

'A good world needs knowledge, kindness and courage. It does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.' (Bertrand Russell) Discuss.

Hardly anyone would dispute the truthfulness of the first part of Russell's statement. The world we live in determines who we are and the quality of our life, so no rational person would want to hide behind cowardice in a place inhabited by apathetic and antagonizing creatures. The second part is much more disputable, however. Although the passing of time is inevitable, many embrace nostalgia and seek to learn from the past. Russell's claim was initially made in reference to religion and its influence on individual morality. However, I believe that it makes an interesting and important debate when applied to a wider variety of aspects of the world, including politics and the society at large. Russell believed that the key to gaining knowledge, happiness and courage was free intelligence. He suggests that following mindlessly what was said in the past, inhibits independent thinking and leads to widely understood unhappiness. In a democratic, open society that we live in, blind obedience to the 'ignorant men' as such is regarded with contempt, yet I will try to show how 'free intelligence' let loose can be dangerous for individuals and the society. To discuss the topic we need to make a distinction between collective learning and individual thinking.

The first is a process of mere assimilation of information, as dictated by some authority, be it the Church, the government or the society, and it seems to be exactly what Russell is condemning, when he speaks of 'hankering after the past' and 'fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago'. Employment and creation of free intelligence, can be associated with the process of thinking independently, which allows for creativity and individualism in forming one's views. For many liberals, learning inhibits thinking and this argument will be considered first.

That learning alone proves to be dangerous for free intelligence and thinking, is demonstrated by its importance for the flourishing of totalitarian regimes. Those at the top of a superstructure establish a moral high ground, which is then presented to the masses as an ultimate objective to be reached, or at least a rule to be adhered to. This ensures that the government's position is not endangered in any way; the less free thinking there is, the smaller the possibility of somebody finding flaws in the regime and its functioning, let alone of them voicing these opinions. From a very young age one is taught opinions of leaders, often those from the past, and this is always a repetitive process. Those views are not discussed, but merely absorbed and memorized, which destroys one's creative and analytic faculties. In relation to bringing about knowledge, kindness and courage, it *can* still yield positive effects. The process of decision-making becomes more efficient, as less debates mean greater unity, which facilitates governing. Plato would argue, that if his 'philosopher kings' did exist, then learning their rules and opinions, would contribute to this process. Not only would decisions be made

quickly and easily, but they would certainly be the correct ones. However, even the philosopher himself doubted whether his vision was realistic, and history proved his doubts right. When learning is all there is, and complete submission is all that results from it, the rulers have the potential to exploit it for their own benefit, as many have done in the past. Learning alone does not allow an individual to function effectively in a real society and life, because they are unable to deal critically with new problems. We are by nature social beings and spontaneity is part of this interaction, but one thing that learning, as understood in its extreme form, cannot accommodate is spontaneous reaction. This causes further problems, such as the inability of citizens to work together for the benefit of society. Its daily functioning needed for its survival is eroded, together with its structure and identity. Moreover, learning without thinking and consequently understanding can have disastrous consequences for each individual, not just the community. For example, in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Boxer worked himself to death when trying to satisfy Napoleon, because he pre-learned that 'Napoleon is always right.' without considering the slogan independently. Plato described knowledge as '*justified, true beliefs*', so it is even disputable whether learning brings us any knowledge at all. Teaching under totalitarian regimes is not based solely on propaganda, so a lot of it is *true*, but defining whether North Korean children's worship of their 'great leader' is *justified*, proves rather controversial.

On the other hand, thinking and free intelligence without knowledge to underpin them are also dangerous. The first problem is that of relativism, which makes achieving knowledge, kindness and courage dependent on the individual. A world where nothing is clearly defined is a difficult one to function in. Unconstrained individualism can turn into pure and destructive egoism; what Hitler saw as the high moral ground would be condemned by Popper or Mandela. Under this system anyone is allowed to do anything, because that is what their individual reasoning dictates. 'It is right because I think so', could turn into a legitimate justification for genocide and incest. J.S. Mill in *On Liberty* stated, that one man's freedom ends, where another man's freedom begins. This is not a perfect definition, but at the moment it is the most commonly accepted one. Thus unconstrained free thinking, and consequently individualism (and relativism that is its intrinsic part) can actually lead to as many problems for happiness and personal freedom, as 'hankering about the past'.

Relativism would not be such a problem in the eyes of Thomas Hobbes, who believed that in the State of Nature all individual beings would act in their own self-interest. It would however, pose problems to other individuals living alongside them, because there might be situations when someone's harm is necessary for somebody else's gain. Free intelligence and thinking would allow those selfish individuals to craft their own moral and legal codes, but clashes of individual interests and rules would be inevitable (the same problem would still apply even if we defined morality and values in absolute terms). This also leads to the state of war and anarchy, as demonstrated in *The Leviathan*. We experience it, though to a much lesser extent, even when shopping – the selfish gain of the seller has

adverse effects on the buyer. Another problem with individual thinking and anarchism, is that individualism cannot survive for long. A natural leader will *always* emerge and take control; it is up to him/her how he/she is going to use authority, but some restrictions on free thinking or at least the way this thinking is put into practice will become necessary. This leads to imposition of learning sooner or later.

However, it doesn't have to be the kind of learning described earlier, but rather learning to underpin the individual thinking. Knowledge might be an objective *per se* for Russell, but it is also necessary for the achievement of effective free intelligence. A painter with great imagination and ideas cannot transfer them to canvas, unless he knows how to handle the brush and mix the colors. Similarly, an independent thinker in society can do no good, unless he ensures that his ideas had not failed in the past and that they are unlikely to fail in the present. Knowledge is not necessary only to spot reflections of our possible actions in the past, but also to remind us of our own fallibility. Thinking is always praised as the faculty that differentiates humans and animals, but immersing in it without the true and relevant knowledge can generate a God Complex. In this sense, knowledge paradoxically makes us aware 'that we know nothing', which in fact acts as a stimuli to learn more, but also to think to fill the gaps in our knowledge.

In fact, the learning practiced *by itself* in a closed society and the individual thinking *by itself* in an open society, separately lead to ignorance condemned by Russell. The true education, that leads to knowledge, kindness and courage is the reconciliation of learning with free intelligence and thinking. It allows the collective learners to appreciate the needs and opinions of individual thinkers and vice versa.

Summa summarum, Confucius rightly said that "he who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger." Russell's claim is justifiable when restricted to religion, as for an outside observer it can seem too restrictive for free intelligence and conducive to ignorance of the unknown. However, when taken out of context, we must be careful not to take the statement to an extreme and twist it as an argument to dismiss any form of learning. It would not only make Russell appear contradictory, as he was one of the greatest scholars of the 20th century, but could also have disastrous consequences.

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