

THINKING FOR ONESELF¹

MR. PRESIDENT, Members of the Graduating Class, Ladies and Gentlemen: Commencement not only has its ceremonials, but it has its ritual of routine. It has its familiar phrases. Intelligent members of the graduating class can almost predict what the commencement speaker is going to say. It is fortunate that we should have arrangements of this kind which enable us to listen to the old, familiar phrases with a certain warm satisfaction. One of these familiar formulas is this: "My dear young friends of the graduating class, as you go out into the world, one thing let us hope you will begin to do. You have learned to think for yourselves and now as you enter the careers which lie before you may you continue this life of reason and the application of rational principles to the experiences which come to you day by day." How well it sounds!

Yet what assumptions there are which have not been investigated! It seems almost unkind to raise certain questions, the answers to which have been taken for granted. How many college students are congenitally prepared to think for themselves? How can they be induced to try? Does our educational system really encourage reflection? What are the conditions of actually thinking for oneself? And, after all, does thinking for oneself, in the sense of living the intellectual life, make one popular in our country in these days?

¹A stenographic report of an address delivered at the twenty-fourth commencement convocation of the Rice Institute by George E. Vincent, Ph.D., LL.D., President of the Rockefeller Foundation, retired, at nine o'clock Monday morning, June 5, 1939.

These are pertinent questions. It would be rash to try to answer all these questions in a single address. It would be also unfair not to point out that there are serious difficulties in the way of those who propose to think for themselves. In the first place, think of all the ready-made ideas which, from childhood on, are poured into our minds: family, community, church, school, radio, motion-picture, all the influences of the press, publications of various kinds, conversation day by day: all these pour into our minds ready-made ideas, assumptions, conventional phrases, values of one sort and another. Is it possible for us to examine all these ideas day by day, to go over them, revising them in the light of reason and reorganizing our thought and our ideas and our prejudices? You only have to raise the question to see how great the difficulties are.

Or, again, when you think of the complexity of life, when you think of all that has been discovered and all that is going to be discovered in the future, how can one individual hope really to know for himself more than a tiny fragment of all this confusing mass of information and knowledge which lies about him? Obviously all he can do is to cultivate a small field and then trust to others as to the fields with which they are familiar. Intelligence in these days is largely displayed in the sort of authorities whom a person selects to trust.

Then there is another thing that needs to be borne in mind. Thinking for yourself is likely to make you unpopular because it may not necessarily lead you to the conclusions that you ought to reach. When we older people advise you to think for yourselves, of course what we really mean is that we expect you to reach the conclusions which are identical with our own. It is disconcerting when, instead of running smoothly in the well-worn grooves, you jump the track.

126 A Commencement Address

When then you differ from the community, you are likely to find yourselves unpopular, so that many people who might be able to think if they were really bent upon it, feel that on the whole it is unwise to antagonize their community. These are some of the difficulties.

Don't misunderstand me. Thinking for oneself may be considered a counsel of perfection. It may be possible merely to attain it in an approximate degree, but nevertheless trying to think for oneself is so valuable an aid in the development of personality, so essential to the sound growth of a true society, that it is something to be encouraged in spite of difficulties. So if at the outset I point out that it is by no means smooth sailing I hope that you won't at all infer that I offer counsels of despair.

Now let us look into this tradition that man is a thinking animal. It has a respectable and long history. We go back necessarily—we could go back farther but we will not—to the ancient Greeks. Don't be alarmed. It is said of the president of a certain university that every time he starts this side of Homer it is so much clear gain for the audience. I start a long time this side of Homer; of course one must mention Plato and Aristotle if only to show that one is familiar with these names. The Greeks represented a real insistence upon the intellectual life, and it is from these old Greek philosophers that this splendid tradition starts. Of course Rome had something to do with it, but not very much, for Rome has been aptly described as a kind of Typhoid Mary who carried the germs of Greek culture throughout the world without getting the disease herself.

Then of course by that delightfully rapid process which lets us slip through the Middle Ages, we come to the Renaissance, when the ideas of ancient Greece, preserved in the monasteries of Europe, came again to their own, and men

like Erasmus and Sir Thomas More were able to interpret to their generation the glories and the intellectual achievements of ancient Athens. And then we come to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and Scotland with Locke and Hume, and later Adam Smith and the two Mills. What a contribution they made to the idea that man is a thinking animal! In the eighteenth century in France we have the French Encyclopædists and men like Turgot, Condorcet, Diderot, D'Alembert, and Voltaire, who made their contributions to this notion that man is an intellectual creature dominating the world. The theories of popular government were based upon the belief in widespread human intelligence. The economic man was represented as wisely seeking his own best interests.

It was in the nineteenth century that we had the glorious achievements of modern science, the results of research applied in the fields of industry and transportation. You are all familiar with that magnificent address which describes these almost miraculous achievements and exalts man as the master of the universe and in charge of his destiny.

All very beautiful. All very charming. All very satisfactory to people who like to maintain the conviction that we are thinking creatures. But unfortunately there are people who have been in doubt about it all the while. Even in ancient Athens they were not all completely hypnotized. In one of those comic operas which Aristophanes made so popular in Athens, you remember there was a house represented as the house of Socrates. On the outside was a sign reading, "Thinking Done Here," and the whole Athenian audience would roar with as much delight as an American audience would take in making fun of a college professor. Yes, there were serious doubts. There were supercilious aristocrats who would have none of the idea that there were

any considerable number of people who were capable of thinking. There were cynics who, observing human behavior, felt very certain that man was not a rational creature. Then came the time when so-called crowd psychologists studied the behavior of great masses of people, and laid stress upon impulse and emotion and the suggestibility of groups of people.

Next, along with the crowd psychologists, came the people who began to make mental tests and to examine large numbers of human beings. The conclusion some of them reached—mind you, I am not responsible for any of this; I am merely reporting it—was that only a small proportion of any human group is really capable of thinking. This also gave a serious blow to the theory that man is a rational creature.

Furthermore, there was a great deal of discussion about the working of modern popular government. Cynical people began to wonder whether after all it was really true, as the early enthusiasts thought, that government could be safely based upon the assumption of the intelligence of great numbers; whether the economic man could be counted upon to pursue with intelligent selfishness his own ends.

The anti-intellectual movement has reached its climax in the totalitarian countries. There they make no bones of saying that thinking is one of the most dangerous things possible. Thinking is taboo in the totalitarian countries, and from their point of view rightly so. If I were running a country as Hitler and Mussolini are running their countries I wouldn't allow anybody to think for a moment; they might question my pretensions and abilities. That would be fatal to my supreme control and prestige. There can be no thinking among the many in a totalitarian country. A person has to accept with complete faith and to obey humbly.

To think independently is to be a traitor. Here we have the complete antithesis of the intellectual life.

There have been other influences that we have to take into account. People have been attacking our educational institutions. They are actually saying, these people—for example, Abraham Flexner, and Robert Hutchins, and that sardonic person, A. J. Nock—that our higher education is lacking in true intellectual discipline, in unity and cultural value and philosophic insight. These critics deplore premature specialization and preoccupation with vocational and professional training.

In that most interesting and stimulating baccalaureate address yesterday morning the speaker pointed out the dangers of a type of education which neglects such attempts at unity, and seems satisfied with a scattering, fragmentary, curriculum. The critics of higher education in the United States have even implied that universities and colleges are turning out a product of anti-intellectuals. It is asserted that the devotion of the average alumnus to the intellectual life falls far short of fanaticism; that a University Club is about the last place in which you would expect to find especially detached and dispassionate discussion of current questions. Then, too, it is pointed out that there are many people who are afraid to have things investigated; that they prefer that many subjects should not be too closely scrutinized. As a result of reflection there might be unpleasant consequences. And so there is a feeling that it is better not to be too intellectual, not to inquire too keenly.

For these and other reasons there has been a distinct reaction against the theory that man is a thinking animal. One might almost say, if one were pessimistic, that reason is in retreat and that we have come to the days when feeling, emotion, prejudice, hatred, all sorts of things which have

little or no intellectual content, are taking possession of the world.

Some declare that this is an era of propaganda. The very term "propaganda" implies that the vast majority of people are not able to protect themselves against dangerous ideas; we must not let them know about some of these things because they have not the intellectual capacity, which presumably we possess, to protect themselves against the dangerous fallacies which are abroad in the world.

It is easy to make out a case for the assertion that the means of propaganda, all the means of spreading ideas, all the means of influencing vast numbers of people, have been brought to a state of perfection which has never been known before. It is a time when thoughtful people find it hard to be optimistic. But it is also well to remember that there has been never a time when the potentialities of thinking, the possibilities of stirring thought, the possibilities of reaching the people capable of thinking, have been so great as they are at the present time. If there is danger there is also hope. It is this hope that one ought to stress when there is so great a temptation to take a gloomy view.

Now we come to an interesting fact which I feel I should point out to members of the graduating class. There are ways of maintaining one's reputation for thinking and at the same time of avoiding the pain of doing it. It is comforting to know these ways. There are three of them. The first way is to associate only with like-minded people. If you associate only with such companions you hear sound ideas which are identical with yours. There is little danger that two conflicting ideas will get into your head at once, create a conscious problem, and so bring on an attack of involuntary, unpremeditated reflection. Associating with like-minded people is one of the most satisfactory things

that I know. It gives you a sense of intellectual activity without any of the effort which is ordinarily involved. You remember that description of a dogmatic old gentleman who was said not to think but simply to rearrange his prejudices.

In much the same way, in the second place, the reading of one newspaper, or of journals of one party, is a protection against unwelcome reflection. It enables you to have a unified point of view. It avoids conflicting ideas. And reading books of very much the same sort has the same effect. In other words, when it comes to the selection of reading matter, if you will pick out what is pretty sure to confirm those settled convictions which are already yours, you will have again that stimulating sense of something going on inside your head without any of the painful consequences which might occur if something were really going on.

In the third place, one may recommend the use of phrases. Most of our ideas have been worked out in ready-made phrases. Education to a considerable extent consists in passing these ready-made phrases on to the next generation. To be sure, sometimes the phrases and the facts drift so far apart that there is slight embarrassment, but on the whole the phrases wear well. These phrases, having been elaborated and passed on for generations, cover the ground well. The person who has a large store of phrases makes you think of one of these modern business machines with little buttons sticking out all over it. Any topic that is on one of these buttons is available. All you have to do is to push the button and the appropriate phrase will be immediately discharged. It is to be hoped that members of the graduating class have been provided with a supply of phrases which will be ample to satisfy their parents.

You might say that the average person is one who is simply teeming with these ready-made phrases. Robert

Louis Stevenson has described this average person as one "who never by any happy accident says the unexpected thing." He is thoroughly predictable. Some friends of mine in Milwaukee once formed a society called "The Society for the Suppression of the Obvious Remark." They were very clever people but some of their meetings were held in almost complete silence.

If you want to keep up this illusion of reflection, phrases are, above all, highly desirable. For example, you will find a gentleman who ponderously says that "labor should certainly have the right to organize and employers equally ought to have the right to organize but both of them should remember that there is a larger interest, the public interest. If they keep this well in mind, on the whole, everything being equal, in the long run, things will work out all right."

And now one more essential point. You have been wondering, some of you, why I have spoken in this seemingly disrespectful way of man as an intellectual creature when we are confronted by the supreme achievements of modern science, modern industry, the application of research to all the problems of our contemporary life. Let me make a sharp distinction at the outset between the ability to solve a problem, a specific problem in which the solver is greatly interested and which he uses his wits to solve—to make a sharp distinction between that and what we may describe as "the intellectual life."

They are very different things. In the first we have been enormously successful. It is with respect to the second that we have difficulties to confront. If I may use an illustration, which I hope you won't misinterpret, I should like to tell you about an experiment I once saw a number of years ago at Yale University. I was connected at the time with the Rockefeller Foundation, which supplied Yale with enough

money for four chimpanzees. These chimpanzees were to be experimented with. While it was not explicitly affirmed, one got the impression that if the results were satisfactory they might be applied to the slightly higher species known as Yale freshmen.

I was invited to see an experiment with a chimpanzee. It was led into a bare room. Three ordinary boxes were scattered about. A ripe banana was suspended from the ceiling. The moment the chimpanzee had been introduced to us he began looking around in a desultory way. Suddenly he saw the banana. He was completely transformed. He had a passion for bananas, especially for ripe bananas. You could see him drawn passionately toward the banana. He began jumping for it, but he couldn't come anywhere near it. After he had tried in vain a number of times, he seemed to be perplexed. His brow appeared corrugated with thought, but it was so corrugated to begin with that it was hard to tell. Finally after many futile efforts he looked around; saw one of the boxes which lay in a corner. He pushed the box toward the center at one side of the banana, and from this elevation he made a jump. He came nearer the prize but not near enough. After trying several times he pondered again. There were still two other boxes. He put box number two on box number one and took another jump. He came nearer but not close enough. It was tantalizing. Finally he discovered the third box, piled it on the first two; from that he jumped once more, triumphantly grabbed the banana, hurried into a corner, stripped off the skin, and gorged himself with the delicious titbit.

Man, if he may be likened to the monkey with the banana, is extremely clever once he sees a banana that he passionately craves. He uses his wits to extreme capacity to seize that banana. Whether it be a scientific discovery, a great

134 A Commencement Address

invention, whether it be solving a commercial problem, writing a poem, creating a statue or a picture, promoting a social reform, whatever achievement it may be, it is a problem which he solves by the use of his mind. It is a problem that is specific. It is a problem that has a bearing upon his own innermost desire. Man has shown marvelous capacity to meet situations of that kind.

But that is a quite different thing from thinking in the sense of living an intellectual life. President Lowell, when he had described the new House System at Harvard, said in his ironic way, "You see, gentlemen, the whole idea is to make the intellectual life respectable in Cambridge." There you have an allusion to a very different thing from specific problem solving. What did President Lowell mean by "the intellectual life"? He meant by the intellectual life an attitude toward all the aspects of existence. He meant rational control of emotions. He meant a mental attitude, an intellectually controlled attitude toward all the experiences of life, towards one's fellows, toward the mysteries of the universe. He had in mind something which was beautifully shadowed forth yesterday in the baccalaureate address. The educated man is a man whose education and whose intelligence have enabled him to gain insight into the world, sensitiveness to beauty, and given him some conception of the unity of knowledge and of the possibilities of living in harmony with the forces of the universe.

Now we come to close quarters with the specific requirements that are laid down for persons who are in earnest about disciplined thinking. These are by no means easy. What is the first of these? If you are to think soundly you must think in a detached, dispassionate, unemotional way. If you can imagine a conservative lawyer a little while ago considering the proposition to increase the sum of justice by

multiplying justices, you will get some idea of what self-control involves. If you expected him to be detached, you expected almost more than human nature is capable of; yet that is one of the requirements of thinking if you are going to think in accordance with the rules of sound reflection.

In the next place, one must not only be detached but he must be logical. "Logic" means something very different from what it did once. When I was an undergraduate they taught one logic. It consisted largely of major premises, minor premises, and looking out for dangerous things called "undistributed middles." We were very good at that; we were logical, but were rarely able to apply it to anything outside of a classroom. In these days logic is a very different thing. It is not any more a question of black and white. Everything is some shade of gray. It is not "this" and "that" but "more or less," and that is a kind of logic that is really difficult to get on with. A Scotchman—it would be a Scotchman—has recently written a book called "Straight and Crooked Thinking." One chapter describes "thirty-four tricks of crooked thinking." I was distressed to discover with how many of these I was familiar.

In the third place—you are going to cower when I mention this—you must be open-minded. Now open-mindedness is a very difficult thing to describe accurately. There are some people so open-minded they have minds like summer houses, every breeze that blows passes through them, as in this pavilion. Again there is what may be described as the putty-blower or bean-blower mind. It is tubular. You put in first one pellet of putty and then insert a second. When you blow, out flies the first, while the second remains. There is usually one idea at a time in a tubular mind. And it is open at both ends. That is not a happy figure.

A truly open-minded person has a door to his mind with

136 A Commencement Address

a critical guardian on duty. Ideas are examined as they pass. Worse than that; the alert guardian goes out and drags the ideas in. To be real thinkers you must go out and grab ideas and drag them in and examine them with care. More than that; if you find new ideas that you recognize as valid in whole or part, you have to let them remain. Next you have to see how their remaining affects other ideas that are already on the premises. If you are going to preserve a mental unity, you must readjust old ideas to new ideas, generally a painful process.

Of course there is a way of getting out of that. If you have your mind divided up into all kinds of pigeonholes, and keep your science in one pigeonhole, your religion in another pigeonhole, your morality in another pigeonhole, and never take anything out of two pigeonholes at the same time, you can go through life with the most miscellaneous collection of mutually destructive notions under your hat without ever suspecting it.

But if you take things out and look them over, then you have to make up your mind, which is an extraordinarily irksome task. Some people never get to that point. They keep what is called "suspended judgment." Suspended judgment means not jumping to conclusions, one of the pleasant forms of intellectual gymnastics. Not knowing exactly where you started or what you have gone over, but conscious of the fact that you have landed somewhere with both feet, is a great satisfaction. Yet if you are really to be a thinker you must have suspended judgment. You must wait until the evidence is in.

There are people, however, who suspend their judgments permanently. They never can make up their minds, which is sometimes called the academic weakness. They see so many sides of the subject that they cannot look at any one

with any continuity. They find it almost impossible to reach a conclusion. When I was an undergraduate we had a dear old president at Yale, Noah Porter. He had many habitual phrases. One of these was "what might be called." He never left behind him an unprotected statement. He was resourceful in prophylactic phrases. He used "what might be called" thirty-seven times in forty minutes. The story goes that once in college chapel at the end of the long prayer he asked the Lord to forgive us "what might be called our trespasses."

If one is really going to think, one must go on beyond suspended judgment and must make up one's mind, which means reaching a conclusion, coming to a decision. It involves action; it means deciding to do something. One of the fallacies is that thinking is somehow detached from action, that thinking does not often lead to anything except pleasant philosophical examination of what other people are doing.

True thinking means eventually making up one's mind, but not irrevocably, because, if some new ideas turn up, the open-minded thinker has to revise his judgments; the guardian at the door has to open it again, and a process of revision follows. In other words, one not only makes up his mind, but is prepared to revise his judgment when new evidence comes in. If anybody has any doubt about it being a painful thing to think, he has but to reflect upon this aspect of the subject.

Finally comes one of the most difficult tasks of all. If one is going truly to be a thinker one must be tolerant. Tolerance is very generally misunderstood. Tolerance is nowadays confused with a jaunty indifference. I can remember when people believed their theology so earnestly that they felt really anxious about the future of people who did not belong to their church. But in these days we have so amiable

a tolerance that we feel no such concern. But this is not true tolerance; it is only a lack of conviction, an easy indifference.

There is a charming anecdote of a High-Church Episcopalian and a Baptist who fell into conversation once. How it happened I don't know, but in a democratic society this sort of thing may occur. The Episcopalian spoke impressively of the Episcopal Church, especially of the High-Church party; he implied with urbanity and with a disarming indirection that people who belonged to the Episcopal Church not only enjoyed certain advantages in this world but improved distinctly their chances in the next. After the Baptist had listened to this for a considerable time he reached what might appropriately be called the saturation point. "You don't mean to say," he expostulated, "that the Episcopal Church offers the only means of salvation?" "No, indeed," replied the Churchman, "I shouldn't think of saying such a thing. Doubtless there are other means of salvation but no gentleman would take advantage of them."

No; true tolerance is not a jaunty indifference. Tolerance is something quite different. This being a Southern state, I know that you are familiar with the classical languages and therefore, although in the North it is nowadays something of a risk to make classical allusions, I cannot help taking advantage of your classical background to stress the etymology of the word "tolerant" with an anecdote.

At the time I was graduated from Yale they were doing dangerous things at Harvard. They are always doing dangerous things at Harvard which sooner or later have to be followed at Yale. Harvard had dropped Greek from the admission requirements entirely, and reduced the amount of Latin demanded for admission as well as for graduation. Dear old President Porter was in tears. He made an appeal

to us alumni of Yale to stand by the classical languages. Well, we had just come through. We didn't propose to have the chaps who followed us get out of anything that had been required of us. We were loyal to the classical tradition. After President Porter had made his tearful speech, he called on William M. Evarts, the senior senator from New York, who had a dry wit. He rose and said, "Gentlemen, I want to endorse what the President of Yale has so eloquently said about the fundamental importance of the classical languages. Why, gentlemen, when you come to think about it, the classical languages are at the very foundations of our civilization. Most of the ordinary relations of life can be summed up in the two Latin words 'meum' and 'tuum' and if in any circumstances these relations become involved and confused, a third Latin word solves the problem, 'suum'."

This word tolerance comes from the Latin word which you recognize, a Latin word which means to bear, to endure something, to carry a burden, to stand up under a load. True tolerance is no easy thing. True tolerance means that one has the courage and the intellectual integrity to look at an idea no matter how unwelcome and distasteful that idea may seem at first appearance. The tolerant man has the courage and the intellectual honesty to examine that idea, and, furthermore, if that idea appeals to him ultimately as valid, he has the courage to accept it and make such readjustment to it as the case demands. That is tolerance, a hard thing, a test of mind and character.

This is not all; one may reject an idea for himself and still stand resolutely for the right of another to express and advocate that idea, not an easy thing. That is another test of true tolerance. No one can profess to be an honest, straightforward thinker who does not practice to the best of his ability this essential virtue of tolerance.

140 A Commencement Address

These are times, my friends, when we are called upon to exercise tolerance, not in the easy-going sense which we described a little while ago, but in the true sense of being able to stand courageously against the prejudices, the group antagonisms, the racial hatreds, the misunderstandings, the social conflicts of our day. This is a period when graduates of our institutions will have the opportunity to show what sort of qualities they possess when they are faced with these problems of tolerance. In spite of fantastic testimony brought forward before the Dies Committee in Washington, we have no reason to believe that Fascism is organized on any large or effective scale in this country. But we have every reason to realize that the Fascist spirit is manifesting itself in many places and in many ways. Thus it becomes a duty and high obligation of educated, cultivated people, whose minds are in control of their emotions, to do all in their power to minimize and to withstand these waves of emotion, hostility, and hatred which sometimes threaten the unity and peace of our country.

Fascism dare not tolerate differences of opinion. If a man or a small group of men undertakes to do the thinking for a nation, then tolerance becomes a source of weakness. But in a society which still believes that truth can best prevail by freedom of discussion and by allowing ideas, under certain restrictions, to struggle for survival under the control of reason and of argument—in such a country, we who believe in our institutions must stand steadfastly for true tolerance, and in our own personal daily life try to restrain those characteristics which are the very essence of the dangerous Fascist spirit.

I hope I haven't given the impression that thinking is a kind of desiccated process, that it is detached from emotion, that it is something that can be entirely disassociated from

the whole life of the individual. That is a grotesque misunderstanding. The emotions and sentiments are a part of the life of every individual. The intellectual life consists in having mental control over one's emotions, not detachment from them.

We can go back twenty-five hundred years to an ideal which is set forth in Plato's dialogue *The Republic*. He there describes the just man. Who is the just man? The just man is he whose emotions, whose appetites, whose lower nature are always under the control of reason. All these elements are present, but reason is in control. That old dream of twenty-five hundred years ago holds good of our day. The man or woman who lives the intellectual life, like the just man of Plato's Republic, is one who has appetites and emotions but whose calm reason is always in control. He lives with serenity and good-will, enjoying what have been so well called "good states of mind."

What our country needs today, if our institutions are to be preserved, is an increasing number of men and women who, scattered through the whole nation, live day by day this intellectual life in which the reflective powers are in control of emotion and of passion, guiding feelings and sentiments into sound and sane channels of loyalty to our social order. We look to our colleges and universities for recruits for this *elite*, not of economic or "society" status, but an *elite* of brains and character who can play a part out of all proportion to their numbers.

So I repeat we look to our colleges and universities for recruits for this *elite*, but not to our colleges and universities exclusively, for under a democratic system there are many other sources in our population of hard-headed people, as we call them, who have their emotions under control.

Yet largely we do look to our colleges and universities

142 A Commencement Address

for men and women, in relatively small numbers but with great influence, who in the future will play a part in our society, bulwarks against waves of prejudice, hatred, and passion, and defenders of sanity, good-will, tolerance, and faith in popular institutions, which are the safeguards and very foundations of our social and political order.

GEORGE E. VINCENT.

