

Thinking and Thought

Dora Marsden

1913

It is strange to find searchers coming here seeking thoughts, followers after truth seeking new lamps for old, right ideas for wrong. It seems fruitless to affirm that our business is to annihilate thought, to shatter the new lamps no less than the old, to dissolve ideas, the "right" as well as the "wrong". "It is a new play of artistry, some new paradox," they reflect, not comprehending that artistry and paradox are left as the defences of power not yet strong enough to comprehend. If a man has the power that comprehends, what uses has he left for paradox? If he sees a thing as it is, why must he needs describe it in terms of that which is not? Paradox is the refuge of the adventurous guesser: the shield of the oracle whose answer is not ready. Searchers should not bring their thoughts to us: we have no scruple in destroying their choicest, and giving them none in return. They would be well able to repair the depredations elsewhere, however, for nowhere else, save here, are thoughts not held sacred and in honour. Everywhere, from all sides, they press in thick upon men, suffocating life. All is thought and no thinking. *We* do the thinking: the rest of the world spin thoughts. If from the operation of thinking one rises up only with thoughts, not only has the thinking-process gone wrong: it has not begun. To believe that it has is as though one should imagine the work of digesting food satisfactorily carried through when the mouth has been stuffed with sand.

The process of thinking is meant to co-ordinate two things which are real: the person who thinks and the rest of the phenomenal world, the world of sense. Any part of the process which can be described in terms unrelated to these two — and only two — real parties in the process is redundant and pernicious, an unnecessary by-product which it would be highly expedient to eliminate. Thoughts, the entire world of ideas and concepts, are just these intruders and irrelevant excesses. Someone says, apropos of some change without a difference in the social sphere, "We are glad to note the triumph of progressive ideas." Another, "We rejoice in the fact that we are again returning to the ideas of honour and integrity of an earlier age." We say, leprosy or cholera for choice. Idea, idea, always the idea. As though the supremacy of the idea were not the subjection of men, slaves to the idea. Men need no ideas. They have no use for them (Unless indeed they are of the literary breed — then they live upon them by their power to beguile the simple). What men need is power of being, strength in themselves: and intellect which in the thinking process goes out as a scout, comparing, collating, putting like by like, or nearly like, is but the good servant which the individual being sends afield that he may the better protect, maintain and augment himself. Thinking, invaluable as it is in the service of being, is, essentially

a very intermittent process. It works only between whiles. In the nadir and zenith of men's experience it plays no part, when they are stupid and when they are passionate. Descartes' maxim "Cogito ergo sum," carried the weight it did and does merely because the longfelt influence of ideas had taken the virtue out of men's souls. Stronger men would have met it, not with an argument, but a laugh. It is philosophy turned turtle. The genesis of knowledge is not in thinking but in being. Thinking widens the limits of knowledge, but the base of the latter is in feeling. "I know" because "I am." The first follows the second and not contrariwise. The base — and highest reaches — of knowledge lie not in spurious thoughts, fine-drawn, not yet in the humble and faithful collecting of correspondences which is thinking, but in experienced emotion. What men may be, their heights and depths, they can divine only in experienced emotion. The vitally true things are all personally revealed, and they are true primarily only for the one to whom they are revealed. For the rest the revelation is hearsay. Each man is his own prophet. A man's "god" (a confusing term, since it has nothing to do with God, the Absolute — a mere thought) is the utmost emotional reach of himself: and is in common or rare use according to each individual nature. A neighbour's "god" is of little use to any man. It represents a wrong goal, a false direction.

We are accused of "finesse-ing with terms." No accusation could be wider off the mark. We are analysing terms; we believe, indeed, that the next work for the lovers of men is just this analysis of naming. It will go completely against the grain of civilisation, cut straight across culture: that is why the pseudo-logicians loathe logic — indeed, it will be a matter for surprise that one should have the temerity to name the word. So great a fear have the cultured of the probing of their claims that they are counselling the abandonment of this necessary instrument. They would prefer to retain inaccurate thinking which breeds thoughts, to accurate thinking which reveals facts and in its bright light annihilates the shadows bred of dimness, which are thoughts. Analysis of the process of naming: inquiry into the impudent word-trick which goes by the name of "abstraction of qualities": re-estimation of the form-value of the syllogism; challenging of the slipshod methods of both induction and deduction; the breaking down of closed systems of "classification" into what they should be — graded descriptions; *these* things are more urgently needed than thinkable in the intellectual life of today. The settlement of the dispute of the nominalist and realist schoolmen of the Middle Ages in favour of the former rather than the latter would have been of infinitely greater value to the growth of men than the discoveries of Columbus, Galileo and Kepler. It would have enabled them to shunt off into nothingness the mountain of culture which in the world of the West they have been assiduously piling up since the time of the gentle father of lies and deceit, Plato. It is very easy, however, to understand why the conceptualists triumphed, and are still triumphing, despite the ravages they have worked on every hand. The concept begets the idea, and every idea installs its concrete authority. All who wield authority do it in the name of an idea: equality, justice, love, right, duty, humanity, God, the Church, the State. Small wonder, therefore, if those who sit in the seats of authority look askance at any tampering with names and ideas. It is a different matter from questioning the of *one* idea. Those who, in the name of one idea do battle against the power of another, can rely upon some support. Indeed, changing new lamps for old is the favourite form of intellectual excitement inasmuch as while it is not too risky, is not a forlorn hope, it yet ranges combatants on opposing sides with all the zest of a fight. But to question *all* ideas is to leave authoritarians without any foothold whatsoever. Even opposing authorities will sink differences and combine to crush an Ishmaelite who dares. Accordingly, after three quarters of a thousand years, the nominalist position is where it was: nowhere, and all men are in thrall to ideas — culture. They are

still searching for the Good, the Beautiful and the True. They are no nearer the realisation that the Good in the actual never is a general term, but always a specific, i.e. that which is “good for me” (or you, or anyone) varying with time and person, in kind and substance; that the Beautiful is likewise “beautiful for me” (or you, or anyone) varying with time and person, in kind and substance, measured by a standard wholly subjective; that the True is just that which corresponds: in certainties, mere verified observation of fact; in doubt, opinion as to fact and no more, a mere “I think it so” in place of “I find it so.” As specifics, they are real: as generalisations, they are thoughts, spurious entities, verbiage representing nothing, and as such are consequently in high repute. The work of purging language is likely to be a slow one even after the battle of argument in its favour shall have been won. It is observable that egoists, for instance, use “should,” “ought,” and “must” quite regularly in the sense which bears the implication of an existing underlying “Duty.” Denying authority, they use the language of authority. If the greatest possible satisfaction of self (which is a pleasure) is the motive in life, with whose voice does “Duty” speak? Who or what for instance lays it down that our actions must not be “invasive” of others? An effete god, presumably, whose power has deserted him, since most of us would be hard put to it to find action and attitudes which are not invasive. Seizing land — the avenue of life — is invasive: loving is invasive, and so is hating and most of the emotions. The emphasis accurately belongs on “defence” and not on “invasion” and defence is self-enjoined.

No, Duty, like the rest, is a thought, powerless in itself, efficient only when men give it recognition for what it is not and doff their own power in deference, to set at an advantage those who come armed with the authority of its name. And likewise with “Right.” What is “right” is what I prefer and what you and the rest prefer. Where these “rights” overlap men fight is out; their *power* becomes umpire, their might is their right. Why keep mere words sacred? Since right is ever swallowed up in might why speak of right? Why seek to acquire rights when each right has to be matched by the might which first secures and then retains it? When men acquire the ability to make and co-ordinate accurate descriptions, that is, when they learn to think, the empire of mere words, “thoughts”, will be broken, the sacred pedestals shattered, and the seats of authority cast down. The contests and achievements of owners of “powers” will remain.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Dora Marsden
Thinking and Thought
1913

Retrieved 10/22/2021 from <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:519757/>
Originally published in *The New Freewoman* Volume I Number 5 (August 15, 1913)

theanarchistlibrary.org