Faculty Work Comprehensive List

2-2018

iAt Book Club: How to Think

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iAt Book Club: How to Think

Abstract

This book club series features the book, "How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds," by Alan Jacobs. Various voices have contributed to the series as they interacted with one another and responded to the book. Series contributors are Erin Olson, Mary Nickel, Myles Werntz, and Justin Bailey.

Access at publisher's site: https://inallthings.org/iat-book-club-how-to-think-round-table-2/

Keywords

In All Things, book club, book review, How to Think, Alan Jacobs

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.
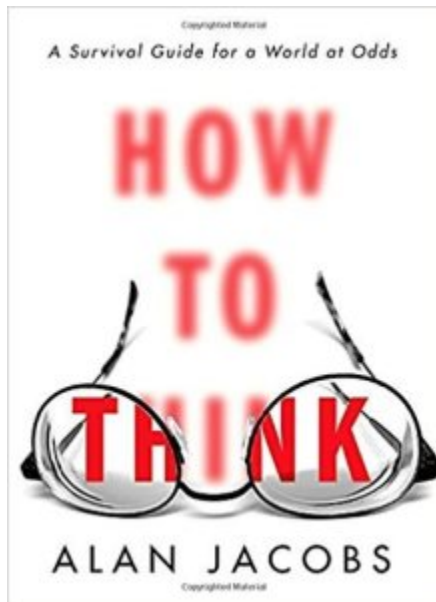
In Alan Jacobs' *How to Think,* Jacobs offers a (self-consciously) unpopular account of thinking for a world inundated by thinkpieces and hot takes. In a digital age, what passes as thoughtful is largely reactive, rather than charitable or incisive. Thinking, he argues, is not an act done in isolation, but in communities with others. The difficulty with this, however, is that we are all prone to in-group thinking, associating with those with whom we agree and repelling those with whom we disagree. This group-think is reinforced by hashtags, quick referential language, and lumping of people into categories, but the solution, Jacobs says, is not to jettison all of our assumptions or all of the intellectual furniture which comprises our mental worlds; the antidote for shallow thinking is not skepticism so much as charitable forbearance: that is, tarrying in hope with those with whom we disagree.

Jacobs' book is necessary reading, not only because of its counter-intuitive proposals for slow-thinking, charitable engagement with those with whom we have little in common, and diagnosis of the mechanisms of bad thinking. It is necessary because the venue for thinking—the digital world—pushes us so often in precisely the wrong direction of good thought. If we are to engage that venue well, Jacobs thinks, we should not swear it off, but consider what we are doing when we engage with one another in digital formats. It is truly—both in what it

proposes concerning good thinking, and in its attention to our current context—a book for our time.

* * *

For now, I'd like to kick off our roundtable on Alan Jacobs' provocative *How to Think* with a brief question: what are the material dimensions of thought?

As one who spends much of his day thinking and encouraging my students to learn to think, Jacobs runs against the grain of contemporary wisdom. In the place of "keeping up to date," he proposes slowing down; instead of persistent attachment to social media with ready-formed opinions, he proposes detachment and cultivation of small groups of persons with whom one can disagree over the long haul. Having been off of social media for the last month, I'm more drawn to his arguments than ever before, if only because having the space to think deeply and slowly has been cultivating better thinking in me.

That being said, I notice the following things which are out of sync with Jacobs' proposals. First, though I have detached myself from much social media, my connections and relationships are largely the same. Jacobs proposes that thought, as a social enterprise, occurs in the company of difference, engaging with those whose words and dispositions are not ours.This, I think, is not due to a desire to think differently, but largely due to the ways life (and perhaps our world) is organized: we seek out people in our stage of life, or with our own tastes, or with our backgrounds. As C.S. Lewis once put it, friendship has to be "**about**" something, and these commonalities are often the basis for how friendship, and thus, thought, are formed.

And so, the desire to think differently is a good start. But Jacobs' proposal is less about intent, and more, I take it, about the structures which enable thought, as a social enterprise, to occur. In a different way, it reminds me of how in **Alasdair MacIntyre's** work, the production of communities of virtue within which arguments can occur is nested within MacIntyre's latent Marxism: the cultivation of certain goods requires certain material conditions for their production. To think, as Jacobs proposes, is not about intent, but about *conversion* of our material conditions in a very real sense.

This brings me back to my initial question, then: what are the material conditions of thought? Can thought occur in a world which pushes us into affinity groups? Can thought—the social, careful engagement with difference—occur within friendship?

-- Myles Werntz

Thanks for your thoughts, Myles. I echo your praise of Alan Jacobs' excellent book *How to Think*.

I'm most interested in the points you bring up about social media. Like you've mentioned, many of our worst pathologies are exacerbated by our digital habits. The utopia of connected minds that the Internet promised becomes instead, as Jaron Lanier put it, the place where everyone's inner troll is unleashed.

I've definitely felt myself turning troll in cyberspace and have also experimented with practices to moderate my media consumption. There are certainly times when it seems that whatever is happening on social media, it's not the thick, intentional version of "thinking" that Jacobs has in mind.

But I think Myles is right to problematize the prescription of strategic withdrawal from social media. Even when we "unplug," we still find ourselves organized in affinity groups rather than organically engaged with those who espouse different habits of thought. So, how might diverse communities of thought be cultivated, if we naturally gravitate towards those who are likeminded?

What's interesting on this note is that studies like **this one** have suggested that the Internet is not the echo chamber that it seems. Online spaces are less ideologically segregated than almost all of our normal environments (homes, neighborhoods, work places), exposing us to a wider range of views than we would otherwise encounter. Our social media networks are filled with "weak social connections" the sorts of people that we probably wouldn't take out for coffee but whose thoughts regularly show up on our newsfeeds.

Mere diversity of thought doesn't entail thicker thinking, of course. But what if social media is one of the only places where we actually encounter the RCO ("repugnant cultural other")? Perhaps this means that non-engagement is not an option, and we should think of social media in terms of strategic *entanglement* rather than strategic *withdrawal*. This seems to be what Jacobs has done with his twitter account. After an online altercation that had his hands shaking with rage, he strategically curated an ideologically diverse group of around 100 thoughtful tweeters with whom to think.

That sounds quite idyllic to me. When I think of Jacobs' "think tank," I imagine an elegant, eloquent, and eclectic group that Jacobs has access to by virtue of his status as a public intellectual. But, is this image realistic for the rest of us? Or must we learn to work with what we have? That might not mean engaging the clickbait from that crazy high school acquaintance. But surely, there are less crazy "weak social connections" with whom we ought to entangle ourselves. It would certainly seem a shame to neglect the one space we frequent populated by ideological diversity.

What if the frustration we feel online is an invitation to engage rather than unplug? To plunge in rather than remain above the fray? Equipped with Jacobs' prescriptions for thought, how can we do better online?

-- Justin Bailey

I am not sure anyone likes to be categorized or "put in a box." When people make assumptions about me and my likes, talents, and dreams based solely on the fact that I am a woman, a wife, a mother, a social worker, or an academic, I get annoyed. While I expect people to recognize my uniqueness, I am not always quick to or even likely to extend that same grace to others. Alan Jacobs in his book *How to Think* says that we all categorize or "lump" from time to time as a necessary way to triage the overload of information received by our brains on a daily basis. In our fast-paced, information-laden world, we need to be able to quickly sort and categorize what we see and hear and, more often than not, people will get included in this categorization process. We are quick to label someone as liberal or conservative, racist or homophobic, black or white, a "tree hugger" or a capitalist.

According to Jacobs, lumping helps us sort through information quickly, helps us decide what to do; grouping others together can also lead to a certain amount of solidarity among those who are placed together in the same category. So, lumping and categorizing can be good and even necessary at times. But, when it becomes our default and when we're unable to see the times in which those categories have broken down and need to be reexamined—this is when lumping becomes problematic. Jacobs argues that perhaps then we should switch to splitting— creating new categories—rather than just continuing to blindly add individuals to old ones. This is where thinking comes in. We need to be consistently thinking in order to assess the categories in which we place people, and we should always be willing to take them out of those categories and place them in new ones as needed.

Jacobs, in some ways, seems to underestimate this need to be critical of our categories, and one might walk away from his book recognizing only the ways that "lumping" seems to work in our cognitive favor. Splitting (making a new category for someone who does not fit in an old one) seems to be more helpful than lumping in all situations. But better yet, shouldn't we be encouraging people to, at least when it comes to other people, seek always to understand and recognize their unique distinctiveness? Although lumping and categorizing can save us time and cognitive space, the cost of doing so seems much too high to be dismissed as something "we all do."

-- Erin Olson

Upon reflecting on Alan Jacobs' perceptive book, *How to Think*, it occurred to me that it could easily have been called *When Forbearance Fails*—a play on the 1956 social psychology classic *When Prophecy Fails*. The eponymous subject of Jacobs' analysis in *How to Think* is described as something that is "necessarily, thoroughly, and wonderfully social." Contrary to the commonplace idiom, we simply can't "think for ourselves." Thinking is something humans do together. It requires membership in a healthy community. And, it seems, *genuine, organic* membership—as Jacobs puts it—requires a certain level of forbearance. Such membership involves knowing, for example, that others "wouldn't write me out of their own personal Books of Life if I said something they strongly disagreed with" (63). This is the ideal context in which thinking can flourish.

I wonder if, by meditating on the role forbearance plays in developing healthy communities for thinking, we might get at the concerns that have been raised already by Myles and Justin. I might offer my own spin on Myles' motivating question: what are the material conditions of forbearance? And, in engaging with Justin's thoughts, I would ask: what does digital forbearance look like? I'll reflect on these in reverse order.

What troubles me about some of the enthusiasm about social media is the sense I get that what I've called digital forbearance *isn't really a thing*. Sure, the "global conversation" online might give users of social media access to diverse viewpoints, and the Gentzkow and Shapiro study Justin cites suggests that online encounters aren't less ideologically diverse than face-to-face encounters. But, it seems clear to me that the problem isn't simply about what kind

of *exposure* individuals have to ideological difference. Many of us, I think, have had a great deal of exposure to what Jacobs calls an "RCO"—a repugnant cultural other—on social media.

The trouble is that it is vastly more feasible to dismiss, berate, or dehumanize an RCO online than in person. It's easier to publish contemptuous words online than to say them in person. It's less socially dangerous. Similarly, it's easier to stop following a certain user than to walk away from a table at a meal. Again, it's less socially costly. It's no coincidence that though the group that Jacobs talks about having genuine membership in existed on an online platform, it was almost completely composed of people he had met in person. I'm concerned that the connections that we have to those that we have never met in person are simply so easy to forsake that they don't seem worth the work of forbearance.

I'm not so certain, however, that there's that much more hope for forbearance in the "real world," so to speak. I've been apprehensive about this since reading Bill Bishop's 2008 *The Big Sort*, which forcefully evidences the high degree to which Americans have been moving to neighborhoods with like-minded residents. As a helpful illustration, Bishop uses county presidential election results to show the considerable increase in voter homogeneity across 28 years. (Shaded counties in the maps below are "landslide counties," where the margin of victory in the presidential election was more than 20 percentage points.)
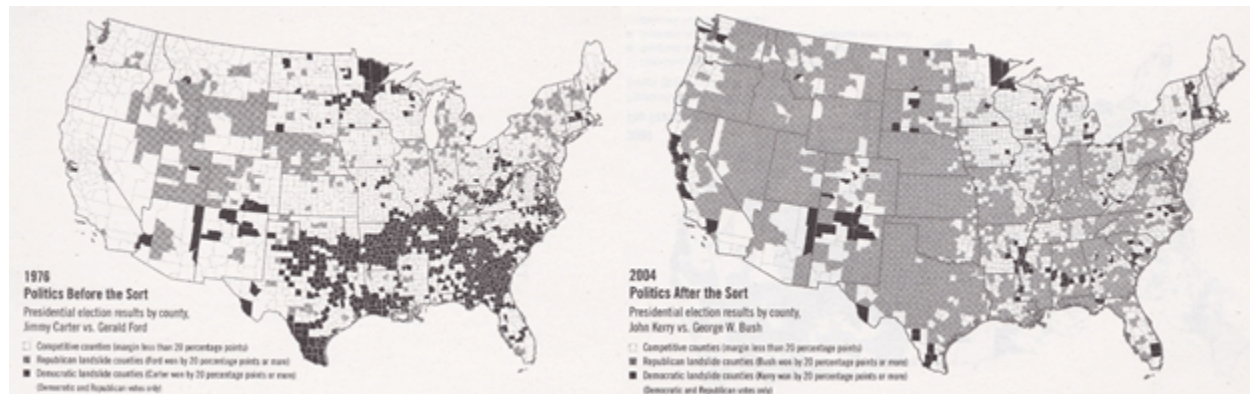
Perhaps we're not exactly writing one another out of our "personal Books of Life," but we are less and less willing to bear ideological differences in the places we live. And—I should note—this *we* that I use here is no "false we," as Jacobs calls it. I live in Princeton. If I have the opportunity to move in the near future, I'll most likely seek out cities with high quality grocery stores and bike lanes, and avoid areas where NRA membership rates seem a little too high. Let's be honest.

The real questions that stem from Jacobs' book, as far as I can tell, are: how much are we personally willing to put on the line for forbearance, for the survival of the social fabric? Or is forbearance, in the age of the unfollow button, the discerning homebuyer, and all sorts of political balkanization, doomed to fail?

-- Mary Nickel

Erin's pointing us to the phenomenon of "lumping and splitting," combined with Mary's reading along the axis of forbearance, brings up a question about the virtues necessary to pursue Jacobs' preferred way of thinking:

In addition to the material conditions of enacting thought, we've touched lightly on the virtues necessary to enact thought as Jacobs describes it. This is not an exercise in cultivating interior dispositions, as I understand Jacobs, but a matter

of intentionally putting ourselves in the presence (digital or physical) of those with whose disagreements we tarry. The kinds of virtues which enable this are the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, but Jacobs interestingly doesn't point to these. He points to more social virtues, such as acting "in good faith" (53) with one's interlocutors. To act in good faith is to consider the best of one's intellectual other, to assume in charity that they are seeking the good as they see it—i.e., acting in good faith is a judgment made of the motives of another, though one has no evidence of it.

This strikes me as a fairly optimistic way to proceed, but one which seems unlikely to occur apart from some overarching assumption about human nature. One could make a calculated risk apart from any assumptions of human nature—that it is more likely that your interlocutor is in this for the pursuit of the good than not—but to say that also assumes that a person is capable of knowing the good such that their pursuit of it coheres to that good, *and* that their pursuit is intelligible to an intellectual other. This puts an extraordinary amount of weight on our actions being *morally* self-evident to one another, that through your actions, I can see your moral pursuit of the good, or something like this.

For Jacobs, thought is not an internal exercise, but a social engagement, and so, the virtues necessary for thinking are social and not internal ones. But in order to engage charitably in this process, I have to make certain assumptions about a person which are not ones about her actions, but about her dispositions. It seems to me that this begs some further explication. After all, his program for thought is a social one which proposes to operate in a practical way, acting in good faith, but this method of thinking also implicitly assumes internal virtues of charitable pursuit of the good, humble desire for the true, appreciation for the beauty in those with whom one disagrees. But these virtues (which I'm calling "internal" for lack of a better term—perhaps "invisible" would be better?) are undiscussed. It's the lack of discussion about what *precedes* these public acts of good faith which makes me skeptical that, when we engage in thought as a social act, we're not just reaching out to those whom we assume to already have the same internal engine as ourselves. It's easy to enact forbearance when we assume a commonality of internal formation, but quite another thing when this is not the case.

-- Myles Werntz

In this continued roundtable of Jacobs' *How to Think,* I'd like to circle back to the question of online vs. offline thinking. Several of us have expressed 1) an observation that people tend to be less civil in online environments than they

would be in person, and 2) the concern that our offline environments are rather homogenous, sorted into clusters based on affinity.

So, we are caught in a bit of a quandary. Offline, we reckon with embodied persons who cannot be so easily "blocked" as their online counterparts, but these offline interlocutors usually think along the same lines as we do. Online, we encounter significant ideological diversity, but the shape of our engagement – with written words rather than an embodied person – diminishes the empathy that we might otherwise offer to rival ideas. What is the way forward for cultivating the forbearance (a great word, Mary) that so often fails?

I think Myles is right to bring up virtue, and to inquire as to how these virtues might be inculcated into our common life. It is one thing to say, "we should all listen to others' views in good faith!", and quite another to ask what practices, institutions, technologies, and cultural currents might form us to do so. There certainly seem to be no shortage of currents that encourage us to label and lump.

We might ask this question for both our online and offline environments, since they have a reciprocal relationship with one another. Neither can be abandoned when it comes to learning how to think, and as mentioned above, both domains offer unique challenges and unique opportunities.

Just yesterday, I saw **a study** that found a significant difference in how we process opposing views in written form compared with when we actually hear a person's voice (recorded or otherwise). There is, after all, a bit of the body in the voice, and hearing someone audibly explain her own viewpoint tends to diminish our instinctual reactions to dismiss what is being said.

This made me wonder, can advocating social media forms that allow us to hear (literally) the voices of others help us think more clearly? I'm not even sure what that kind of online dialogue would look like – all of us read more quickly than we listen – but maybe it is precisely our addiction to saving time and cognitive space (as Erin points out) that stop real thinking before it starts. If we are going to change the way we think together, it will require not just the aspiration to virtue but new practices, technologies, and mediating structures to break us of destructive habits.

-- Justin Bailey

I'll just ask the payoff question in light of Justin's last line[1] : in what ways does this directive change how we will think?

For me, it's encouraged detachment from online engagements, and grounded cultivation of relationships with people with whom I'm not immediately kindred spirits. We all have limited time and energy; between kids and jobs and outside commitments, the cultivation of a friendship with someone with whom you don't have much in common seems both imprudent and, frankly, a waste of precious time. But, two things come to mind for me when I find myself shrinking from that possibility.

First, I'm reminded over and over again of what Bonhoeffer writes in the opening chapter of *Life Together*, that the worst danger to the church is that of creating a church in our own image, assembled of those with whom we would like to affiliate. Though directed toward a plural audience, Jacobs' work reaffirms this theological counsel, and encourages me to take the time to befriend and partner with those who don't share my tastes, interests, or points of view. It encourages me, in those friendships, to be prudent with how I share my thoughts, watching for insider/outsider signals which would foreclose talking about important topics.

Secondly, I'm reminded that this active engagement of thought is not only good for me, but is in fact the way I **become** me. As Jacobs notes, if thought is a social activity, then for me to be a good thinker is not achieved in isolation, but by these active, time-consuming, difficult engagements, which grow the muscles of virtuous speech and forbearance. I can't be a good scholar by simply regurgitating that which I'm familiar with, but by being stretched by that which I disagree with; I can't be a good parent by going with my instincts, but by picking up the parenting book that I think at the onset is probably going to be a waste of time, and being willing to be surprised. Ultimately, thinking here is a metaphor for how we live, with the applications as wide-ranging as life itself.

-- Myles Werntz

FOOTNOTES

[1]"If we are going to change the way we think together, it will require not just the

 aspiration to virtue but new practices, technologies, and mediating structures to

break us of destructive habits."