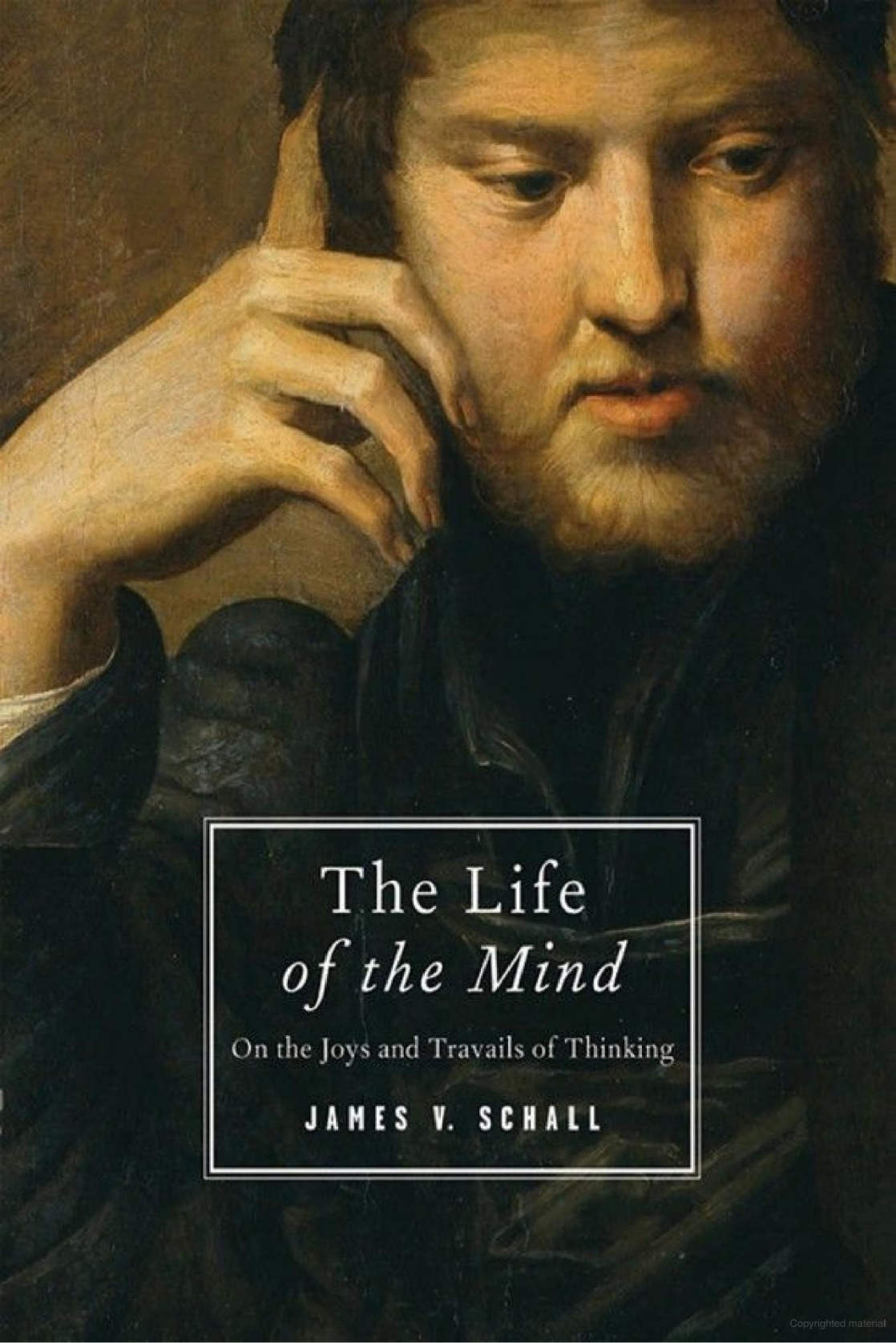

The Life *of the Mind*

On the Joys and Travails of Thinking

JAMES V. SCHALL

Contents

Introduction

A Certain Lightness in Existence

The title, subtitle, and two introductory citations of this book contain four thematic elements—the "life of the mind," the "joys and travails of thinking," the "splendor of discovery," and the potential existence in ourselves of all things not ourselves. The notion of precisely the "splendor" of discovery is something that I found in the poet Phyllis McGinley, though it is an ancient idea. It does not merely mean that things exist, or even, as Étienne Gilson once said, that "things exist and I know them." It includes the additional element that we see a light, as it were, shining through all reality, something that incites us to respond to it, to behold it. There is a radiance to being. All things that are limited to themselves point to what is not themselves.

Although I was at first inclined to title this book *The Splendor of Discovery,* I finally decided to call it *The Life of the Mind,* a title I quite liked. But a friend in Australia reminded me that this title, *The Life of the Mind*, had also been given to a famous two-volume study by the great German philosopher, Hannah Arendt. I had to laugh at this reminder, as I have on my shelves both volumes of this work, devoted respectively to "Thinking" and "Willing." The final volume, "Judging," never appeared. Indeed I had reviewed this book.[1] Arendt's volume titles are familiar to anyone who knows Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Aquinas. Arendt was indeed most influenced by Augustine, about whom she wrote her doctorate. What could

be more insightful than the following sentence? "The true opposite of factual, as distinguished from rational, truth is not error or illusion but the deliberate lie."[2]

My "life of the mind" is not that of Arendt, of course, but she is right. The lie is opposed to the true statement of *what is*, just as error is opposed to valid reasoning. The life of the mind is indeed concerned with distinguishing lies from truth, error from reason. We want to know these things—what is truth? what is error? what is reasonable? what is a lie?—for their own sakes, because that activity of knowing these things is our life; it is our mind. In the end, *The Life of the Mind,* as I hope will become clear, still seems to be the best description of what I have to say here.

This book, be it affirmed in the beginning, lest there be doubt, is not a study about a physical organ called the brain, nor is it a book in logic—of how concepts are related to each other. Any bibliographical or research check online or in a library will reveal, besides the Arendt books, numerous other books and papers with this same title, "the life of the mind," dealing with sundry aspects of knowing or with the physical organ, the brain.

That our minds are alive, that they have a "life," is a classic philosophic principle. *Vivere viventibus est esse*, that is, the very being of living things is that such things do live. They have a source of motion within themselves, their own peculiar activity. Likewise, some living things, ourselves included, also have minds. The very "life" of beings with intelligence is *to think*, to exercise this intelligence actively, on *what is*. A knowing being lives most acutely, most vividly, when it thinks about *what is*.

Our minds initially are empty. While empty, even before we think anything, they are minds, that is, knowing powers we did not give ourselves. Until they encounter something not themselves, something outside of themselves, our minds do not know anything. The mind is a power that actively seeks to know what is there, what it encounters. More precisely, what knows is not the mind but we ourselves with or through our minds. Nothing, furthermore, is really complete unless it is also known. All things have two existences, a real one and a mental one. The mental one is really a quality of the existing being who is thinking about what, outside of himself, is known through his mind.

We can, however, know something but not really be moved by it. We can choose not to think deeply about it. Chesterton once said, in a memorable

phrase of which I am inordinately fond, that there is no such thing as an uninteresting subject, only uninterested people. Nothing is so unimportant that it is not worth knowing. Everything reveals something. Our minds cannot fully exhaust the reality contained in even the smallest existing thing.

The condition of our being human, then, is the risk of not knowing something worth knowing. The "whole universe may dwell in our minds," as Aquinas remarked. This indwelling is the purpose for which we are given minds in the first place. What makes it all right to be a particular, finite human being, such as each of us is, is that, because of intelligence, the universe is also given back to each of us. Our knowing does not take anything away from what is known. Nor does our individual knowing take anything away from others knowing the same thing in the same universe.

What is given to us besides ourselves seems initially given that we might simply behold it. This is what Aristotle meant when he defined the mind as that power that is capable of knowing all things. This primary contemplative moment does not imply that we can have no further purpose or use for what we know. Knowledge enables us to act in the world for our immediate and ultimate purposes. Nonetheless, what is there to be known usually antedates our own finite existence. We know ourselves first as receivers of what is there to be known without us.

This is a book about thinking and reading, about thinking while reading, about being aware and being delighted in the very acts of either reading or thinking. It is, if you will, a book in the famous *artes liberales,* in the liberal arts. That is, it deals with those things that free us to be what we are, what we are intended to be, beings who know, who know *what is*, who delight in this knowing. We are not to be afraid of the splendors in things, except perhaps in the fear that, granted our finiteness and, more darkly, our reluctant wills, we may miss some of them.

Some advice will be found here about what to read and why to read. At the end, there is a particular book list designed to "waken" our minds. If there is a sense of urgency, of not wanting to miss anything, even if, till now, we have missed many things, it is not set over against the leisure in which we have time for things. We want to know things that are beyond ourselves, that are not ourselves, almost as if this knowing others is part of knowing ourselves, as I think it is. We are not given ourselves as if we were only to be concerned with ourselves. Yet, we are receivers; we are given

things so that we might know them. We are even told to "know ourselves," no mean feat as the history of philosophy and our own experience teaches us.

Indeed, as I shall often suggest, we cannot and do not know ourselves unless we first know what is not ourselves. We become "alive" in the intellectual sense by knowing even the humblest thing, no less than the greatest, both of which can fascinate us. But with both the great and the small we can also choose to ignore, even reject them. We suspect that there is a connection between the highest of things and the lowest and what is in between—in which latter category, if we are wise, we place ourselves. The Greeks, indeed, called us "the mortals," the beings who die and, uniquely, know that they die. They also called us the *microcosmoi,* the tiny (micro) individual beings in whom somehow the whole of creation exists, in all its levels, matter, life, sense, mind.

Indeed, I will even suggest that, paradoxically, there is a danger in not being delighted with our knowing of *what is*. We are to be pleased about those things that are, in their own order, pleasing. It is a perversion of both mind and heart to think that somehow *what is,* is not also given to us. I am bold enough to maintain, with Belloc, that even while walking, we can and do encounter the things *that are*. There is a "metaphysics" in the privilege of walking this green earth. It may be advantageous, moreover, to have had a "bad education," as Phyllis McGinley tells us, if it leads us to seek out what we missed. Plato is quite careful not to rush us along too soon in our learning. He implies that our relatively little time as mortals is enough time to accomplish—make manifest—what we are. We do not, as we recall from the end of the *Republic*, have an opportunity to choose our "daimon," our destiny, a second time. We are given one life. It is enough.

This is, as it were, a book for those who, while being educated, often with the highest credentials, were not exposed to the highest things and who, in spite of it all, suspect that they are lacking something. This book follows on my previous books on what can be broadly called "education and reality"—*Another Sort of Learning, A Student's Guide to Liberal Learning*, and *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*.

One chapter hints that we need "to take care of our own wisdom." Another talks about the "whole risk of being a human being": the risk, as it were, is that we are given so much but do not realize it. Yes, we can choose to miss what is there. This is not an "academic" book, though, hopefully, it

is an intelligent one. If there is a certain lightsomeness in these considerations, it is because there is *a certain lightsomeness in existence itself*, something we miss at our peril. Things do "depend" on a philosophy that knows *of what is, that it is.*

This is not a "self-help" book, to recall Walker Percy's acerbic and delightful *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*.[3] Even less is it a book on "self-reliance" or "self-transcendence" or "self-interest." It is rather a book of wonder, of amazement that something really exists, including one's self. I am much taken by the "order of things," both that there is order and that I can know it, discover it. I do not "make the world," but find it already there, already what it is. Hence, I speak of "discovery," not "making." It is a great comfort, on honestly knowing ourselves, to acknowledge that we do not cause *what is* to be. And if I speak of the "life of the mind," I do not mean that this life is unrelated to or totally independent of the life of the senses within the body. We exist as a whole. We are single beings both in what we are and in what we know.

Thus, I begin with a reflection on A. D. Sertillanges' famous book *The Intellectual Life*, because such a life is something we all can and want to strive for, even the humblest of us. Thomas Aquinas, who possessed perhaps the best mind of our kind, did not hesitate to spend time with the slower of his brothers in teaching them what they could know. But he himself spent most of his waking hours in the careful, profound, and incisive explication of *what is*. He did not neglect any source of information that is available to us, including revelation.

Does this book have a "practical" purpose? Will it help you get into graduate school, or get a better job, or run for office? Not really. It is largely addressed to what is impractical about us, to what has to do with knowing, not doing, even granting their intimate relationship. The "doing" that I envision is not merely the desire to find a book and to read it. It is to feel our soul moved by what is not ourselves, by the truth, by *what is*. Plato, in a famous passage in his Seventh Letter, warned us about writing, about how its set words could conceal what it is that they are meant to reveal or convey. He claimed that he never wrote what he really thought. He told us that he only wrote Socratic dialogues, though he did unexpectedly confess in the *Symposium* that he did know something about love. In reading Plato's dialogues, we ought to be led to the vision that he had, if we be philosophers.

St. Thomas also understood that we can never fully understand or state the whole truth of anything or of everything. Yet, he thought that we could and should say what it is we know, realizing, with Socrates, that the reality will be more than our words and concepts can convey. Both Plato and Thomas set us on an adventure, a search, a quest simply to know. If we have allowed ourselves to be dulled, to be deflected from reality, these pages, it is hoped, will serve to awaken us, to resume in our souls that vocation we all have to know, as best we can, *what is*.

Chapter I

On the Joys and Travails of Thinking

> A vocation is not fulfilled by vague reading and a few scattered writings.
>
> —A. D. Sertillanges

Many of us in later years wish that someone would have told us, when we were younger, about certain things, often certain books, which, as we look back on it, would have greatly helped us in the project of our lives. In particular, certain books, we suspect, would have at least helped us know the truth of things. Some of these books are directed to what is true, to reality, to *what is*. But a certain number of others, such as Aristotle's *Organon*, are directed to the question of the elements of knowing and speaking, or how we ought to go about knowing. I have in fact written one such book myself, *Another Sort of Learning*. In that book, I mention A. D. Sertillanges' book on "the intellectual life" to be among those few books that will give anyone seriously interested a good start.

But Sertillanges gives more than a good start. He explicitly tells us how to begin, how to read and write, how to discipline our time, even our souls. He also attends to the life of the spirit in which any true intellectual life exists. We have perhaps heard from Aristotle that we are rational animals, that the contemplative life is something to which we should aspire. Practically no one tells us what this life might mean, whether it is something that is available to us on some condition that we do not easily

comprehend. But even if we vaguely know that the intellectual life is an exalted one, we have heard rather less about what acquiring this life might entail. No one spells out its terms and conditions. We are also aware that wisdom comes somewhat later in life than we might at first have suspected or desired. Yet, we surmise that ways existed that could have helped us had we only known them.

Sertillanges' *La Vie Intellectuelle*, first published in 1921, was an immediate success. It went through many editions, in many languages, and thanks to the Catholic University of America Press, is still in print.

I want to explain why this book should always be sought out by young undergraduate and graduate students, by elderly folks, and by everyone in between. Every time I have used this book in a class, often when I teach a St. Thomas Aquinas course, I have had undergraduate students tell me later that it was a book they remembered. It taught them much about how to maintain their intellectual curiosity in a practical, effective manner not merely in college but throughout their lives. Thus, at the beginning of this book, the best way I can go about my effort to talk of "the life of the mind" is to advise the reading of another book, not necessarily immediately, but still soon enough, a book with almost the same title, *The Intellectual Life*. In the "life of the mind" it is all right, even exciting, if one book leads us to another—if one author leads us to a second one.

At first sight, *The Intellectual Life* is a "quaint" book. At second sight, it is an utterly demanding book.[1] Sertillanges painstakingly tells us how to take notes, how to begin to write and publish, how to organize our notes and, behind them, our thoughts, even our days. It seems "quaint" because we no longer use, as Sertillanges did, pens or typewriters. We are grateful for the opportunity to use late-model computers and printing processes that would have amazed him. But Sertillanges' advice is just as pertinent and demanding for someone with a computer as it is for someone with a pencil.

We need to recall that many of the greatest books and writings were initially put down on parchment or even stone. If we look at the total output of great thinkers like Aristotle or Augustine or Aquinas, it is difficult to imagine how they could have been more productive even if they had had a computer. Human mind and ingenuity, evidently, will find a way to record what is worth setting down. After all, what is important is what is true, not the mechanics of recording it. In the 1920s, Sertillanges himself was far better off technologically than was Aquinas, about whom Sertillanges wrote

so well. Technological capacity, however useful, is not the same as intelligence. The truth alone is reason enough to look at Sertillanges' book, and through it, at Aquinas, from whom also this present book derives so much.

"How did Aquinas ever do it?" we wonder. It is highly doubtful, as I have said, that he would have written more or better if he had had the latest computer and research tools at his disposal. In fact, in some sense, such things may have been a hindrance. For St. Thomas Aquinas developed a great memory and an uncanny capacity to have at his fingertips the teachings of the great writers before his time, including Scripture. This wisdom took books and reading, of course, even for Aquinas, but he learned how to do these things. What Sertillanges teaches us is how, in our own way, to imitate the lessons imparted by the life of the great Dominican—how to lead a proper intellectual life, one suffused with honesty, prayer, diligent work, and, in the end, the delight of knowing.

In reading Sertillanges' book, a first outside project that I now recommend, we cannot help feeling that he is letting us in on some of the secrets of Aquinas's vast productivity and keen insight. There are just so many hours in the day, week, or month. Sertillanges does not ask us all to give up our daily lives and devote ourselves full-time to the intellectual life in the sense that St. Thomas Aquinas did. Rather, in his practical way, Sertillanges teaches us how to organize our lives so that we can acquire a solid beginning, hopefully when we are young, and spend the rest of our days building on this solid foundation. In brief, Sertillanges teaches us about habits, about discipline, productivity, and truth. He thinks that we can lead a truly intellectual life if we manage to keep one or two hours a day for serious pursuit of the higher things. He is not rigid or impractical here. Moreover, when stated merely in terms of hours or time, we tend to miss what Sertillanges is driving at.

Any sort of learning, in the beginning, will have drudgery connected with it. We can simply call it a kind of work. We need to come to a point where we begin to delight in what we are knowing, where we cannot wait to get back to our considerations or writings or thoughts on a given topic. Anything *that is* is fascinating. Chesterton, whose own intellectual life seems as vibrant as anyone in modern times, remarked that there are no such things as uninteresting subjects, only uninterested people. This is one of those truths which is so obvious that we can hardly bear it, since it forces us

to look first to ourselves for the cause of our boredom. A large part of this "uninterestedness" happens precisely because we have never learned how or why to see what is there. Sertillanges teaches us to examine our lives. He does not neglect to mention that moral faults, both serious and light ones, can in fact hinder or prevent us from having the freedom from ourselves that enables us to see what is not ourselves, to see *what is.* "Do you want to have an intellectual life?" Sertillanges asks in his introduction to the 1934 edition. "Begin by creating within you a zone of silence." We live in a world surrounded by noise, by a kind of strident unrest that fills our days and nights. We have so many things to distract us, even if sometimes we think they might educate us. Sertillanges is sure we have the time. But he is also sure that we do not notice that we have time because our lives appear to be busy and full. We find the time first by becoming interested, by longing to know. Sertillanges demands an examination of conscience both about our sins and about our use of time.

An intellectual life, a contemplative life, is itself filled with activity, but activity that is purposeful, that wants to know and to know the truth. Those we often call "intellectuals" today are probably not exactly what Sertillanges had in mind when he talked about "the intellectual life." Intellectuals as a class, as Paul Johnson wrote in his book *The Intellectuals,* may well devise their theories and explanations precisely as products of, or justifications for, their own moral disorders. They are the modern-day versions of the sophists Plato criticized so much for not taking a stand on the truth of things. We should never forget that an intellectual life can be a dangerous life. The greatest of vices stem not from the flesh but from the spirit, as Augustine said. The brightest of the angels was the fallen angel.

These sober considerations explain why I like this little book by Sertillanges, why I take the trouble to talk about it at the beginning of this book. He does not hesitate to warn us of the intimate relation between our knowing the truth and the ordering of our own souls to the good. The intellectual life can be and often is a perilous life. But this is no reason to deny its glory. And Sertillanges is very careful to direct us to those things that we pursue because they explain what we are, explain the world and God to us. A first step in having a life of the mind is to know that other minds have had lives, which they explain to us—if we would listen.

When we pick up Sertillanges' book, we will be surprised, no doubt, by its detailed practicality. It is not totally unlike Fowler's *Modern English Usage*

or Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. In another sense, this is a handbook, a step-by-step direction of what to do first, what next. We are tempted to think that the intellectual life is some gigantic insight that comes to us one fine morning while we are shaving or making breakfast. Sertillanges does not deny that some insight can come this way, but the normal course of things requires us habitually to pursue the truth, to know, to be curious about reality.

The Intellectual Life, moreover, is not primarily for academic professionals, though it will harm not a single one of them. Nor would I say it is for everyone. But it is for very many and not just for those who have advanced degrees in physics or metaphysics. This is a book that allows us to be free and independent, to know why we need not be dependent on the media or any ideology. It is a book that does not exactly "teach" us to know, but it does teach us how to go about knowing and how to continue knowing. It is designed to keep us inwardly alive precisely by teaching us how to know and grow in knowing, steadily, patiently, and yes, critically.

I would put *The Intellectual Life* on the desk of every serious student, and most of the unserious ones. Indeed, Plato said that our very lives are "unserious" in comparison to that of God. Something of that relaxed leisure, of that serene sense of freedom that comes from knowing and wanting to know is instilled in our souls by this book. Its very presence on our desk or shelves is a constant prod, a visible reminder to us that the intellectual life is not something alien, not something that we have no chance, in our own way, to learn about.

We should read through this classic book, making its teachings ours after our own manner. Adapting what Sertillanges suggests to our own computer habits, to our own books, to our own hours of the day or night should be no problem. The book will have an abiding, concrete effect on our lives. If we follow its precepts, it will make us alive in that inner, curious, delightful way connoted by the words in its magnificent title—*The Intellectual Life.* I see no reason for settling for anything less. The great French Dominican still teaches us how to learn, but only if we are free enough to let him teach us—only if we are free enough to want to know.

Chapter II

Books and the Intellectual Life

I

Thus far, we have seen that one way to begin attending to the "life of the mind" is with *The Intellectual Life*. We have also mentioned in passing, Fowler, Strunk and White, Phyllis McGinley, Thomas Aquinas, Chesterton, Aristotle, Josef Pieper, Walker Percy, Étienne Gilson, Plato, and Paul Johnson. Now we come to *Samuel* Johnson. Some years ago, in 1979, when I first began teaching at Georgetown, I happened to read in class something by Johnson, the great English lexicographer and philosopher. I no longer recall quite what I read, though I am habitually prepared to read something by Johnson at the drop of a hat. Most days, I try to read for myself something from his unfailing wisdom. At any rate, several months after that initial encounter I received in the mail, from Florida, a package that contained a 1931 reprint of a book originally printed in the year 1799.

The book was James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* This two-volume-in-one book was found by a student in that 1979 class in some used bookstore—used bookstores, I am going to insist here, are places to be haunted by young students as almost the equivalent of Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, for they are indeed usually full of unexpected treasures, if you know what to look for. The particular book I had been sent, as a blue-inked stamp on its title page informs us, once was housed in St. Paul's High School

Library in St. Petersburg, Florida. Surely any high school or university library that gets rid of such a marvelous book deserves to lose, if not its accreditation, its reputation! I think of this incident each year when I notice what basic books—say, Aristotle's *Ethics* or Plato's *Republic*—students sell back to the university bookstore as used, certain signs of intellectual failure on the part of the students selling them back. I would add that worthless books *should* be sold back—the trick is to know the difference.

To build on what I have said about *The Intellectual Life* in the previous chapter, let me here provide some reflections on books—on acquiring them, on keeping them, on reading them, and on re-reading them. Never forget C. S. Lewis's perceptive remark that if you have only read a great book once, you have not read it at all (though you must read it once in order to be able to read it again). In his *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis wrote, "Those who read great works ... will read the same work ten, twenty, or thirty times during the course of their life."[1] Furthermore, he adds, "We must never assume that we know exactly what is happening when anyone else reads a book."[2] The same book can move another's will and understanding differently than it does our own. We ourselves are receptive to different books at different times in our lives. It is quite possible for one to get nothing out of reading a book, whereas someone else, reading the same book, goes out and changes the world. Likewise we can be excited by reading a book that our friends find dull. There is a mystery here of how mind speaks to mind through reading.

But back to Samuel Johnson and one of his statements about books, a passage on which I often reflect. In his immensely insightful book, Boswell recalls several observations that Johnson made on Monday, September 22, 1777. "Dr. Johnson advised me to-day," Boswell begins,

> to have as many books about me as I could; that I might read upon any subject upon which I had a desire for instruction at the time. "What you read *then* said he, you will remember, but if you have not a book immediately ready, and the subject moulds in your mind, it is a chance if you again have a desire to study it." He added, "if a man never has an eager desire for instruction, he should prescribe a task for himself. But it is better when a man reads from immediate inclination." (II, 148)


image
not
available


image
not
available

in New Jersey. World War II was just over, so there was no real pressure on troops. We had time to go to the post library. Once inside, I gazed perplexedly at the stacks and stacks of books. By that time, I had had a semester of college at the University of Santa Clara and was familiar with the Varsi Library there. But what sticks in my mind about the army library was the awareness that I did not know what to read, what to look for, or what was worth reading. Stacks of books are nothing if we have no idea how to choose among them. I suppose someone could go into a library and start with the first shelf and try to read to the end, A to Z in the Library of Congress system, but that would be both impossible and impractical. No one would ever, in a single lifetime, get beyond section "A" in any good-sized library.

But somehow out of all those books in the post library I selected and read a novel by Aldous Huxley. I think it was called *Chrome Yellow*, or something like that. It was unfortunately not *Brave New World*, a book that might have served to put Josef Stalin in some context. In fact, *Brave New World*, as my friend Jerome Hanus at American University has told me, is an extremely good book for students of today to read. It is rather accurate in its depiction of what would happen to our culture if we embraced certain modern principles in genetics and politics, principles that we evidently did embrace. But my point here is to emphasize this vivid sense of wanting to read but having no guidance, no clue about what is worth reading or how one would go about finding it.

This graphic experience of not knowing what to read, I think, lies at the origin of that tendency I have of giving students good, brief bibliographical lists of what to read. "Schall's Twenty Books to Keep Sane By," listed in my book *A Student's Guide to Liberal Learning*, or "Twenty Books That Tell the Truth," included in *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*, are merely recent manifestations of this peculiar tendency. In fact, the first appendix to this very book contains a list that I call "Schall's Twenty Books That Awaken the Mind."

IV

It is my experience that many of the most wonderful books are not read simply because the average student has not heard of them. Several years ago, I was teaching a class on Aquinas. Among the books assigned for the


image
not
available

by any other tradition. This is, in large part, because the Greeks and Romans regarded themselves as addressing mankind as such, however proud they were to be Greek or Roman. Metaphysics was not "Greek" metaphysics, but "metaphysics." Existing cities were Roman or Greek; political philosophy related to all cities. The principles of "oratory" were not Roman, but universal.

This tradition is worthy in itself. It is also worthy because subsequent traditions and cultures grew from this classical heritage. They commented on it, rewrote it, and even at times objected to it. The initial sources were enriched by the later ones. The end did not forget the beginning, nor did the beginning remain sterile to the end. It was not an accident that Cicero, as he tells us in his *De Officiis* ("On Duties"), sent his son, however unworthy, to Athens to study. Nor was it an accident that Augustine, as he tells us in *The Confessions*, decided, as a brash young man, to become a philosopher because of a now lost Ciceronian dialogue. Likewise, it is not surprising that Augustine's major work is titled *The City of God*, both because two Psalms speak of such a city (numbers 46 and 87) and because Plato wrote *The Republic*. We cannot read Augustine without, at the same time, reading the Greeks, the Romans, the Hebrews, and the Christians. Augustine was a man of "liberal learning," who even wrote a dialogue featuring his own son titled *De Magistro* ("On the Teacher"). Augustine still teaches us, but only if we let him.

One of the men most responsible for what are known as "great books programs," themselves designed as efforts to "save" liberal education, was Mortimer Adler.[6] "The liberal arts are traditionally intended to develop the faculties of the human mind, those powers of intelligence and imagination without which no intellectual work can be accomplished," Adler wrote:

> Liberal education is not tied to certain academic subjects, such as philosophy, history, literature, music, art and other so-called "humanities." In the liberal-arts tradition, scientific disciplines, such as mathematics and physics, are considered equally liberal, that is, equally able to develop the powers of the mind. The liberal-arts tradition goes back to the medieval curriculum. It consisted of two parts. The first part, trivium, comprised grammar, rhetoric, and logic. It taught the arts of reading and writing, of listening and speaking, and of sound thinking. The other part, the quadrivium,

> consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (not audible music, but music conceived as a mathematical science). It taught the arts of observation, calculation, and measurement, how to apprehend the quantitative aspect of things. Nowadays, of course, we would add many more sciences, natural and social. This is just what has been done in the various modern attempts to renew liberal education.[7]

The medieval trivium and quadrivium, indicated the place where three roads (*tres viae)* or four roads (*quatro viae)* of knowledge crossed in the same person. The quadrivium, in particular, had to do with numbers—arithmetic meant "number in itself," geometry meant "number in space," music meant "number in time," and astronomy meant "number in space and time."[8] Without preparation in such disciplines, thought the medievals, we lack the intellectual tools to understand the world. Each discipline was worthy of study in itself, but once all were acquired, the student was "free" to stand before all things as a whole, both to know and to act. Hence the notion associated with "liberal arts" was "universal" or "general."

V

In the classical medieval tradition, to be a complete human being, there were things worth doing and knowing. Man was an animal who freely needed to complete himself to be what he was intended to be. But this "self-completion" was not considered to be, though it could be, an act of pride or autonomy, that is, an act that made man the cause of the distinction in things. The fact that man had to "complete" himself in order to be what he was intended to be was itself a challenge in one's own soul. It paid deference to one's own initiative and freedom.

Education, moreover, was not a "thing." The word *educere* means to bring forth, or to complete something already begun by the very fact that one is a human being. We do not "make ourselves" to be human beings, as Aristotle constantly affirmed, though we do make ourselves to be good or bad human beings, complete or incomplete human beings. Yet, the freedom to become bad or evil is itself a kind of slavery, since it deflects us from our proper end. This is why the path to freedom in the classical tradition has always been pictured as one consisting of acquiring virtues and avoiding

ISBN: 978-1-4976-4674-2

Published by ISI Books
Intercollegiate Studies Institute
3901 Centerville Road
Wilmington, DE 19807-1938
www.isibooks.org

Distributed by Open Road Distribution
345 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014
www.openroadmedia.com