Thinking for Fun and Profit

There is a great myth about the mind which must be mercilessly hunted down and whacked with pillows from the comfy chair. Actually, there are several, and it will be fun to whack them all, but today’s whackology is aimed at one in particular.

We begin thinking, in a pre-verbal and pre-literate way, as soon as we are born. We don’t have much going on up there, other than the desire for sustenance and warmth, but we learn new things every day. We learn colours, textures, what a breast looks like from various angles, and so on.

Eventually, we learn to walk and talk, to socialize and read, to stand on our heads and to cause havoc with our siblings. We learn new words constantly. We learn to babble continuously until big people tell us to be quiet already.

All this thinking comes from somewhere. Our histories, environments, people and creativity all have parts in the creation of our thoughts at any given moments. There are a hundred factors that go into each firing of the synapses.

When we reach a certain age, we are told to begin to learn to control ourselves. Stop doing this, start doing that…things are always wrong or right. We seem to always be getting into trouble somehow. Our thoughts are always taking us in the wrong direction, and punishment always seems just around the corner. Our creativity is slowly trained out of us. Our thoughts are forced down narrower passageways, even as our minds expand. We are compartmentalized, although our horizons become ever more distant.

Eventually, we think only along certain paths. Water takes the route of least resistance, and our thoughts flow in similar fashion. We learn to think of our thoughts as things that react to the environment or repeat earlier thoughts. We learn to feel helpless before the flow of our minds, pushed this way and that way. When we meet people who seem freer, somehow, we envy and wish, but we say to ourselves, “I can’t help it.”

“I can’t help it,” becomes the gospel of our lives. Can’t stop eating? I can’t help it? Can’t stop being angry? I can’t help it. Can’t learn to be happy? Can’t control my actions? Can’t help feeling helpless? It’s not my fault. I can’t help it.

That is the myth we must whack. We are not helpless. The mind is not a simple machine which does nothing but react. The mind is a creative tool, with complex feedback loops. You can control your mind.

No, you can’t suddenly stop feeling depressed or anxious. A device as complicated as a brain can go wrong in many ways, and it can be the devil to fix. The Chief Rabbi suffered from bipolar disorder his entire first 40 years of life, and it wasn’t until he had some decent medication that he learned to really live. You can’t think your way out of an organic brain disorder. This chapter is not a condemnation of the disabled, who must be given special status and leeway. This chapter is about those of us who don’t have any excuse for their behaviour.

You can choose what to think. You can stop certain thoughts and thought patterns. You can tell certain aspects of your consciousness to shut up, or be reasonable. You have the technology, you just have to believe that you can use it.

How many times have you heard yourself say you hate something or someone? How many times have you found yourself angry over minor slights or mere mistakes on another human’s part? You, like most of us, may be doing this all the time.

Hating and anger are hard work. They require a lot of mental energy, and they don’t feel good. By definition and nature, they are negative emotions. Think of them as an evil acid that wears down your brain, until you have nothing left in your head but negativity, pooling in the recesses wear happiness should be. You don’t have to do that to yourself. You are the general of your brain.

It isn’t easy, and at first there are far more failures than successes. It isn’t easy to tell yourself not to be angry. You may feel justified in your anger, or helpless without it. You may be angry so much of the times that you are used to the feeling, and it has become a safety blanket for you. But it’s like anything, with practice you become better.

This has all been dealt with in more detail in other chapters. The emotional rewards of forcing your thoughts into fun/Fun are well-described already. This chapter is really about creativity: Thinking for Fun and Profit.