

A THINKER'S AGENCY IN THINKING

Let us say I announce my intention to think and someone says, "To think for oneself is to think of oneself." What then would we make of this statement?

Our first reaction might be to respond by feeling that although we all do think for ourselves we are definitely not thinking of ourselves whenever we think. For instance, when I set an intellectual problem for myself that does not mean that I have decided to think about myself. The problem which I have set for myself could be, say, about global disorder; and unless I constitute the world I cannot be said to be thinking of myself when I am trying to solve some problem of the world. Surely the world and I are not identical: I am the subject and the world is the object; and it is quite silly to imagine that there is any confusion on a matter as direct as this.

If our first reaction is dismissed we can then interpret the statement "To think for oneself is to think of oneself" as being a warning that the very act of setting intellectual problems for oneself is a selfish act. When half the world is either at war or hungry it will seem perverse to a sensitive person that some people should be content with sitting at their tables and making claims that they are trying to solve the misfortunes of the world. By this interpretation it seems that to speak of thinking for oneself is valid in a psychological sense, indicating something like a personal obsession, an intense commitment towards solving a

particular problem for one's own satisfaction. The selfishness that is referred to here is the selfishness of catering to one's own priorities – in this case the priority of seeking intellectual over practical solution – thus ignoring or abstracting away from the felt needs and pains of others. Perhaps, this statement comes from someone who would prefer us to become social workers or social activists.

There is, however, the possibility that this statement points to deeper issues that concern thinking. Conceivably, the problem relates to the issue of the thinker – his Ego as opposed to his metaphysical self – and the connection that this bears to the status of thinking. Hence, an elucidation of the cryptical statement that confronts us will depend on what is meant by 'I' when we say "I think such-and-such;" it will depend on whether we can in any sense speak of "my thought." It will also depend on the extent to which we can exert our will when we are involved in thinking. These issues are of importance even for social workers and activists. Social workers and activists are not exempt from the need to think. Selfless as they may be they could unwarily be trapped into thinking of themselves; and although by its nature thinking is necessarily a personal activity, still it can sustain statements and actions of the most socially revolutionary nature.

Indeed, thinking is a personal activity in the sense that we are conscious of what we think and we alone know what is going on within our heads. We are able to form connections between various objects or events, we are able to form relationships, we are able to explain and theorise. Above all, the fact that we are personally involved in all these mental processes is clear to us. And this comes across most explicitly when we say, "I think this-and-this." Even when we say "X and Y happen", we might mean, perhaps, that "Kepler thinks X and Y happen",

and, of course, Kepler could then say, "I think X and Y happen because of this and this." In other words, to declare that I think certain things is to admit *my* agency behind those thoughts which *I* have organised in my mind in a particular fashion.

But to hold this view of thinking immediately leads us into a big problem. This is because when we claim to have certain thoughts we are in effect saying that we are aware that there exists what may be called a field of thought. However, to say that we are aware that a certain field exists is to say that there is a seer who sees the field. This seer cannot be within the field of thought for if this were so then there would not be anyone who could describe the field which we must be doing when we say "I think this-and-this." If the seer were to be within the field of thought, occupying very much the same status as all other elements within the field, nothing could be said of the elements.

On the other hand, we may be tempted to propose that there is a self which observes objects and events, and which draws relationships between these units. And that there is another self which observes and describes the activities of the first self. Unfortunately, we would then be forced to acknowledge that there is a series of observing selves, each beyond the previous one. If this were to be the case there would be an infinitude of observing selves and we should be able to enumerate a number of them. This is out of the question because one is always him-self. One does not have a higher self and a lower self. More simply, even if there were an infinitude of selves that would not mean that the question of seership is solved. The question remains regardless of the number of selves we posit.

The relation of the self (or the seer) to the field of thought becomes less troublesome if we accept the fact that the self (or the subject) is not itself within the field of thought. This comes across lucidly if we employ the analogy of the eye and the field of vision. It is true that the human eye can see whatever lies before it. Yet, the eye that sees what lies before it cannot see itself. The eye that sees is not itself included amongst the various objects that are seen by it. The eye that sees is beyond what it sees, otherwise the eye would not be able to see and describe what it sees. Ironically, the eye cannot describe itself because although it sees, it cannot see itself. This attests to the objective nature of the eye. The eye as seer is beyond what it sees. By virtue of being 'beyond' it cannot be seen by itself.

Just as the eye stands beyond the field of vision, so the metaphysical subject or the transcendental 'I' stands outside the field of thought. But it is necessary to be wary about carelessly extending the eye-analogy. We think of the eye and the field of vision as two discrete entities. This image comes from the kind of picture generated by such examples as that of a man perched at the peak of a hill and watching the goings-on in the valley far below his feet. This sort of example, wrongly used, provides the foundation for failing to recognise the danger of applying rules that are acceptable in another domain. That of space, in this case. We can draw a circle and then say that all this is included within the circle, and all this, i. e., whatever is outside the circumference, is not within the circle. We would be making gross mistake if we extended these rules to logic. It can be said that all this is logical and so is sensible, and all this is illogical and so is nonsensical. But we cannot speak of a boundary of logic in the same way as we speak of the circumference of a circle. Because what is logical and sensible can be thought of, whereas what is illogical and nonsensical cannot be thought of. Taking

a step further, it is easy to appreciate that I think of such things as P and Q and R. It is I who think of P, and it is I who think of Q, and it is I who think of R. It is the same 'I,' too, who states that I think of P, Q and R. It is, once again, the same 'I' who records that I have stated that I think of various things. Although I think, the transcendental 'I' is not a thought. The transcendental 'I,' being characteristic of any subject, is not an object. But we tend to believe that the 'I' which thinks thinks *about* this and *about* that. I think, supposedly, about the different objects that lie before me. The subject that thinks—the transcendental 'I' — is really more elusive. Taking yet another step we see that if we were to try to isolate this 'I' we would find ourselves in an embarrassing position. Because we would first start off by identifying and describing our bodies, then we would go on to identify and describe our mental activities, and then we would find ourselves to be in something of a fix if we were asked to describe the 'I' to which all this occurs. It then becomes clear that the 'I' which thinks is not a thought, and the 'I' that experiences is not itself an experience.

If the transcendental 'I' is beyond thought and experience it is quite difficult to see the validity of any attempt to seek ownership of thought. It is true that there are thoughts. There is no cause for uneasiness on that point. What does cause uneasiness is that 'entity' which we call 'I.' Because if this 'I' is beyond thought and experience, then this metaphysical subject is beyond description and comprehension. It then makes no sense to endow the unknowable with attributes, not even with the attribute of authorship. To put this differently: the metaphysical subject by virtue of its transcendental nature lies beyond space and time. To speak of that which lies beyond space and time is impossible since what lies beyond space and time cannot be thought of. Consequently, it is unimaginable to speak of 'my

thought' - simply because this 'I' makes no claims, not even the claim of something or other being 'mine'.

Equally, it is meaningless to say that a thought is mine in the sense that I have willed this particular thought. Even at a very concrete level we are struck by our powerlessness. If I went to dry my clothes in the sun I would bring my clothes out. It might rain just when I bring my clothes out. Supposing the weather is more reliable, then I shall be left at the mercy of the sun. After all, I depend on the sun's rays, and there is nothing here about which I can exert my will. The sun and its rays are beyond my will. Should the sun not rise that day—and that is logically possible—then I would be left with my wet clothes.

At the level of psychology our powerlessness is even more astounding. Take the case of a rat scurrying past our feet. One of us might react by shrieking in fear, someone might angrily rush in search of a club, another person might shake his head as if to express distress over the possible threat to our health, and the rare person would maintain his equanimity. Each of us would react in a manner consistent with our training, temperament and past experiences. What thoughts arise in our minds given a certain situation thus depends on so many factors beyond our control. Should I persistently have thoughts that I find disagreeable—for example, if I am plagued by frightful thoughts whenever I see a rat and sometimes break into a sweat—then I might resort to some process of cognitive psychotherapy. Undertaking certain mental exercises does not necessitate that I shall have the thoughts that I want. There is no necessary connection between wanting to have a thought and having that thought. It is easy to illustrate the absence of any such connection. For instance, we could prepare ourselves to think about some subject, say, physics. As part of the preparation we could

read many books and journals on physics. But all this preparation is no guarantee that the theory of relativity should occur to any one of us (assuming this theory is yet to be formulated). Although I might want to have a certain thought there is nothing I can do to ensure that it will occur to me. And should it occur to me there is still nothing to negate the fact that wanting and having are logical non-sequitars.

It seems unwarranted to speak of 'my thought' for two basic reasons. First, it does not make sense to speak of thinking or having a thought as if one had ownership over the process of thinking, or as if one could possess a thought. We could definitely prepare ourselves in a certain manner, as if to entertain a thought or to make ourselves conducive to receiving the thought; but that would be all. Second, given the transcendental nature of 'I' it does not, once again, make sense to ascribe ownership to it. The metaphysical self being beyond time and space, and beyond subject and object, it cannot be said to possess this idea or that opinion. Being transcendental, the 'I' that thinks cannot be meaningfully said to claim ownership over a thought. Since no Ego is involved in thinking it would be wrong to say that the metaphysical self owns or possesses thoughts.

It makes sense, instead, to speak of thinking as a process that involves submission. Not will. That is because the process of thinking requires the thinker to wait upon thoughts. All that is within the reach of the thinker is to prepare himself to think. This preparation will take the form of reading, gathering facts, acquainting oneself with all that has already been said. Beyond that there is nothing we can do. It would be incorrect to imagine that we could wait *for* thoughts. That would imply waiting for something specific. We could wait for the bus, or for our friends. To say that we are waiting for the bus or for our friends

is meaningful because we know what we are waiting for and there is a certain time range over which we can reasonably expect these events to occur. We cannot estimate when a thought will occur to us. We have no control over its passage. It is as if the thought will decide when it will appear to the thinker. A thought can very well appear instantaneously; and the instant is not within time, it transcends time. In addition, we cannot anticipate the nature or character of a thought. Since only archangels and yogis have foreknowledge, mortals such as us will know the content of a thought once it occurs, and not before. To think is therefore to wait *upon* thought, this waiting being undertaken by the transcendental self.

To wait *for* thoughts is, strictly speaking, meaningless. Thinking will be a perversion if the thinker is waiting for a thought. This perverted activity will lie and remain at the level of propositions. Thinking will then come to be mistaken for the formulation and evaluation of proposition. All that will matter will be the correctness of a proposition. Taken from a slightly different angle, thinking in this perverted form will solely imply the verification, calculation and manipulation of facts. The focus of all attention will be centred on collecting facts, verifying or negating them and expressing them in different ways. But it must be remembered that facts only contribute to the setting of a problem, they are parts of the problem to be solved and should never be mistaken to be a part of the solution of a problem. As has been stated in a different context earlier on, the solution to any problem in space and time can only lie beyond space and time; but facts and propositions cannot constitute a part of any solution because facts and propositions lie within the world. What lies within the world is the case, it is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen. If our interest is in the truth rather than in what is correct, then we cannot be

content with documenting and commenting on facts and propositions, we must take it upon ourselves to seek the sense beyond the obvious, we must be willing to submit ourselves to what is higher than the obvious.

When thinking is perverted, the transcendental self does not participate in thinking. Consequently, thinking which properly belongs to the metaphysical realm becomes distorted into a psychological activity. It is at this level that one can refer to thinking for oneself as thinking of oneself. It is valid to speak of thinking for oneself - although that is not characteristic of thinking, meaningfully considered - in the sense that the Ego is the centre of fact gathering, verification and processing. By extension, if one's Ego is at the centre, then one is simply reflecting upon what one can do to the facts at one's disposal. To reflect upon what use one can put one's facts to is to be concerned about one's capabilities, i.e., to think about oneself. Thus, thinking which is not a waiting upon is a perversion because what properly should be at the centre (thought) has its place taken by the Ego. And the transcendental self is completely forgotten

When the transcendental self is at the centre of thinking then we could go so far as to say, "Thoughts think," instead of "I think." To allow the transcendental self to participate in thinking is to preserve the pristine nature of thinking. Otherwise, thinking becomes an egocentric activity; thinking is reduced to shrewdness and calculation. We must, therefore, understand the statement "To think for oneself is to think of oneself" as a warning against the temptation to be clever and egocentric.

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