



If Thinking Is Obsolete, So Is Virtue

In one of his more recent columns — “Is Thinking Obsolete?” — Thomas Sowell takes note of the intellectual laziness that appears to have consumed our culture.

“It is always amazing,” he writes, “how many serious issues are not discussed seriously, but instead simply generate assertions and counter-assertions.” Sowell identifies “television talk shows,” where “people on opposite sides often just try to shout each other down” as a particularly salient illustration of this troubling phenomenon.

“There is a remarkable range of ways of seeming to argue without actually producing any coherent argument,” he notes.

In part, the inability to think critically and honestly is the legacy of “decades of dumbed-down education.” Yet there is more to it than this. Sowell states: “Education is not merely neglected in many of our schools today, but is replaced to a great extent by ideological indoctrination.” He laments that “a student can go all the way from elementary school to a Ph.D. without encountering any fundamentally different vision of the world from that of the prevailing political correctness.”

What’s even worse is that “the moral perspective” that accompanies “this prevailing ideological view is all too often that of people who see themselves as being on the side of the angels against the forces of evil” — irrespective of the issue in question.

Of course, Sowell is correct about all of this. Yet matters are actually worse than what he says, for with the death of thinking goes the death of virtue.

The good thinker must possess the virtue of analytical rigor, it is true. But this isn’t the only virtue that comes with good thinking.

For millennia, the story of Socrates’ fate — he was sentenced to death for questioning morals and virtues and died from drinking hemlock, a poison — has served as a constant reminder that the enterprise of thinking, real thinking, is an inherently subversive activity. It is radical, for there is no idea that is immunized against it, no idea that the committed thinker will not interrogate. Obviously, then, thinking is a threatening engagement — for both the thinker as well as those to whom he turns his





attention.

Thus, thinking both requires and cultivates the excellence of courage. It is a manly art that fortifies its practitioners even as they risk being alienated from “the respectable crowd” — i.e., the self-appointed guardians of the prevailing orthodoxy.

However, it isn't just ostracism that is the cost of good thinking. The good thinker also risks his own self-image, for clear thinking demands self-denial, the denial of those of the thinker's own emotions, passions, and desires that conflict with his pursuit of truth. Self-denial is self-discipline, or moderation — traditionally, a cardinal virtue. Yet this, in turn, also gives rise to honesty or veracity.

But there are still other crowning achievements that come with good thinking.

Whatever else may be said of them, while trying “to shout each other down,” those television talk-show personalities to whom Sowell alludes most definitely *cannot* be said to possess humility. But humility is necessary for clear thinking, for it enables us to recognize the very real possibility that our preconceptions, and even our convictions, just might be wrong. Without this acknowledgment, the thinker reduces himself to nothing more or less than a mere apologist for his own prejudices.

Humility, in turn, is indispensable if wisdom is to be had. When the Oracle informed Socrates that he was the wisest of human beings, he was incredulous. On the one hand, he knew that the gods cannot lie. On the other, he was also painfully aware of his own ignorance. After a time, he discovered that the gods were right: He was the wisest of men, but precisely because he knew that he knew nothing.

Finally, good, sober thinking breeds a sense of justice or good will. The good thinker grants a fair hearing to all ideas — including, especially, those of his opponents.

Courage, honesty, moderation, wisdom, humility, justice — for thousands of years, Western civilization has prized these character traits. Our ancestors also realized that these excellences are inseparable from that of good thinking.

If, as Sowell suggests, thinking is obsolete, then virtue is imperiled as well.



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