

CAN ONE WILL ONE'S THOUGHTS ?

Suppose someone said : "I shall have thought T_1 at time T_1 ," then we should imagine that this person had at his disposal a variety of thoughts - perhaps, $T_0, T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n$ - and that he could choose to have T_1 at any time convenient to him. We would also imagine that in this person's world his statement would be described as being a correct statement if at time t_1 he actually had thought T_1 and no other thought. If thought T_2 , or some thought other than T_1 occurred to him at time t_1 , a future moment in time, then our thinker's claim would fail to qualify as a true statement.

A statement such as the one just mentioned forces us to accept that at any given time an array of thoughts is available for selection. While we must admit that many people have thought about many things and have, in fact, expressed their thinking, this does not mean that all thinking has reached a point of finality. Thinking would have reached its points of finality when what needs to be said has been said so completely, so indisputably, so perfectly and with such universal validity that no new contribution would be possible, no new interpretation conceivable, no new application foreseeable, no infinitesimal change necessary. For this state to prevail it is not necessary that any restrictions be placed on the number of systems that can exist, that is to say, that it is possible to have any number of subsets within an universe that encloses all possible areas of enunciation. Now, a system (or a subset of enunciative possibilities) would be an area within which thoughts of a certain nature can be included.

However, certain restrictions must be imposed if thinking is to be at a standstill. First, all permissible systems must be mutually exclusive. Second, each system must be independent in the sense that no mapping or transformation be possible between any two systems. To these restrictions two more stringent conditions must be added: Each system can contain only one proposition at most; and no modification of this proposition (like negations or qualifications, for instance), no matter how strong or weak, are admissible. Thus, one could imagine that in this situation certain disciplines would be demarcated, say, as physics, chemistry, mathematics and economics. The subset of economics could be seen as being composed of demand theory, production theory, etc., etc. However, a proposition that falls under the domain of demand theory would have to be self-evident and self-sufficient, free from the potentiality of being compared with another theory, improved or explicated by propositions from another subset or system, like mathematics; applied in another system, like agriculture; or extended to develop other subsets included within the subset of economics, for instance, to derive theorems in production theory. Quite simply, in order to obtain a world where the dialectical progress of knowledge is arrested we would have to impose many rigid conditions and assume that the first propositions that did occur were arrived at in some mysterious fashion, destined not to recur in a similarly mysterious fashion again.

But a world where thinking is robbed of its ability to participate in the dialectical process need not be the only world where one can will one's thoughts and boldly proclaim: "I shall have thought T_1 at time t_1 ." It is equally possible that although thinking proceeds on its onward movement, there may be some thinkers who might prefer to reconstruct already available thoughts.¹ In that case, time t_1 will refer to some time period

in the future, whereas thought T_1 would refer to a thought which had already been formulated, but with no constraint on the growth of thinking. This would mean that as new thoughts are developing and as others can be expected to arise in time, thinkers are free, as mentioned earlier, to reconstruct something that had been previously thought out *as if* it were being conceived for the first time. One method in this direction would be to recreate history for oneself. This demanding procedure would require that before consciously arriving at a once-thought-out thought, the thinker would have to reeover the conditions which motivated the genesis of the selected thought or line of thinking. This would entail living in the extant social mileu that was associated with the predetermined thought, engaging in intellectual debates that surrounded the predetermined thought; this would also entail forgetting about the existent social mileu in which the thinker lives, forgetting the economic conditions that are contemporaneous and forgetting on-going intellectual debates. In essence, this method would strive to return the enthusiastic thinker to the complex flow of events from which the intended thought sprouted. The difficulty with this exercise would be the impossibility of reversing time. With no known technique for temporal regression this method fails because it is logically trapped by the attempt to reverse a phenomenon (time) which by nature is irreversible. An escape route from this dilemma would be to *be* the thinker who had originally discovered the thought that is presently being re-sought. The difficulty here, aside from the obvious one of coming to terms with a person who is no longer alive, would be the difficulty of knowing what goes on in another person's mind. Again, it is not easy to prescribe how one could get *into* another person's mind, a problem compounded when one has to get into the mind of a dead person. In the usual course of events we would judge what a person does (speaks, writes, behaves) to be some

extension of what goes on 'within' a person. Observing the way a person salivates, talks about food, opens his eyes wide at the mention of a particular item on a menu, we may say : "I believe this man likes boiled eggs." It must be granted that what we know about this person's likes or dislikes, fondnesses and aversions, is limited by what he lets us know and by how much we can guess about him. What we are confronted with when challenged to be another person requires us to forgo our *belifes* and forces us (or rather our peculiar thinker) to *know* another person's mind, which amounts to *seeing* inside the "soul" of another. We are left in a spot, quite unable to accept or dismiss processes and entities that we can neither falsify nor validify, subjects about which there can be no description, discussion or cognisance (as we normally understand the term). We can only reply politely : "I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about," when someone declares : "I'm going to get into Cervantes' soul to have his thoughts on Don Quixote." Our apparent escape route really turns out to be a blind alley, and a bad one at that since it defies our ordinary language and asks to be spoken about, if one chooses to speak about this path, in a language unique to the speaker.

Undeniably, one could rediscover for oneself what one's predecessor had discovered. This can happen; but not in any self-conscious way. To lay claim to the ability to will one's thoughts, that is, to be able to decide upon one's choice of thoughts, stating in advance one's predetermind thought just wipes out any room for rediscovery. A rediscovery, like a discovery, cannot be intentional. Even the prospector for oil cannot decide that he would find his oil at this-and-this particular place. If he announces, "I will find oil at this-and-this place," one can only take it as an expression of his confidence and belief. The prospector, after all, is guided by geological surveys

and findings which point to the probabilities of finding oil in particular locations. The element of uncertainty – and anxiety – is a crucial component of any discovery process. Otherwise, one would be merely uncovering, what one all along knew was covered somewhere. A rediscovery, for a thinker, cannot properly be said to occur if he is not “carried along by the inertias of language and invention,”² since the “collaboration of chance”³ tempers a discovery, or a rediscovery, for that matter. The essence of a rediscovery lies in the fact that the ‘rediscoverer’, unaware of the processes, methods or arguments of his predecessor, retraces his (the predecessor’s) steps. The thoughts that result in a rediscovery would be new to the individual thinker who figured them out, not to the world, which had already witnessed this movement. What is a rediscovery according to recorded history would be a discovery, in all respects, to the individual concerned. As with a discovery, so with a rediscovery, it makes no sense to speak in advance and with certainty of the thoughts one *will* have.

It makes equally little sense to declare in advance that one will have a particular dream (D_1) at time t_3 . We would accept such a remark without any discomfort from a person who is known to be mentally unsound, otherwise a prediction of this type though expressed as a perfectly grammatical sentence is bound to be greeted with a start. It will be a different thing if this dreamer told us that this dream D_1 had been occurring to him without fail every night, for the past three weeks, and that he would not be surprised if this dream recurred. Our dreamer’s statement would then take on a new sense; it would mean something unlike his original statement. While his original statement “I shall have dream D_1 at time t_3 ” – would convey that he had control over his dreams, this statement when supported by data

on his dream trends would probably serve to convey his anxiety over the continual recurrence of dream D_1 , an entirely different impression, since his remark now indicates a lack of any control over this dream which seems to have a will of its own in its insistence on troubling him; having troubled our dreamer for so long he now expects the dream to trouble him for a further night.

It is unlikely that we make any mistake in imagining it possible to will our dreams because we know that dreaming really belongs to the realm of the unconscious. Whatever role the conscious mind has is limited to feeding the unconscious 'layer' of the mind with experiences which would then appear in some particular manner depending upon the personality of the dreamer. Roughly speaking, the unconscious mind has complete control over how waking experiences are to be 'processed' and 'presented' as dreams. Dreaming would not be dreaming if we could choose our dreams.

We could, however, choose what move to make in a game of chess. A player bent over a chessboard could say to himself: "I shall move the king pawn..." He need not say this; he need only move a particular piece. In moving a piece, or in telling himself that he will move a particular piece, the player demonstrates to us, or to himself, that he had this thought to move this piece. But one would be unreasonable if one insisted on saying: "I shall have a particular thought only: the thought to move the king pawn..." The foolishness in holding this view is blatantly obvious: one could announce the decision to have the thought only after the thought had occurred to one's mind. To say: "I shall have a particular thought only - the thought to move the king pawn," is as nonsensical as saying, "I shall have dream D_1 ." But we have greater freedom with chess games, because after a thought has occurred to us we can choose

whether or not to execute, develop or reject this thought; we have no such choice with dreams. As far as dreams are concerned we cannot say : " I now have this dream," unless this observation lies within the dream itself; but in games of chess and in other activities we engage in while awake we can say : " I now have this thought," or : " I now have this move in mind," or : " I now have this view." Thus thoughts that occur during dreams are subject to the rules of dreaming, but thoughts that occur during a game of chess, besides following the rules of chess playing, also exhibit a great deal in common with activities that call for thinking.

The chess player, like the physicist or the economist, is a thinker in that it is his aim to study the position of the various pieces and to decide the strongest possible move that could be made. Here, the player, having learnt how the various pieces can be moved, must judge how best he can assert his strength. The extent of a chess player's knowledge of the rules that govern the game of chess and his keenness in thinking about the interrelations between the various pieces⁴ are expressed by the strength of his move; to the extent that his move is good he is a good thinker. The chess player looks at the pieces on the board and ' thinks ', his thinking being directed towards understanding how the pieces are interrelated. Then, on the basis of his thinking, he makes his move, and the effectiveness of his move reflects the keenness of his thinking. While looking at the pieces on the board certain processes characteristic of thinking occur to the chess player, and then he has a thought (- experienced as understanding, knowing, realizing, discovering an insight). We know that the chess player has had a specific thought if he so expresses himself, perhaps by giving verbal expression to that thought, by writing it down in the form of chess notation, or by executing a move that corresponds to that thought. If the chess

player does none of this then we cannot know about that thought. Thoughts are not facts, not even when they are expressed tangibly. When thoughts are expressed then we can say: "So-and-so said this," "So-and-so thought this-and-this," "I see the sense of so-and-so's thoughts," "I understand this man's thinking." It may be true that the black pawn is in front of the white queen: that is, indeed, a fact; it is observable; the *thought* of this state of affairs would not, however, be a fact. It is not within normal human powers to see the colour of the black pawn that is referred to, and possible to hear someone say that the black queen and the white queen stand in a particular relation. The facticity of the relative positions of the pawn and the queen would remain so long as the relative positions of these pieces were not disturbed. This facticity would nevertheless give rise to thoughts pertaining to the configuration in sight. The thoughts that arise within people's minds with regard to this arrangement would always escape us in that they are neither observable (no one has ever seen a thought) nor are they amenable to rearrangement the way chess pieces are, or stones and bricks are. One can point to some things, but one cannot think about them for someone else.

Similarly, one cannot lead someone to a thought; just as truly, one cannot lead oneself to a thought. It would be correct to hold that, "I'm going to town," because a 'town' is a thing we are all capable of witnessing. We can also witness the road that leads to a town and, in fact, witness people driving or walking to town. None of this can be said if someone told us: "I'm going to have thought T_1 ." This statement sounds as nonsensical as the utterance: "I'm going to have presence of mind." A person's 'presence of mind' is unlike the pair of shoes he would like to buy, something he could show us if we accompanied him to a shoe store. We can say; "He had a pair of shoes," if we

see him wear them, or carry such a pair with him. But we could say: "He had presence of mind," if on several occasions at moments of pressure this man 'displays' clear thinking. At best the statement, "I'm going to have presence of mind," is a statement of hope, intent, something that can be verified only after this virtue is exhibited, since we cannot see anyone travel along a road towards 'presence of mind.' On the other hand, one could decide to think *about* something or other. It is possible to exercise one's will here because one does not commit oneself to a resultant set of thoughts. The choice in this matter is a choice between looking either at one set of facts or another set of facts, rather one can choose to think about pawns or about the money people have in their pockets.

The crucial problem about willing one's thoughts can be resolved if one understands 'will' to be exhibited by choosing something over another, that is, the power to accept one thing and reject another. This necessitates foreknowledge of alternatives. A decision or a choice, while being an expression of one's will necessitates the presence of a 'thought' as the basis for action. So, willing a thought is to have *the* thought to have *a* thought. In our experience, the 'a' thought (the resultant of one's brain-processes) must precede the 'the' thought (the decision to will) if one can talk at all about the 'a' thought, or the thought that one wishes to favour. Given the nature of thoughts and thinking this seems a meaningless endeavour.

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NOTES

1. See "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths; Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Harmondsworth, Middlesex : 1970 pp. 62-71
2. *Ibid*, p. 68.
3. *Ibid*, p. 67.
4. Cf. "A thinker is very much like a draughtsman whose aim it is to represent all the interrelations between things." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. Von Wright, tr. by Peter Winch, Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 12 e.