

# How to Think More Effectively

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Focused Thinking



A central problem of our minds is that they tend to throw out thoughts that are vague. They aren't wrong, so much as imprecise – which means that we don't have a secure handle on what we truly feel or want and so are unable to steer our lives to accurate and satisfying destinations. The mind likes to point in general terms to sensations and wishes without delving into their specific characters. It spontaneously gives us the overall headline rather than the telling and operative detail, which means that we are hampered in our ability to formulate exact plans and to diagnose our real problems.

For example, when we are young and thinking about what sort of job we'd like to do, what may come to mind is that it should be 'creative' or involve 'working with people'. When we reflect on what's missing from our lives, we might point out a lack of 'fun'. Someone might ask us how we found a recent restaurant meal and we might capture our impressions with the term 'brilliant'.

Such accounts are not false, but they lack the specificity required in order to properly understand ourselves and our situation. To find the right sort of job, we need a more accurate grip on our talents and sources of satisfaction than is provided by the word 'creative'. Re-engineering our love lives will be difficult if the missing ingredient cannot be rendered any more precisely than an absence of 'fun'. Finding a meal 'brilliant' doesn't get us far in unlocking the secrets of successful restaurant visits.

To work against the inertia of the mind, we need to ask ourselves further questions. We need to break down our vague first feelings into their constituent parts: what is it about 'creativity' that

we enjoy? During what moments of our current working lives do we feel dissatisfied? When we say 'fun', what do we really mean? What are five experiences of fun we might recently have had? And what are their opposites? We start with generalities and, if things go well with inner questioning, we end up with finely grained truths.

This is hard work. The first person to spot the arduousness, and to pioneer focused thinking, was the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE). He became famous in Athens for standing around the marketplace asking what seemed like simple questions about what his fellow citizens were trying to achieve with their lives. They would tell him at once, and with great confidence, that they cared about 'justice' or that they admired 'courage' or that they were keen on 'beauty' or 'art'. Socrates would respond not by agreeing or disagreeing but by asking them what they meant by 'justice' or 'courage' or 'art' or 'beauty'.

These were not unfair questions: his friends were relying heavily on these words. But after a few minutes of more searching discussion, it would always turn out that these people couldn't say clearly what they meant. Socrates was getting at something fundamental: we go around feeling that our thoughts are clear, but if we submit them to further questioning, we realise that they suffer from a grave vagueness. However, there is no inner warning system to alert us to this; no intellectual alarm in our brains to shout 'watch out, you're being vague! You're formulating plans with woolly ideas!' We don't easily realise how out of focus our minds are and how at risk we will be of hitting reefs and shallows.



Vagueness is a problem because it means failing to pick out what really matters to us in any given situation. We might circle the right territory but we do not close in on the core issue, so our thoughts are ineffective guides to action. Suppose we like a film, but we can't really say why; when someone asks us, we can't define what's fascinating or impressive about it. Often this wouldn't matter. But if we're trying to become a cinematographer or scriptwriter, we won't know how to reproduce what has impressed us until we isolate what we really experienced.

In our thinking work, we are often like miners in search of a precious metal who initially always hit a compound ore; we need (without realising it) to sift out the valuable essence. Lack of a definition can sometimes seem like a purely academic worry, but it is at the root of many failed efforts and doomed goals.

Some of the big words and phrases that we rely on – like courage, love, justice, fun, art, family – are the deceptive public outer casing in which our own experiences, loves and fears are approximately contained. However, our own meaning is likely to be much more specific, more detailed and more intimate. To understand ourselves, we will need to discover, individually, the words that lie behind our first words.

The difference between vagueness and focus is what separates great from mediocre art. Marcel Proust had a friend, Gabriel de la Rochefoucauld, who wrote a novel called *The Lover and the Doctor*, which he sent to Proust in manuscript form with a request for comments and advice. 'Bear in mind that you have written a fine and powerful novel, a superb, tragic work of complex and

consummate craftsmanship,' Proust reported back to his friend in his characteristically polite way. But the superb and tragic work had a few problems, not least because it was filled with clichés: 'There are some fine big landscapes in your novel,' explained Proust, treading delicately, 'but at times one would like them to be painted with more originality. It's quite true that the sky is on fire at sunset, but it's been said too often, and the moon that shines discreetly is a trifle dull.'

Why did Proust object? After all, doesn't the moon shine discreetly? Don't sunsets look as if they were on fire? Aren't clichés just good ideas that have proved rightly popular?

The problem with clichés is not that they contain false ideas, but that they are superficial articulations of very good ones. They are, to return to the crux of the issue, *vague*. The sun is often on fire at sunset and the moon discreet, but if we keep saying this every time we encounter a sun or a moon, we won't be getting at our actual sensations. When the first volume of Proust's novel was published eight years after *The Lover and the Doctor*, he also included a moon, but skirted ready-made moon talk in favour of an unusual and authentic metaphor that better captured the reality of the stellar experience:

Sometimes in the afternoon sky, a white moon would creep up like a little cloud, furtive, without display, suggesting an actress who does not have to 'come on' for a while, and so goes 'in front' in her ordinary clothes to watch the rest of the company for a moment, but keeps in the background, not wishing to attract attention to herself.



A talented artist is, first and foremost, someone who takes us into the specifics of valuable experiences. They don't merely tell us that spring is 'nice'; they zero in on the particular contributing factors to this niceness: leaves that have the softness of a newborn's hands, the contrast between a warm sun and a sharp breeze, the plaintive cry of baby blackbirds. The more the artist moves from generalities to specifics, the more the scene comes alive in our minds.

The same holds true in painting. A great painter goes beneath a general impression of pleasure in order to select and emphasise the truly attractive features of the landscape: they show the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the trees and reflecting off a pool of water in the road; they draw attention to the craggy upper slopes of a mountain or the way a sequence of ridges and valleys open up in the distance. They've asked themselves with unusual rigour what is it that they particularly appreciated about a scene and faithfully transcribed their salient impressions.

The goal is not to become artists or philosophers, but to do something that accompanies these tasks: to move from woolly first impressions to authentic details; to go from vagueness to focus – and therefore to give ourselves the best chance of reaching what we actually seek.

\_\_\_\_\_ The difference between vagueness and focus is what separates great from mediocre art.

## Mental Manoeuvre

1. Consider what you find exciting, desirable, beautiful or regrettable.
2. Note how the first answers are large and general, not so much wrong as vague, pointing to the general area without touching on live details.
3. Circle the vagueness and chip away at it (like Michelangelo with his hammer) with further questions:
  - *What do you really mean?*
  - *What is this unlike?*
  - *When have you felt this before?*
  - *How might you put this in different terms?*
4. What marks out good thinking is that it is precise. We start with ore; we should end up with a refined metal. We start with a block of stone; we should end up with a sculpture.

## 6

## Philosophical Meditation



To understand ourselves, we need to take regular stock of the thoughts that flow through our consciousness.

Insofar as there is public encouragement of the idea, it tends to be according to practices collectively referred to under the term 'meditation'. In meditation, we strive to empty consciousness of its normal medley of anxieties, hurts and excitements and concentrate on the sensations of the immediate moment, allowing even events as apparently minor but as fundamental as the act of breathing to be noticed. In a bid for serenity and liberation, we still the agitations of what Buddhists evocatively term our 'monkey minds'.

But there is another approach to consider, based not on Eastern thought but on ideas transmitted to us via the Western tradition. In Philosophical Meditation, instead of being prompted to sidestep our worries and ambitions, we are directed to set aside time to catch, untangle, examine and confront them.

It is a distinctive quirk of our minds that few of the emotions we carry in them are properly acknowledged, understood or truly felt; that most of the thoughts that drive our behaviour exist in an unprocessed form within us. Philosophical Meditation seeks to lend us a structure within which to sieve the confused content that muddies our stream of consciousness.

Key to the practice is regularly to turn over three large questions.

### **What am I anxious about?**

The first involves asking what we might be anxious about right now.

We are rarely without a sizeable backlog of worries, far greater than we tend consciously to recognise. Life, properly felt, is an infinitely alarming process even in its apparently calmer stretches. We face an assortment of ongoing uncertainty and threats. Even ordinary days contain concealed charges of fear and challenge: navigating through a train station, attending a meeting, being introduced to a new colleague, being handed responsibility for a task or a person, keeping control over our bodies in public settings – all contain the grounds for agitation that we are under pressure to think should not be taken seriously.

During our meditative sessions, we need to give every so-called small anxiety a chance to be heard: what lends our worries their force is not so much that we have them but that we don't allow ourselves the time to know, interpret and contextualise them adequately. Only by being listened to in generous, almost pedantic detail will anxieties lose their hold on us. At almost any time, a chaotic procession flows within our minds that would make little sense if recorded and transcribed: '... biscuits to the train why earrings deal they can't do it I have to Milo phone list do it the bathroom now I can't do, 11.20, thirty three per cent it a 10.30 tomorrow with Luke why invoices separately detailed why me trees branches sleep right temples...'

But such streams can gradually be tamed, drained, ordered and evaporated into something less daunting and illogical. Each word can be encouraged to grow into a paragraph or page and thereby lose its hold on us. We can force ourselves to imagine what might happen





if our vague catastrophic forebodings actually came to pass. We can refuse to let our concerns covertly nag at us and look at them squarely until we are no longer cowed. We can turn a jumble of worries into that most calming and intellectually noble of documents: a list.

### **What am I upset about?**

A Philosophical Meditation moves on to a second enquiry: What am I presently upset about? This may sound oddly presumptuous, because we frequently have no particular sense of having been upset by anything. Our self-image leans towards the well defended. But almost certainly, we are somewhere being too brave for our own good. We are almost invariably carrying around with us pulses of regret, loss, envy, vulnerability and sorrow. These may not register in immediate consciousness, not because they don't exist, but because we have grown overly used to no one around us giving a damn and have taken heed, along the course of our development, to recommendations that we toughen up.

Yet a life among others daily exposes us to small darts and pinpricks: a meeting ends abruptly; a call doesn't come; an anticipated reunion feels disappointingly distant; someone doesn't touch us when we needed reassurance; news of a friend's latest project leaves us envious. We are mental athletes at shrugging such things off, but there is a cost to our stoicism. From small humiliations and slights, large blocks of resentment eventually form that render us unable to love or trust. What we call depression is sadness and anger that have for too long not been paid their dues.

During a Philosophical Meditation, we can throw off our customary and reckless bravery and let our sadness take its natural, due shape. There may not be an immediate solution to many of our sorrows, but it helps immeasurably to know their contours. As we turn over our griefs, large and small, we might imagine we were entertaining them with a kind and patient figure who gave us the chance to evoke hurt in detail; someone with whom there would be no pressure to rush, be grown-up or impressive and who would allow us to admit without fear to the many things that have pained and reduced us in the previous hours.

### **What am I ambitious and excited about?**

There is a third question we can consider within a Philosophical Meditation: What are we currently ambitious and excited about?

A part of our mind is forever forward-thinking and hopeful, seeking to maximise opportunities and develop potential. Much of this energy registers as vague tension about new directions we might take. We could experience this inchoate restlessness when we read an article, hear of a colleague's plans or glimpse an idea about next year flit across our mental landscape as we lie in the bath or walk around a park. The excitement points indistinctly to better, more fulfilled, versions of ourselves. We should allow our minds to wonder at greater length than usual about what the excitement (it could be a view, a book, a place, an insight) might want to tell us about ourselves.

In a poem written in 1908, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke described coming across an ancient statue of the Greek



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god Apollo. It had had its arms knocked off at the shoulders but still manifested the intelligence and dignity of the culture that had produced it. Rilke felt an unclear excitement. He meditated upon and investigated his response, and concluded that the statue was sending him a message, which he announced in the final dramatic line of 'Torso of an Archaic Apollo':

*Du musst dein Leben ändern*  
You must change your life

Influenced by German Romanticism, Rilke realised that he had fallen under the spell of an abstruse way of thinking and expressing himself. Now the Greek statue was being recognised by one part of his mind as a symbol of the intellectual clarity of ancient Greece, to which his conscience knew he needed to pay more attention. By decoding his excitement, Rilke was catching sight of an alternative way of being.

The case may be particular, but the underlying principle is universal. We each face calls, triggered by chance encounters with people, objects or ideas, to change our lives. Something within us knows better than our day-to-day consciousness the direction we may need to go in to become who we really could be.

A period of Philosophical Meditation does not so much dissolve problems as create an occasion when the mind can order and understand itself. Fears, resentments and hopes become easier to name; we grow less scared of the contents of our own minds, and



less resentful, calmer and clearer about our direction. We start, in faltering steps, to know ourselves slightly better.

## Mental Manoeuvre

### 1. Anxiety

Write down what you are anxious about; find at least eight things. Each entry should be only a single word (or just a few words) at this point.

Don't worry if some of the anxieties look either trivial or dauntingly large. The mind tends to be an almost comedic blend of the two.

If you're having trouble, search for things that may be anxiety-inducing under the following categories:

- *Work*
- *Relationships*
- *Children/Parents*
- *Health*
- *Money*
- *Things I have to do*

Feel the curious release that can come from just making a list of these items. Huge relief can come from what we call 'unpacking' an anxiety. There are two kinds of unpacking we might do around any given anxiety.



There is **practical unpacking**: talk yourself through the practical challenge. Ask the following questions:

- *What steps do you need to take?*
- *What do others need to do?*
- *What needs to happen when?*

It is useful to have a calm and sympathetic part of yourself listening in on the detailed description of what needs to be done to address an issue. It's no longer merely an anxiety; it's a set of steps. They might not all be easy, but at least you are clearer about what they are.

There is also **emotional unpacking**: Talk yourself through an emotional challenge or set of doubts.

Describe the feeling in more detail. What do you feel it points to? Imagine trying to piece it together for a considerate friend.

The aim here isn't to solve all anxieties; it's to get to know them and to experience the relief that comes from clarity.

## 2. Upset

As quickly as you can and without bothering how petty, unreasonable or pretentious it might sound, write a list of current upsets; the more, the better. How have others hurt you? What are you sad, distressed, nostalgic or wounded about?

In the present safety of this exercise, allow yourself to be, for instance, furious about the way your partner brushes their teeth (too lackadaisical or too smug); the agents of global politics; your boss saying 'yeah, right' in a slightly sarcastic manner; the hotel receptionist who implied you might not be rich enough to stay there, or your mother commenting on your taste in shoes. These are just starting points; every starting point is valid.

Look at your list. Select two ways that people have hurt you that particularly preoccupy you, without considering the objective merits of your irritation. What is it about these things that bothers you? Go into as much detail as possible. Imagine you are pouring your heart out to a sympathetic and patient friend.

Now ask yourself: If this had happened to a friend, how would you advise them? What might you say?

Again, we're not attempting to resolve these issues as yet. The crucial issue is to get clear about what is actually distressing us. We're moving from vagueness to clarity.

## 3. Excitement

Rapidly list several things that have caught your attention and excited your interest since the last Meditation. A word or a brief phrase is sufficient for now.

Your list might (but doesn't need to) include:

- *Moments of envy – when you thought that someone else had something you might like to have a version of yourself.*
- *Daydreams: ideas about how life might ideally be, that you'd maybe feel awkward about telling others, because they might seem far-fetched, greedy or odd.*
- *How nice someone or something was.*
- *How thrilled someone makes you feel.*

Select two items that have particularly been on your mind. Pass them through a sieve of further questions:

- *Describe your excitement as if to a sympathetic, interested friend.*
- *If you could realistically change your life in certain ways, what would it be to change your life in the light of this?*
- *This exciting thing holds a clue to what is missing in your life; what might be missing?*
- *If this thing could talk, what might it tell you?*
- *If this thing could try to change your life, what changes might it advise?*
- *If other parts of your life were more like this, what might they be like?*

It would help if we could perform a Philosophical Meditation at least twice a week.

## 7

### 'Mad' Thinking