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Essays and Aphorisms

Selected and Translated with an Introduction by

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PENGUIN BOOKS

ON THINKING FOR YOURSELF

1

As the biggest library if it is in disorder is not as useful as a small but well-arranged one, so you may accumulate a vast amount of knowledge but it will be of far less value to you than a much smaller amount if you have not thought it over for yourself; because only through ordering what you know by comparing every truth with every other truth can you take complete possession of your knowledge and get it into your power. You can think about only what you know, so you ought to learn something; on the other hand, you can know only what you have thought about.

Now you can apply yourself voluntarily to reading and learning, but you cannot really apply yourself to thinking: thinking has to be kindled, as a fire is by a draught, and kept going by some kind of interest in its object, which may be an objective interest or merely a subjective one. The latter is possible only with things that affect us personally, the former only to those heads who think by nature, to whom thinking is as natural as breathing, and these are very rare. That is why most scholars do so little of it.

2

The difference between the effect produced on the mind by thinking for yourself and that produced by reading is incredibly great, so that the original difference which made one head decide for thinking and another for reading is continually increased. For reading forcibly imposes on the mind thoughts that are as foreign to its mood and direction at the moment of reading as the signet is to the wax upon which it impresses its seal. The mind is totally subjected to an external compulsion to think this or that for which it has no inclination and is not in the mood. On the other hand, when it is thinking for itself it is following its own inclination, as this has been more closely determined either by its immediate surroundings or by some

recollection or other: for its visible surroundings do not impose some *single* thought on the mind, as reading does; they merely provide it with occasion and matter for thinking the thoughts appropriate to its nature and present mood. The result is that *much* reading robs the mind of all elasticity, as the continual pressure of a weight does a spring, and that the surest way of never having any thoughts of your own is to pick up a book every time you have a free moment. The practice of doing this is the reason erudition makes most men duller and sillier than they are by nature and robs their writings of all effectiveness: they are in Pope's words:

For ever reading, never to be read.

3

Fundamentally it is only our own basic thoughts that possess truth and life, for only these do we really understand through and through. The thoughts of another that we have read are crumbs from another's table, the cast-off clothes of an unfamiliar guest.

4

Reading is merely a surrogate for thinking for yourself; it means letting someone else direct your thoughts. Many books, moreover, serve merely to show how many ways there are of being wrong, and how far astray you yourself would go if you followed their guidance. – You should read only when your own thoughts dry up, which will of course happen frequently enough even to the best heads; but to banish your own thoughts so as to take up a book is a sin against the Holy Ghost; it is like deserting untrammelled nature to look at a herbarium or engravings of landscapes.

It may sometimes happen that a truth, an insight, which you have slowly and laboriously puzzled out by thinking for yourself could easily have been found already written in a book; but it is a hundred times more valuable if you have arrived at it by thinking for yourself. For only then will it enter

your thought-system as an integral part and living member, be perfectly and firmly consistent with it and in accord with all its other consequences and conclusions, bear the hue, colour and stamp of your whole manner of thinking, and have arrived at just the moment it was needed; thus it will stay firmly and for ever lodged in your mind. This is a perfect application, indeed explanation, of Goethe's lines:

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,

Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen. ¹

For the man who thinks for himself becomes acquainted with the authorities for his opinions only after he has acquired them and merely as a confirmation of them, while the book-philosopher starts with his authorities, in that he constructs his opinions by collecting together the opinions of others: his mind then compares with that of the former as an automaton compares with a living man.

A truth that has merely been learnt adheres to us only as an artificial limb, a false tooth, a wax nose does, or at most like transplanted skin; but a truth won by thinking for ourself is like a natural limb: it alone really belongs to us. This is what determines the difference between a thinker and a mere scholar.

5

People who pass their lives in reading and acquire their wisdom from books are like those who learn about a country from travel descriptions: they can impart information about a great number of things, but at bottom they possess no connected, clear, thorough knowledge of what the country is like. On the other hand, people who pass their lives in thinking are like those who have visited the country themselves: they alone are really

familiar with it, possess connected knowledge of it and are truly at home in it.

6

A man who thinks for himself is related to the ordinary book-philosopher as an eyewitness is to an historian: the former speaks from his own immediate experience. That is why all men who think for themselves are in fundamental agreement: their differences spring only from their differing standpoints; for they merely express what they have objectively apprehended. The book-philosopher, on the contrary, reports what this man has said and that has thought and the other has objected, etc. Then he compares, weighs, criticizes these statements, and thus tries to get to the truth of the matter, in which respect he exactly resembles the critical historian.

7

Mere experience is no more a substitute for thinking than reading is. Pure empiricism is related to thinking as eating is to digestion and assimilation. When empiricism boasts that it alone has, through its discoveries, advanced human knowledge, it is as if the mouth should boast that it alone keeps the body alive.

8

The characteristic mark of minds of the first rank is the immediacy of all their judgements. Everything they produce is the result of thinking for themselves and already in the way it is spoken everywhere announces itself as such. He who truly thinks for himself is like a monarch, in that he recognizes no one over him. His judgements, like the decisions of a monarch, arise directly from his own absolute power. He no more accepts

authorities than a monarch does orders, and he acknowledges the validity of nothing he has not himself confirmed.

9

In the realm of actuality, however fair, happy and pleasant we may find it, we are nonetheless always under the influence of gravity, which we have continually to overcome: in the realm of thought, on the contrary, we are disembodied minds, weightless and without needs or cares. That is why there is no happiness on earth to compare with that which a beautiful and fruitful mind finds in a propitious hour in itself.

10

There are very many thoughts which have value for him who thinks them, but only a few of them possess the power of engaging the interest of a reader after they have been written down.

11

Yet, all the same, only that possesses true value which you have thought in the first instance *for your own instruction*. Thinkers can be divided into those who think in the first instance for their own instruction and those who do so for the instruction of others. The former are genuine *thinkers for themselves* in both senses of the words: they are the true *philosophers*. They alone are in earnest. The pleasure and happiness of their existence consists in thinking. The latter are *sophists*: they want to *appear* as thinkers and seek their happiness in what they hope thereby to get from others. This is what they are in earnest about. To which of these two classes a man belongs may quickly be seen by his whole style and manner. Lichtenberg is an example of the former class, Herder certainly belongs to the latter. ²

12

When you consider how great and how immediate is the *problem of existence*, this ambiguous, tormented, fleeting, dreamlike existence – so great and so immediate that as soon as you are aware of it it overshadows and obscures all other problems and aims; and when you then see how men, with a few rare exceptions, have no clear awareness of this problem, indeed seem not to be conscious of it at all, but concern themselves with anything rather than with this problem and live on taking thought only for the day and for the hardly longer span of their own individual future, either expressly refusing to consider this problem or contenting themselves with some system of popular metaphysics; when, I say, you consider this, you may come to the opinion that man can be called a *thinking being* only in a very broad sense of that term and no longer feel very much surprise at any thoughtlessness or silliness whatever, but will realize, rather, that while the intellectual horizon of the normal man is wider than that of the animal – whose whole existence is, as it were, one continual present, with no consciousness of past or future – it is not so immeasurably wider as is generally supposed.