Space for Notes
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Arthur Schopenhauer
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Chapter XXII
On Thinking for Oneself

§ 257

Just as the largest library, badly arranged, is not so useful as a very moderate one that is well arranged, so the greatest amount of knowledge, if not elaborated by our own thoughts, is worth much less than a far smaller volume that has been abundantly and repeatedly thought over. For only by universally combining what we know, by comparing every truth with every other, do we fully assimilate our own knowledge and get it into our power. We can think over only what we know, and so we should learn something; but we know only what we have thought out.

Now it is true that we can arbitrarily apply ourselves to reading and learning, but not really to thinking. Thus just as a fire is kindled and sustained by a draught of air, so too must thinking be through some interest in its theme, which may be either purely objective or merely subjective. The latter exists solely in connection with our personal affairs; the former, however, is only for minds who think by nature, to whom thinking is as natural as breathing, but who are very rare. Thus with most scholars there is so little of it.

§ 258

The difference between the effect produced on the mind by thinking for oneself and that produced by reading is incredibly great; and thus it is for ever increasing the original disparity between minds, by virtue whereof we are driven to the one or to the other. Thus reading forces on the mind ideas that are as foreign and heterogeneous to the tendency and mood it has at the moment, as is the seal to the wax whereon it impresses its stamp. Thus the mind is totally compelled from without to think first of one thing and then of another, for which it has absolutely no inclination or disposition. When, on the other hand, a man thinks for himself, his mind follows its own natural impulse, as this has been more specifically determined for the moment either by external environment or by some recollection. Thus the environment of intuitive perception does not impress on the mind one definite idea as does reading, but gives it merely the material and the occasion to think what is in accordance with its nature and present disposition. Therefore the mind is deprived of all its elasticity by *much* reading as is a spring when a weight is continually applied to it; and the surest way not to have thoughts of our own is for us at once to take up a book when we have a moment to spare. This practice is the reason why erudition makes most men more stupid and simple than they are by nature and also deprives their literary careers of every success.* As Pope says, they remain:

> For ever reading, never to be read.
> *The Dunciad,* ш. 193-4.

Scholars are those who have read in books, but thinkers, men of genius, world-enlighteners, and reformers of the human race are those who have read directly in the book of the world.

[* Those who write are so numerous, those who think so rare.]

§ 259

At bottom, only our own fundamental ideas have truth and life; for it is they alone which we really and thoroughly understand. The ideas of someone else which we have read are the scraps and leavings of someone else's meal, the cast-off clothes of a stranger.

The idea of another which we have read is related to our own that occurs to us as the impression in stone of a plant from the primeval world to the blossoming plant of spring.

§ 260

Reading is a mere makeshift for original thinking. When we read, we allow another to guide our thoughts in leading strings. Moreover, many books merely serve to show how many false paths there are and how seriously we could go astray if we allowed ourselves to be guided by them. But whoever is guided by genius, in other words thinks for himself, thinks freely and of his own accord and thinks correctly; he has the compass for finding the right way. We should, therefore, read only when the source of our own ideas dries up, which will be the case often enough even with the best minds. On the other hand, to scare away our own original and powerful ideas in order to take up a book, is a sin against the Holy Ghost. We then resemble the man who runs away from free nature in order to look at a herbarium, or to contemplate a beautiful landscape in a copper engraving.

Even if occasionally we had been able very easily and conveniently to find in a book a truth or view which we very laboriously and slowly discovered through our own thinking and combining, it is nevertheless a hundred times more valuable if we have arrived at it through our own original thinking. Only then does it enter into the whole system of our ideas as an integral part and living member; only then is it completely and firmly connected therewith, is understood in all its grounds and consequents, bears the colour, tone, and stamp of our whole mode of thought, has come at the very time when the need for it was keen, is therefore firmly established and cannot again pass away. Accordingly, Goethe's verse here finds its most perfect application and even explanation:

> What from your fathers' heritage is lent,
> Earn it anew, really to possess it![1]

Thus the man who thinks for himself only subsequently becomes acquainted with the authorities for his opinions when they serve merely to confirm him therein and to encourage him. The book-philosopher, on the other hand, starts from those authorities in that he constructs for himself an entire system from the opinions of others which he has collected in the course of his reading. Such a system is then like an automaton composed of foreign material, whereas that of the original thinker resembles a living human being. For it originated like this, since the external world fertilized the thinking mind that afterwards carried it and gave birth to it.

[1] *Faust*, Part i, Bayard Taylor's translation.]

The truth that has been merely learnt sticks to us like an artificial limb, a false tooth, a nose of wax, or at best like a rhinoplastic nose formed from someone else's flesh. On the other hand, the truth acquired through our own thinking is like the natural limb; it alone really belongs to us. On this rests the distinction between the thinker and the mere scholar. The intellectual gain of the man who thinks for himself is, therefore, like a beautiful painting that vividly stands out with correct light and shade, sustained tone, and perfect harmony of

colours. The intellectual acquisition of the mere scholar, on the other hand, is like a large palette full of bright colours, systematically arranged perhaps, but without harmony, sequence, and significance.

§ 261

Reading is equivalent to thinking with someone else's head instead of with one's own. Now for our own thinking, whence a coherent and connected whole, a system though not strictly rounded off, endeavours to evolve, nothing is more detrimental than too strong an influx of other people's ideas through constant reading. For each of them has sprung from the mind of another, belongs to another system, bears another tint; and never do they flow of themselves into a totality of thought, knowledge, insight, and conviction. On the contrary, they set up in the head a slight Babylonian confusion of tongues, and a mind so crammed is now robbed of all clear insight and thus is wellnigh disorganized. This state can be observed in many scholars and results in their being inferior to many illiterate men as regards common sense, correct judgement, and practical tact. The latter have always subordinated to, and incorporated in, their own thinking the little knowledge that has come to them from without through experience, conversation, and a little reading. Now it is just this that the scientific *thinker* also does to a greater degree. Although he needs much knowledge and must, therefore, read a great deal, his mind is nevertheless strong enough to master all this, to assimilate it, to incorporate it into his system of ideas, and thus to subordinate it to the organically consistent totality of his vast and ever-growing insight. Here his own thinking, like the ground-bass of an organ, always dominates everything and is never drowned by the notes and tones of others, as is the case with the minds of mere pundits and polyhistors, where fragments of music in all keys run into one another, so to speak, and the fundamental note can no longer be detected at all.

§ 262

Those who have spent their lives in reading, and have drawn their wisdom from books, resemble men who have acquired precise information about a country from many descriptions of travel. They are able to give much information about things, but at bottom they have really no coherent, clear, and thorough knowledge of the nature of the country. On the other hand, those who have spent their lives in thinking are like men who have themselves been in that country. They alone really know what they are talking about; they have a consistent and coherent knowledge of things there and are truly at home in them.

§ 263

The ordinary book-philosopher is related to the man who thinks for himself as a critical historian to an eyewitness; the latter speaks from his own immediate apprehension of things. At bottom, therefore, all who think for themselves are of one accord and their difference springs only from that of their standpoint; but where this alters nothing, they all say the same thing. For they state merely what they have objectively apprehended. To my agreeable surprise I have often subsequently found stated in the ancient works of great men propositions which, on account of their paradoxical nature, I hesitated to lay before the public. The book-philosopher, on the other hand, reports the statement of one man, the opinion of another, the objection of a third, and so on. He compares, carefully weighs, and criticizes all these and endeavours to get at the truth of things; and in this respect he is exactly like the critical historian. Thus for example he will start investigations on whether Leibniz had for a while ever been a Spinozist, and such like. Very clear instances of what is said here are furnished for the curious

admirer by Herbart's *Analytische Beleuchtung der Moral und des Naturrechts* and also by his *Briefe über die Freiheit. We* might marvel at the great trouble such a man takes, for it seems that, if only he would keep his eye on the matter itself, he would soon reach the goal through a little thinking for himself. But there is a small difficulty here since such a thing does not depend on our will; we can at any time sit down and read, but not think as well. Thus it is the same with ideas as with human beings; we cannot always send for them at will, but must wait for them to come. Thinking about a subject must occur automatically through a happy and harmonious concurrence of external occasion with inner mood and interest; and it is precisely this that will never come to those men. This finds its illustration even in those ideas that concern our personal interest. If we have to come to a decision in such a matter, we cannot sit down to it at any arbitrarily chosen moment, think over the reasons, and then decide. For at that very moment, our consideration of the matter is often not firm, but wanders to other things; and for this even our disinclination in the matter is sometimes responsible. We should, therefore, not try to force it, but wait till the mood for it comes automatically. This will often come unexpectedly and repeatedly, and every different mood at a different time casts a fresh light on the subject. It is this slow procedure that is understood by the expression *maturity of decisions.* For the task must be apportioned and in this way much that was previously overlooked will occur to us; and even the disinclination disappears since things often seem to be much more endurable when they are kept clearly in view. Likewise in what is theoretical, the proper time must be awaited and not even the man endowed with the greatest mind is capable at all times of thinking for himself. Therefore he does well to use the rest of the time for reading; but, as I have said, reading is a substitute for original thinking and supplies the mind with material, since someone else thinks for us, although always in a way that is not our own. For this reason, we should not read too much lest the mind become accustomed to the substitute and cease to know the thing itself, and thus get used to paths already well worn and become estranged from its own train of thought by following that of another. Least of all should we, for the sake of reading, withdraw entirely from the spectacle of the real world. For here the occasion and mood for original thought occur incomparably more frequently than in reading. That which is intuitively perceptual and real is, in its original nature and force, the natural object of the thinking mind and is most readily capable of deeply stimulating it.

According to these observations, it will not surprise us to learn that the man who is capable of thinking for himself and the book-philosopher can easily be recognized even by their style of delivery; the former by the stamp of earnestness, directness, and originality, by all his ideas and expressions that spring from his own perception of things; the latter, on the other hand, by the fact that everything is second-hand, consists of traditional notions, trash and rubbish, and is flat and dull, like the impression of an impression. His style, consisting of conventional, and even banal, phrases and current new-fangled words, resembles a small state whose circulation consists of none but foreign coins because it does not mint any of its own.

§ 264

Mere experience is as little able to replace thinking as is reading. Pure empiricism is related to thinking as eating to digestion and assimilation. When empiricism boasts that it alone through its discoveries has advanced human knowledge, it is as if the mouth were to boast that the existence of the body were solely its work.

§ 265

The works of all really capable minds differ from the rest in their character

of *decisiveness* and *definiteness,* together with the distinctness and clearness springing therefrom, since they at all times clearly and definitely knew what they wanted to express; it may have been in prose, verse, or tones. The rest lack that decisiveness and clearness; and in this respect they can be at once recognized.

The characteristic sign of all first-rate minds is the directness of all their judgements and opinions. All that they express and assert is the result of their own original thinking and everywhere proclaims itself as such even by the style of delivery. Accordingly, like princes, they have an imperial immediacy in the realm of the mind; the rest are all mediatized, as is already seen from their style which has no stamp of originality.

Therefore every genuine and original thinker is to this extent like a monarch; he is immediate and perceives no one who is his superior. Like the decrees of a monarch, his judgements spring from his own supreme power and come directly from himself. For he no more accepts authorities than does the monarch take orders; on the contrary, he admits nothing but what he himself has confirmed. On the other hand, minds of the common ruck who labour under all kinds of current opinions, authorities, and prejudices, are like the crowd which silently obeys laws and orders.

§ 266

Those who are so eager and hasty to decide debatable questions by quoting authorities, are really glad when they can bring into the field the intellect and insight of someone else instead of their own, which they lack. Their number is legion; for as Seneca says: *unus quisque mavult credere, quam judicare.*[2] And so in their controversies, authorities are the weapons generally chosen with which they pitch into one another; and whoever is involved in these is ill-advised to defend himself against them with grounds and arguments. For against such weapons they are horny Siegfrieds immersed in the flood of an inability to think and judge. They will, therefore, hold up to him their authorities as an *argumentum ad verecundiam,*[3] and will cry *victoria*!

[2 'Everyone prefers to believe rather than to give his own opinion.' *(De vita beata,* I , 4.)]
[3 An argument that avails itself of human respect for great men, ancient customs and authority generally in order to strengthen one's point.]

§ 267

In the realm of reality, beautiful, happy, and agreeable as it may have been, we always move only under the influence of heaviness which must constantly be overcome; whereas in the realm of ideas we are bodiless spirits without weight and pressure. Therefore no happiness on earth can compare with that which a fine and fruitful mind finds in itself at a happy hour.

§ 268

The presence of an idea is like that of a loved one. We imagine that we shall never forget it and that the beloved can never become indifferent to us; but out of sight, out of mind! The finest thought runs the risk of being irretrievably forgotten if it is not written down, and the beloved of being taken from us unless she has been wedded.

§ 269

There are plenty of ideas that are of value to the man who thinks them; but of them only a few have the power to act through repercussion or reflection, that is to gain the reader's interest after they have been written down.

§ 270

But here only that is of real value which we have in the first instance thought out *for ourselves.* Thus we can divide thinkers into those who think primarily *for themselves* and those who think at once *for others.* The former are the genuine *self-thinkers* in the double meaning of the term; they are the real *philosophers.* For they alone take the matter seriously; and the pleasure and happiness of their existence consists in just thinking. The others are the *sophists;* they wish to *shine* and seek their fortune in what they hope to obtain from others in this way; this is where they are in earnest. We can soon see from his whole style and method to which of the two classes a man belongs. Lichtenberg is an example of the first; Herder belongs to the second.

§ 271

The *problem of existence is* very great and very close to us; this existence that is dubious, questionable, tormented, fleeting, and dream-like. It is so great and so near that, the moment we become aware of it, it overshadows and hides all other problems and purposes. Now in this connection, we see how all men, with few and rare exceptions, are not clearly conscious of the problem; in fact, they do not appear to have grasped it at all, but are much more concerned about everything else. They live for the day and think only of the scarcely longer span of their personal future, for either they expressly decline to consider the problem, or else, with regard thereto, they willingly make a compromise through some system of popular metaphysics with which they are satisfied. If we carefully consider all this, we may form the opinion that only in a much wider sense can man be called a *thinking being;* and then we shall not be very surprised at any trait of thoughtlessness or simplicity. On the contrary, we shall realize that the intellectual horizon of the normal man transcends, it is true, that of the animal which is unaware of the future and the past and whose existence is, so to speak, a single present. But we shall also realize that the human mental horizon is not so incalculably far removed from the animal's as is generally assumed.

It is in accordance with the foregoing that, even in conversation, we find the thoughts of most people to be clipped as short as chopped straw, so that out of them a longer thread cannot be spun.

If this world were populated with really thinking beings, it would be impossible for all kinds of noise to be permitted and given such unlimited scope, even the most terrible and purposeless. But if nature had intended man for thinking, she would not have given him ears, or at any rate would have furnished them with air-tight flaps, as with bats whom for this reason I envy. But like the rest, man is really a poor animal whose powers are calculated merely for the maintenance of his existence. For this reason, he needs ears which are always open and, even unasked, announce the approach of a pursuer both by night and by day.

* Scanned from Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume Two, Translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

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