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Chosen Topic: 1

“He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger.”

Learning and Thinking?

Introduction

The relationship between the acquired knowledge (education, experience, convention, tradition, custom, ethics and so forth) and the active thinking of the host of the knowledge has been in turbulence through history. There have been attempts to inject certain knowledge and acts into people while at the same time confining the spontaneous thinking of the people as much as possible, while some have put emphasis on thinking rather than learning. Whatever the case, the viewpoint on the steelyard having ‘learning’ on one side and ‘thinking’ on the other has diverged between people.

Thus, what Confucius stated about that very relationship of the two is not unfamiliar to us. He believed that learning without thinking is walking into vacancy; being lost. However, he went further when regarding the case of thinking without learning; walking into fire, being in danger. This would mean that gaining knowledge without active, spontaneous and volunteered thinking is fleeting and meaningless, in that one cannot exert it by his or her will and thus fail to prove it fruitful. On the other hand, exerting one’s will without any knowledge of the context(ethics, morals, custom and so forth) is more meaningless and even dangerous, because of various reasons such as exerting one’s will without certain limitations. By this, stressing the need for learning in prior to thinking, the Confucian philosophy put a heavy emphasis on education and learning before thinking, which is still being practiced throughout the world, especially in Asian countries.

Interestingly, this idea has been exemplified through a lot of historical events; there appeared so many furious and insane dictators who exerted their will and materialized their thoughts without considering the basic convention and knowledge of the society and the world(simply, without learning). There were so many wars where lots and lots of people like this were involved. Even some regard the ‘Nazis Holocaust’ as a consequence of a man with headstrong will, but without knowledge and learning. Like this, the viewpoint of highlighting on learning before thinking has been taking concrete shape through times.

However, I cast doubt on this idea. Yes, I have seen that thinking with learning is important, but why is learning with thinking less important? Couldn’t Confucius and his educational practice be wrong? Therefore, partly acknowledging the idea of Confucius, I will lead this essay to explore to prove that what is truly going into a state of being lost and what is really in danger. This essay will question the Confucian idea of learning and thinking, and attempt to find the desirable relationship between the two.

Learning without thinking; can’t this also be dangerous?

Learning and education is indeed a great tool when it comes to maintaining the current status of beings. People teach themselves about how they were and what they did in the past, to emulate the predecessors and sustain the current world and society. However, there are some views that this can be one kind of 'obedience'. Aren't we obeying and submitting to what we learn and what we teach?

Perhaps what Confucius meant when he said that someone who learns without thinking is lost is that knowledge and experience without active will is useless, devoid of utility. That perhaps means that learning without thinking is just one way of losing the direction of one's activity and things. However, rather than solely losing a certain direction, can't this be also dangerous? Isn't 'being lost' also hazardous to human beings, who constantly need directions and ways to lead a life in the turbulent society?

It has now become a cliché, a stereotyped thing to even state that the current world is diverged, with so many different rights and values and morals and tastes and groups and societies and so forth. People are engaged in various activities and encountered with so many different values. Furthermore, paradoxically, the contemporary society also put as 'Macdonaldized' society, has many facets of standardized and uniformed state. The consuming culture is one example. Modern society promotes the same kind of consuming; fashion, for example, the same clothes from the show window. Electronic devices, for example, the same models from one another. This leads human beings to lose a part of their identity which can represent their distinct personalities and characteristics. Also, with societies putting high emphasis on materialism, humans are isolated, losing their subjectiveness and their initiatives. In this kind of society with great chaos in rights and values and state of beings, we desire for something to hold on, something to rely on, something to firmly believe in. Therefore, we have to learn those, but without the firm and willful thinking, one might lose his or her way in learning. Then, one could get lost in the whirlpool of myriad things and values. This is highly dangerous, since one can lose a direction of life and either just imitate what others commit or just linger in the state of anarchy and chaos.

Additionally, learning and knowing without thinking can be certainly dangerous when it happens to involve subjects to obey. In the very first part of the essay, I have demonstrated the example of the Nazi's holocaust and how some people see it as a result of 'thinking without learning'. However, can't it be the case of learning without thinking? Numerous people involved in the Nazi's government and the activities in the genocide have confessed to the fact that what they did was mere submission to what they have learned. They complied with the orders from the chief heads from the party and the government, without thinking of their personal feelings and the morals involved in the commitment. They lacked active thinking in their commitments, as to how they would feel, how the victims would feel, whether they actually disliked the victims and so on. In other words, they committed what they have learned without thinking.

Also, learning without thinking can trigger a standstill and quiescence. Through learning, we make the premise that what we learn is desirable, and it is not desirable to break and deny what we have been learning. Without firm thinking, we are constantly submissive to this premise and thus never able to move on to break it. This is why Lao-Tzu, a scholastic opponent of Confucius, strongly opposed to his idea. He believed that all artificial knowledge that is involved in learning should be discarded and denied, since artificial ones have at least a little bit of intention of the one who made it and thus could only serve to fulfill the maker's desires.

Thinking without learning; is it always dangerous?

Today's world, with the vast majority living in democratic societies and under liberty, has had a breakthrough in the enlightenment period. Several centuries ago, there have been monarchial leaders governing the whole society and the fellow human beings. Although, like Hobbes's idea of Leviathan, some few peculiar scholars and philosophers have supported this state of people being ruled and governed with intense power and authority, the majority of the world finds this current system of democracy and activeness highly healthy and desirable. We have broken the wall that has been there for ages; the political systems, custom, way of thinking, life and so forth.

Then what gave the dynamic power for this breakthrough? What led humans to boldly come out of the 'cave' and meet the sunshine? The power, I believe, is certainly not from learning. Had humans learned anything from where they were, they could not have escaped the stuffy darkness. The reason is that what they learned from the society would constantly support the society and could tell them to maintain it. Rather, they did it because they refused what they had learned; they rejected the idea of being subordinate to forceful authorities and being silent. Therefore, they questioned and doubted what they had been learning; they abandoned and discarded that they had learned, they managed to think of something without the flesh of what they learned. They were thinking, without learning. Also, in the current world, thinking without learning is meeting numerous positive consequences. The great inventions, the great ideas in various fields like literature, mathematics, science and et cetera have been realized due to thinking prior to learning. These facts tell us that thinking without learning, or at least before learning can certainly have beneficial effects on our lives.

Like Lao-Tzu, Some have seen learning as governing. By learning, we either govern our minds with knowledge, or get governed by the knowledge. Why are we able to make routine and conventional activities like the others in the society through our lives? We have learned about it, and have complied with the governing of the knowledge. In other words, by learning, we let the knowledge be our own masters to control ourselves. Now, this of course can be dangerous. By letting what we have learned control ourselves, we are confined in the cage of our knowledge. We cannot escape and cannot help but stick to where and when we are. Learning can confine and limit us so that we cannot get out. And what we have learned is so natural that we do not, or cannot question its origin and existence. From this situation, thinking with the premise of learning cannot be satisfactory; we have to put aside learning, and think actively to break what was there.

It is often regarded that in order to progress and advance, one should learn first. Some argue that one should learn about the current context and atmosphere and then make a leap to future. However, this idea is flawed. If people bear in mind the current status and the environment in order to advance, that is not true advance. If the premise of the present is largely based on the progress of proceeding, that is just an emulation of the present and a mere standstill, not advancement.

Then how should the relationship between learning and thinking be?

Regarding all the arguments made so far, that both learning without thinking and thinking without learning are evenly dangerous and also beneficial, one could go on to make the conclusion that we should evenly put emphasis on both of the intellectual activities. In other words, 'think while learning, and learn while thinking'. However, this is not that easy as it seems. As a matter of fact, lots of people have reached the conclusion, and lots of people have put this into practice, but many have failed to maintain this in a perfect state. If it had been possible all the time, then there would not have been numerous tragic events that men have committed, from small ethical mistakes to large-scale wars. These mean that men are not always able to control the even emphasis on learning and thinking.

Then how are we to manage this? I suggest that we form and maintain a mutuality between the two. Ironically, we should 'learn' to 'think' while learning, and 'think' to 'learn' while thinking. We must teach ourselves, one another that while we learn, at schools or at daily lives, we should constantly be aware to think actively and spontaneously, to find true values and ponder about the meanings of what we learn. Also, when we think, we should bear in mind that we should have things to learn, to prevent ourselves from exerting our actions from our wills and thoughts too impudently and licentiously. It is extremely hard, and also it would seem like a cliché, but the discussions so far has led to this conclusion. After all, it has its own distinctive value in constantly trying in our lives. Just like John Mill's idea that dilemmas are not dilemmas when they are discussed and tried constantly, I believe that it indeed is worth trying.

Conclusion

Finally, this essay has attempted to answer the questions in the introduction, 'whether learning without thoughts is never dangerous and thinking without learning is always dangerous'. The following is the summary;

Learning without thinking: it can also be dangerous, since it can hinder one from finding a direction in the chaotic society of today, be used to make social units to obey to certain acts and commitments, and prevent people from deny what they have learned.

Thinking without learning: it is not always dangerous, since it can help and have helped people to break what they have learned and to proceed, advance and progress to a better state of living, better political systems and a better life.

The desirable relationship between the two: Rather than simply fusing the two activities, we should form and sustain the mutuality between the two, and put it into practice.

Now, I find this essay valuable, in that it could question and doubt the solid idea of Confucian philosophy that has been governing the scholastic atmosphere in many Asian nations to the current day. However, it could not completely deny the whole notion of Confucius's scholastic attitude or prove the ultimate and definite fact that thinking proceeds learning. Also, this essay has made some vague viewpoints on subjects. This is where I find the limitations of this essay. Again, I firmly believe that discussing itself can be valuable, and the attempts are also valuable.