable minds are distinguished from all other works by a character of decision and definiteness, and, in consequence, of lucidity and clearness. This is because minds like these know definitely and clearly what they wish to express — whether it be in prose, in verse, or in music. Other minds are wanting in this decision and

clearness, and therefore may be instantly recognised.

The characteristic sign of a mind of the highest standard is the directness of its judgment. Everything it utters is the result of thinking for itself; this is shown everywhere in the way it gives expression to its thoughts. Therefore it is, like a prince, an imperial director in the realm of intellect. All other minds are mere delegates, as may be seen by their style, which has no stamp of its own.

Hence every true thinker for himself is so far like a monarch; he is absolute, and recognises nobody above him. His judgments, like the decrees of a monarch, spring from his own sovereign power and proceed directly from himself. He takes as little notice of authority as a monarch does of a command; nothing is valid unless he has himself authorised it. On the other hand, those of vulgar minds, who are swayed by all kinds of current opinions, authorities, and prejudices, are like the people which in silence obey the law and commands.

The people who are so eager and impatient to settle disputed questions, by bringing forward authorities, are really glad when they can place the understanding and insight of some one else in the field in place of their own, which are deficient. Their number is legion. For, as Seneca says, “Unusquisque mavult credere, quam judicare.”

The weapon they commonly use in their controversies is that of authorities: they strike each other with it, and whoever is drawn into the fray will do well not to defend himself with reason and arguments; for against a weapon of this kind they are like horned Siegfrieds, immersed in a flood of incapacity for thinking and judging. They will bring forward their authorities as an *argumentum ad verecundiam* and then cry *victoria*.

In the realm of reality, however fair, happy, and pleasant it may prove to be, we always move controlled by the law of gravity, which we must be unceasingly overcoming. While in the realm of thought we are disembodied spirits, uncontrolled by the law of gravity and free from penury.

This is why there is no happiness on earth like that which at the propitious moment a fine and fruitful mind finds in itself.

The presence of a thought is like the presence of our beloved. We imagine we shall never forget this thought, and that this loved one could never be indifferent to us. But out of sight out of mind! The finest thought runs the risk of being irrevocably forgotten if it is not written down, and the dear one of being forsaken if we do not marry her.

There are many thoughts which are valuable to the man who thinks them; but out of them only a few which possess strength to produce either repercussion or reflex action, that is, to win the reader's sympathy after they have been written down. It is what a man has thought out directly for himself that alone has true value. Thinkers may be classed as follows: those who, in the first place, think for themselves, and those who think directly for others. The former thinkers are the genuine, they think for themselves in both senses of the word; they are the true philosophers; they alone are in earnest. Moreover, the enjoyment and happiness of their existence consist in thinking. The others are the sophists; they wish to seem, and seek their happiness in what they hope to get from other people; their earnestness consists in this. To which of these two classes a man belongs is soon seen by his whole method and manner. Lichtenberg is an example of the first class, while

Herder obviously belongs to the second.

When one considers how great and how close to us the problem of existence is — this equivocal, tormented, fleeting, dream-like existence — so great and so close that as soon as one perceives it, it overshadows and conceals all other problems and aims; — and when one sees how all men — with a few and rare exceptions — are not clearly conscious of the problem, nay, do not even seem to see it, but trouble themselves about everything else rather than this, and live on taking thought only for the present day and the scarcely longer span of their own personal future, while they either expressly give the problem up or are ready to agree with it, by the aid of some system of popular metaphysics, and are satisfied with this; — when one, I say, reflects upon this, so may one be of the opinion that man is a thinking being only in a very remote sense, and not feel any special surprise at any trait of thoughtlessness or folly; but know, rather, that the intellectual outlook of the normal man indeed surpasses that of the brute — whose whole existence resembles a continual present without any consciousness of the future or the past — but, however, not to such an extent as one is wont to suppose.

And corresponding to this, we find in the conversation of most men that their thoughts are cut up as small as chaff, making it impossible for them to spin out the thread of their discourse to any length. If this world were peopled by really thinking beings, noise of every kind would not be so universally tolerated, as indeed the most horrible and aimless form of it is.(1) If Nature had intended man to think she would not have given him ears, or, at any rate, she would have furnished them with air-tight flaps like the bat, which for this reason is to be envied. But, in truth, man is like the rest, a poor animal, whose powers are calculated only to maintain him during his existence; therefore he requires to have his ears always open to announce of themselves, by night as by day, the approach of the pursuer.

Notes

(1) See Essay on Noise, p. 28.