

## The Life of the Mind and Communities of Learning

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I am extremely grateful for these reflections on my book, each of which digs into a fundamental principle in the life of the mind: the role of poverty (Nguyen), its universality as a human good, beyond formal institutions (Zatierro), and its role in human community (Weber). I will discuss these topics in reverse order.

Gadi Charles Weber digs into the counter-cultural principle that learning takes place between people—it is not the “content transmission” so common in schools and universities. Weber seeks more clarity as to whether and when, exactly, other people do help us in the life of the mind. When is it best to think alone? When in a pair? When in a larger group? He draws on a fascinating discussion by Maimonides in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, a book which I wish I had been able to study before writing *Lost in Thought*. Maimonides himself draws on rabbinic traditions and parallel accounts of learning in groups in al-Fārābī and Averroës. Maimonides as Weber presents him seems concerned with matters of discretion—who is a fitting participant in a given conversation. By contrast, Weber chooses to interpret him as following the evident concerns of the other authors, the differences in the types of understanding achieved by dialectic, rhetoric, or demonstration, and the communities fitting to each.

In *Lost in Thought*, I sought to unite as many lovers of learning as possible under a large tent, and so I did not attempt any classification of the modes or types of learning. My model was rather the open-ended search for meaning and understanding as modeled by the 20th-century liberal arts. In this model, the individual is primary at the beginning and the end. It is the individual who comes alive in his or her inner life, and it is the individual who must make the judgements which constitute learning from others. We begin and end life alone.

These broad claims of mine hide many complications of the kind Weber brings to light. In my experience, we learn best in groups. Still, we all know someone or other who by all appearances has educated themselves, through extensive solitary reading, thinking, or investigation. In some sense I think this solitude must be an illusion. Education is by nature something shared between human beings. We may have ineffable encounters with word or object, but if I cannot share it, it cannot be taught. If I learn something I cannot speak about, I'm not sure I've learned anything at all.

By his use of Maimonides and related thinkers, Weber illustrates the value of old books and ancient traditions in helping us to think through questions like this. I can ask, “What use are other people in learning?” I can ask a friend and get some further ideas. But if I do not search the past, my

reflections will skitter on the surface. That is not to say it is always easy to translate from ancient traditions to my own interest in the question. The life of the mind is a kind of dialectic between my own questions and the questions others have asked and formulated. Without the former, our work is merely scholarly. Without the latter, we remain stuck at a superficial level, unconnected from our fellow human beings. In other words, old books are yet one more illustration of the fundamental community of minds that our intellectual communities share in and approximate.

In the five years since *Lost in Thought* was first published, I think it has been most successful in reaching thinkers and teachers like Joanna Zattiero. Our colleges and universities are in very poor shape, and their poor condition is increasingly exposed to those who work both within them and outside of them. It is enormously valuable to voice our experiences, so that those we have in common can resonate and help those who seek to reform the existing institutions and those seeking to escape from them.

The problem of hyper-competition is, I think, an old problem, endemic to the institutionalized life of the mind. The problem of scale, however, where university administrators seek to pack as many students as possible into a room for the lowest possible price, is newer and more harmful to learning and teaching. The first can be overcome or avoided on an individual basis. A competitive spirit can even be integrated into a healthy pursuit of learning. The second problem is toxic: since learning is essentially personal, the greater the scale, the less learning takes place. The problem of scale seems to me the root problem in the collapse of higher education that is every day more evident.

The dire state of institutions was one reason I chose to emphasize as strongly as possible the importance of the life of the mind to people outside of those institutions. The great books movement began in the labor movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the US and UK as a democratizing force to bring thinking and understanding to a far broader portion of the population than previously. The universal promise of the intellectual life was made visible in ways that can still inspire us, even if its practice has degraded or fallen off.

Green shoots of the broad and universal great books movement are appearing as I write. Numerous non-credit programs are springing up for adults to pursue the life of the mind for its own sake. I include not only my own Catherine Project, but also the Lyceum Institute, the Matthew Strother Institute for the Examined Life, and the Gull Island Institute, among many others.<sup>1</sup> As individuals change their relationship with academia, the reading and thinking preserved there finds its way into the common culture. I find it enormously encouraging to see people like Zattiero take matters into their own hands. It gives me hope for the future.

Both Zattiero's story and mine show that the difficulties are not just with universities. It is the mode of modern life that separates us from forms of service and labor that we need to flourish. The renewal of our intellectual culture goes along with a more general renewal of forms of community and a return to person-to-person (or person-to-animal!) service.

I find Nguyen's story of growing up in poverty and finding the life of the mind to be very moving. It is the sort of illustration of the universal power of the intellectual life that I sought to include in *Lost in Thought*. It reminds me of the story Roosevelt Montás tells in his *Rescuing Socrates*, where books and ideas played a key role in his vocation as well as in his route out of poverty.

In *Lost in Thought*, I also wanted to present an alternative to rags-to-riches narratives that, even when true and powerful, can be misleadingly optimistic. Instead, I emphasized stories of long-term political prisoners who used the life of the mind to nurture their dignity. It was important to me to emphasize that the life of the mind is a consolation in deprivation and suffering as well as a route to material success.

Of course, as Nguyen suggests, this account also has limitations. It is not by any means the norm to be able to read and think in circumstances of involuntary material poverty. As I sought to argue, it is one reason why material poverty is an evil and why exploitative conditions are unjust. The ability to develop oneself, to think, to study, to imagine, is necessary for us. We should not ever try to console ourselves over unjust conditions by imagining that the highest human activities are not interesting to most people anyway. In this, I think, Nguyen and I are in absolute agreement.

In my account of the unjust and exploitative conditions that make the life of the mind difficult to impossible, I used a contemporary account from James Bloodworth, as well as older ones from Jack London and George Orwell. In these accounts, the despair caused by poor labor conditions nurtures escapist pleasures such as drinking or narcotics. My point in these accounts was that escapist pleasures made the life of the mind even more difficult; and my target was not the poor and exploited who seek those pleasures, but the overlords who design and justify the conditions in which it takes place.

Of course, these examples come from North America and Europe, whose manifestations of poverty are on a different level than those in poorer countries. I used them not as examples of the furthest extremes of poverty—which obviously they are not—but as examples that would bring to life the real environment of my North American and European readers. In these “developed” countries, outright denial of poverty and its consequences is common, especially in the United States. I consider such poverty a particular shame to us, not because it is the worst in existence, but because it is ours in a concrete way that even individuals can respond to immediately.

I did not imagine, when I was writing the book, that it would find audiences in Nguyen's native Vietnam, where it has been translated, as well as in Brazil, China, and the Arabic Middle East, where extreme material poverty is a part of living memory. I am deeply honored that my work is being read in these countries. To try to connect with them more directly would demand my quick acquisition of a superficial and necessarily inadequate understanding of these regions and histories. I choose to trust instead that these different cultures will take what they need from my book and leave behind anything narrow, provincial, or unhelpful.

I was very much aided in the personal realizations that fueled *Lost in Thought* by a long stint of voluntary poverty. I recommend in the book and elsewhere to undertake various forms of voluntary poverty in order to discover our real needs and desires, as well as to discipline the blinding self-indulgence that is so common in the middle and upper classes of North America and Europe. In addition, I wanted very much to give an account of the life of the mind that was not exclusive to the materially privileged. Lastly, I did not want to speak from any false or superficial expertise, but rather from the authority of my own experience as much as possible. These three desiderata obviously create various tensions: I wanted to praise voluntary poverty without justifying involuntary poverty; I wanted to show the dignity and courage possible in involuntary poverty without minimizing its harms; and I wanted to say something universal to all on the basis of the single path of my own narrowly individual life. It is of course natural and inevitable that these tensions appear and that my handling of them is imperfect. I encourage Nguyen to write her own story, as many voices are always better than one.

We live in a time of great crisis in the life of the mind, one where many communities are falling apart and where new communities appear like green shoots. The voices of the past (like Maimonides and his colleagues), the voices from those who have found life outside of the collapsing institutions, and the voices of the poor and marginalized are all crucial to the conversation. Let the conversation be free, wide-ranging, and honest, so that it lays a foundation for our future communities stronger than those of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Catherine Project: [www.catherineproject.org](http://www.catherineproject.org); Lyceum Institute: <https://lyceum.institute/>; Matthew Strother Institute for the Examined Life: <https://www.matthewstrother.org/>; and Gull Island Institute: <https://www.gullisland.org/>.