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IBM AND THE THRACIAN MAIDEN

Let me begin by giving you the title of my paper, the first I have been privileged to give before the Chit Chat Club. Bill Reilly omitted it from the announcement because I think he felt I was pulling his leg, but I am a stubborn person and the title was and is and will remain:

IBM AND THE THRACIAN MAIDEN

It is my understanding that Chit Chat papers are commonly given titles designed to conceal the real nature of the subject to be discussed. The purpose, as I get it, is to insure that members cannot bone up on the subject in advance but instead must rely on their native cunning, keen intellectual powers and broad erudition in discussing the topic sprung on them.

My experience in this room over the last two years or so confirms that these all of these qualities are present in abundance -- no matter how unexpected or obscure the subject, everyone always has something (usually a lot) to say. God knows how long our meetings would run if even a few of us sketched out his comments on the evening's paper in advance.

However, because of my eagerness as a new member to stimulate discussion tonight, I have chosen to give my entire subject away in the title Bill chose not to share with you. IBM is, of course, a designer and manufacturer of computers, a very modern invention. Thrace is an ancient country located about where Bulgaria now is. Maiden, then and now, is a female, young and once upon a time virginal.

Add it all up and you will have readily perceived that my subject is -- thinking.

If the association between IBM, the Thracian maiden and thinking seems a bit obscure, to that degree I have abided by our informal club tradition. But connection there is.

Thomas Watson senior, founder of IBM, was in the habit of putting signs at all company locations that read, simply, THINK. If he had sincerely meant this as an injunction his employee should follow during the work day, IBM would long ago have gone out of business. But of course he didn't. The Thracian maiden goes back quite a bit further -- about 2600 years.

We encounter her in Plato's Theatetus as Socrates discusses leaders in philosophy. He says:

"To take any interest in the rivalries of political cliques, in meetings, dinners, and merrymakings with flute girls never occurs to them (the philosophers) even in dreams. Whether any fellow citizen is well or ill born or has inherited some defect from his ancestors on either side, the philosopher knows no more than how many pints of water there are in the sea. He is not even aware that he knows nothing of this, for if he holds aloof, it is not for reputation's sake, but because it is really only his body that sojourns in the city, while his thought, disdaining all such things as worthless, as Pindar says takes wings 'beyond the sky, beneath the earth', searching the true nature of everything as a whole, never sinking to what lies close to hand."

Theodorus asks Socrates what he means by this and gets an uncharacteristically bitter reply:

"The same thing as the story about the Thracian maiden who exercised her wit at the expense of Thales, when he was looking up at the stars and tumbled down a well. She scoffed at him for being so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he could not see what lay at his feet. Anyone who gives his life to philosophy is open to such mockery. It is true that he is unaware what his next door neighbor is doing, hardly knows, indeed, whether the creature is a man or not; he spends all his pains on the question, what man is, and what powers and properites distinguishes such a creature from any other."

It is perfectly obvious that IMB's Mr. Watson would never knowingly have paid his technicians to think about the "true nature of everything as a whole" or to question man's essential nature. On the contrary, he wanted them to think <u>about</u> the job at hand -- how to build bigger and better computers. He -- like most of us practical folk who dwell in the everyday world -- would have joined the Thracian maiden in laughing at the absent-minded philosopher tumbling down the well.

The ability to think has always been considered primarily an instrument for knowing and doing -- and of course it is. But it does not stop there...and we cannot make it stop there.

And the reason is that mankind has an irresistable urge to do more with the ability to think than use it merely as an instrument for knowing and doing. We seek not only to know and do, but also to understand. It is our finding ourselves in a world that was here long before our arrival and that will remain here long after we have gone that forces this search for meaning. This despite the fact that thinking is always dangerous and out of order.

Indeed, I would content that it is our inate drive to think as a means of seeking answers to questions that have never been answered and probably never will be answered that makes us completely human. Let me return to that important and perhaps controversial point after we have developed the subject a little further.

What do we mean when we say we think? Plato described thinking as "a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering." Note the word discourse. Thinking always requires two voices -- silent voices -- and therefore is dialectical; and it always requires language. It is, in fact, a silent dialogue with one's self. Note also the freedom implied in the phrase "any subject." Thinking cannot be constrained except by conscious repression on the part of the thinker. "In dreams begin responsibilities" , again, Plato's phrase, suggests that even repression cannot be fully effective in banishing unwanted thoughts.

When we are thinking we withdraw from the needs and concerns of the moment; at such times we are always alone with ourselves. We cannot think of something while it is happening -- it must have happened to be an object of thought. We cannot "think out loud" because thought is far swifter than speech. Indeed, while we are thinking we are not aware of the world immediately around us. We are literally "lost in thought." We might even tumble down a well!

But tumbling down a well is not chief among the dangers of thinking. Thinking is dangerous because it is always out of order. We live in a practical world that makes practical demands on our attention every moment of the day. Thinking requires that we withdraw from everything, literally on the spur of the moment, to discourse silently with ourselves on invisible subjects in complete solitude. Even worse, when we "come back" -- even after only an instant's removal -- it may be with thoughts that contradict the customs, opinions. beliefs, even perceived realities of those we "left behind." When we think we are free; and freedom is always dangerous in a world continually seeking order..

Let me anticipate myself a bit. Suppose one day after he returned from a long stint at the office Adolph Eichmann had begun to think about whether slaughtering thousands of helpless and innocent human beings was right. Could he have thought it was, alone in the privacy of his mind? I think it more likely that he did not think about it, did not let himself think about it. Hannah Arendt, the great modern philospher whose book "Thinking" set me off on this slippery subject, coined the phrase "banality of evil" to describe Eichman. Thoughtlessness was his sin, not malice. To the degree he did not think about essential things, he was that less human and that much more a mindless captive of order(s).

Elsewhere Miss Arendt remarks that it is not the really bad people who have bad consciences. On the contrary, it is really good people who have bad consciences, who sense a lack of justice or compassion or lovingkindness in their thoughts or actions and repent heartily of them. Good people have bad consciences, not bad people. This observation, so striking but so in accord with experience, led Miss Arendt to pose a fundamental question:

"Could the activity of thinking as such, a habit of examining whatever happens or comes to pass, regardless of results or specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing and even actually condition them against it?"

Because, as I said, we can refuse to think. "I don't want to think about it", is commonly said when we do not want to examine something disturbing closely and privately and honestly. We instinctively recognize that thinking is dangerous, against our own best interests, will lead us nowhere useful, is out of order. Appeals to morality or ethics in place of thought are to no avail; they are nothing more than custom and habit. Eichmann operated perfectly within the mores and ethos of the Third Reich. So what is it that is disturbed in us at such times?

Whatever "it" is, its existance carries a strong suggestion that thinking is more important to our humanity than we generally recognize. All humans share the potential for thought, from primative tribes to sophisticated moderns, and on one level cultural anthropology and comparative religion record the history of man's attempts to deal with abstract and ultimately unanswerable subjects such as right and wrong, good and evil, justice and immortality. Why, throughout millinia, did we bother?

Let us take another look at this elusive activity of the mind and see what we think about it. Perhaps a scientific analogy will get us started.

Thinking deals with invisible things that are brought into perceptual reality through imagination and expressed in silent dialogue with ourselves in the same way as subatomic particles are brought into perceptual reality through a linnear accelerator and expressed through sophisticated instrumentation.

But, scientists will object, subatomic particles are real. They constitute tangible parts of the physical universe and present themselves to our intelligence as a real puzzle that, if solved, could result in real advances in knowledge. Certainly, this is true. But it does not mean that "thought things" are any less real. Certain "thought things" such as God, freedom and justice are <u>for us</u> in the emphatic sense that reason cannot help thinking them and that they are of the greatest interest to man and the life of the mind. Indeed, the human mind seems never to have been able to ignore them.

The fact remains, however, that while science has an astonishing record of successes that have greatly affected our lives, thinking -- or philosophy -- has none. Zero. But this should not be surprising. There is no way for thinking to be "successful" since it never reaches a conclusion that will serve as a steady base from which to proceed to the next logical conclusion in good scientific fashion. Our thoughts are never given to experience and are therefore unknowable. As a practical matter, thinking means that every time we are confronted with a new situation, we must make up our minds all over again. Furthermore, any imagined practicality of our thoughts tend to evaporate when we bring them out of hiding and into the real world.

But if thinking deals with abstractions, it cannot deal with them in any final way. For example, the concept of justice has been the subject of thought from earliest times. Among us are eminent justices, legal scholars and simple attorneys, and I will leave it to them during the discussion period to tell us what justice is. For my part, I confess that the concept poses such a puzzle that each time I think about it I tend to think as though nothing had gone before. It is this tendency of thought to make us doubt the reality of sense experience -- the real existance of the laws, the courts, the prisons; the

crimes, the victims, the guilty -- that makes it dangerous. What if we are wrong? is what thought asks. We ourselves are dangerous at such moments because we cannot be trusted to support the order on which the application of justice as defined by our society depends.

So thinking is dangerous both to the thinker and to society. No wonder they killed Socrates! Not only did he encourage people to think, but having started them thinking (and doubting the things they had been taught) he refused to offer a doctrine on which they could rely in the future beyond the basic admonition not to contradict one's self (still the only abiding rule in philosophy.)

Religion has always formed a powerful outlet for the expression of thought. In ancient Greece the Gods were like men in their appetites, emotions and activities. The Gods were immortal, man was not. But Gods and man alike were part of nature, part of a whole that was entirely natural and entirely immutible. The Gods showed themselves to mortals -- though only to those whom they addressed -- and the Oracles never spoke but only gave enigmatic indications that seers were left to interpret. Greek thought as exemplified by Socrates was not concerned with the hereafter. There was no hereafter.

In late Roman times Gods and men and nature no longer constituted natural parts of a natural order. The world was seen as harsh and cruel place -- an unnatural place -- in which man had to make every mental and physical effort to protect himself and his from a host of dangers seen and unseen. Philosphers taught ways of thinking that protected man from these forces by properly ordering his life or taught him to ignore them and therefore deny their existance. Philosophy was <u>taught</u> -- a state of affairs that would have horrified Socrates.

If the world was an unpleasant place to be, men's thoughts turned to the possibility of another, better world that would provide some reason for an uncertain, meaningless and incomprehensible life. And so the question of how to attain such a world found its answer in the teachings of the early Christians and a God who was never seen but only heard.

To summarize -- borrowing again from Hannah Arendt -- "faith replaced thought as the bringer of immortality." For although the ancient Greeks had no vision of a life after death that would be their reward for following certain rules this side the grave, they did have a firm concept of immortality. It was their view that men, by their deeds, which included the thought deeds called philosophy, could attain such fame that their

names, like those of the Gods, would live forever in the minds of their countrymen. Man was immortal not because of his soul (seen as a passport to heaven) but because of his deeds in the world. This applied especially to philosophers because they dealt with eternal things, even as did the Gods. Plato put it this way, again speaking through Socrates:

"...we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the divine so far as we can, and that again is to become righteous with the help of wisdom. In the divine there is no shadow of unrighteousness, and nothing is more like the divine than any one of us who becomes as righteous as possible. It is here that a man shows his true spirit and power or lack of spirit and nothingness."

The assumption of how high the human spirit might fly on its own seems unbelievable to us today and perhaps could not have been expressed with any sense of honesty since the time of Plato. Certainly this spirit did not survive the the transition to Rome, where philosophy was put at the service of the state with the object initially of producing statesmen, warriors and good citizens. The state itself was immortal. In later days philosophy was considered a pursuit best followed in retirement, after the active life had ended, "Its usefulness was to teach

men how to cure their despairing minds by escaping from the world through thinking," again quoting Miss Arendt. The Stoics and Epicurians prescribed exercises of the mind along the lines if "Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do and you shall have peace; for it is impossible that what happens should be other than it is."

Senaca's letters give us a glimpse of the weary cynacism that colored Roman thought at the time of Christ. It is a picture of a man who knows he knows nothing of significance and who has given up inquiring. Thought yields to rumination and produces maxims. "No man's good by accident. Virtue must be taught. Pleasure is a poor and petty thing. Glory is an empty, changeable thing, as fickle as the weather. Poverty is no evil to anyone unless he kicks against it."

It was into such a world that the message of the early Christians came -- the "good news" that man was not mortal but possessor of an immortal soul that was a birthright from God who was his father. If they followed the rules, if they were good Christians, each and every one of them, from newborn infant to graybeard, had the promise of everlasting life. Philosophy became, in a basic sense, irrelevant and even inimical. Simple faith, faith like a child's, supplanted mature speculation,

questioning and "philosophizing." Little wonder philosophy has never since approached the prominence it enjoyed among the Greeks or, in a different way, the Romans.

Yet we all go on thinking. We go on asking unanswerable questions. We go on doubting sense experience. Like Socrates, when we go home there is someone waiting for us to engage us in the silent dialogue that, if we let it, deals with significant matters as if nothing had gone before. We are alone with ourselves.

Thinking has been defined as an appetite for meaning, and since nobody knows the meaning of anything, the question is perpetually open for "discussion." But I think something more is involved here. I think that the capacity for thought, this ceaseless and silent dialogue with the self that has gone on among all men down the ages, this out of order, dangerous and ultimately futile activity of the mind, may well serve as a kind of gyroscope of the soul that keeps man from sliding entirely back into a brutish state of nature. Thinking may lack all evidence of acertainable success, but non-thinking has been an indispensible element in all of the sins we have committed against humanity/ourselves.

What do you think?