Thinkers

Revised Edition

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Introduction

This book is called *Thinkers* as a triple reference. Education is all about thinkers. The thinkers described in these chapters, such as George Eliot, Kenneth Clark, Jonathan Swift, Frederick Douglass, and Kay Gibbons, not only form part of the essential contact that makes an educated mind, but they also serve as edifying prototypes of the thinking mind. To read them is to ride the stream of exploratory thought, whether it descends the rocky channels of fiction or the clear-winding rills of nonfiction.

The ultimate audience for this book is a second group of thinkers: students who are learning about the life of the mind and who think they want to think. Intellectually motivated students are among the finest thinkers in the world. They have open minds and a readiness for surprise, and the shorelines of their minds are unspoiled by prior biases.

The third group of thinkers is the instructors (who may be parents) who will read this book as a way to energize their own thinking about the ideas discussed and who may either use these essays to prepare for class or provide them directly to their students.

Current educational literature is vastly about who we educate and why we educate and how we educate. There is a hole in the theoretical ozone layer. These essays are in part an attempt to address that gap. They are a kind of direct guided tour of the life of the mind.

In these essays I hope that readers will see thoughtful books and films as a kind of existential algebra, each book providing another equation for describing our world and our life in it.

Chapter One

A History of Knowledge
Charles Van Doren

Are you ready for a quiz? What do you mean, you did not know you would have to take a quiz? Yes, you have to take it. Who do the following descriptions describe?

1. Erasmus called him *homnium horarum homo*, a man for all seasons. In 1516 he published *Utopia*, a word that he coined for the purpose, and in that book he imagined a better world where people were equal and everyone believed in a good God. In time Henry VIII had him executed.

2. This man said that the secret was *saper vedere*, to know how to see. And see he did. He left thousands of notes and sketches on every imaginable subject, as well as a handful of paintings that are among the great treasures of the world.

3. He created a school in Athens, teaching his students in the *Stoa Poikile*, or painted colonnade, and hence the name of his philosophy, *stoicism*, which taught that human happiness comes from conforming to the will of divine reason. We are happy if we accept what is and do not long for what is not.

4. When he and his Persian army arrived at the Hellespont, the waves were high, forcing the army to delay its crossing. Enraged, he commanded his soldiers to whip the waves for their insubordination.

In his humane and accessible *A History of Knowledge*, Charles Van Doren discussed these and several hundred other individuals who have contributed to the making of the modern mind. Van Doren's survey of ideas—yes!—begins with the ancient world and continues through Planck's constant and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. He discussed not only Occidental thought but Oriental thought as well.

Oh, you want to know the answers to the quiz? All right, the author of *Utopia* was Thomas More, Leonardo da Vinci said the secret was *saper vedere*, Zeno was the Stoic, and that fool Xerxes whipped the waves.

As the title suggests, Van Doren's discussion focuses not on the trodden paths of world political and military history that students have wearily tramped in every textbook—as though all people do is govern and fight—but on the part of human history that is so often missing from students' history texts: ideas. Ideas are the ozone hole in our curricular atmosphere. Our neo-Roman pragmatism—Sculpture is for wimps; real men build arches!—leads us into a shallow, reportorial approach to history; we limit our texts to history's plot, the who-what-where-when, and we ignore the why. Well, any competent English teacher will tell you that a discussion

limited to plot gets not at the thought. Our understanding of the world must be conceptual, not bicep-tual.

What? Oh, all right, here are some more thinkers to test your knowledge of intellectual history:

5. She not only wrote the first fully adult work of fiction but lived independently in opposition to the mores of her age. Respectable people drove her from respectable England because she was not married to her companion, but she counterattacked with books that exposed the small-mindedness of Victorian life.

6. Everything, he decided, is composed of a number of small particles—or atoms, as he called them—whose connections and dissolutions explain the arising and passing of all phenomena.

7. He had composed hundreds of the world's most superb musical works by the age of twenty-five and died ten years later in abject poverty, to be buried in a pauper's grave.

8. His greatest contribution was the set of three laws of planetary motion that solved the problem of epicycles and eccentric orbits once and for all. These three laws are still valid and bear his name.

Give up? The anti-Victorian novelist was George Eliot (whose real name was Mary Ann Evans), Democritus developed the atomic theory (though Thales realized before

him that there must be some uniform substratum for material existence), Mozart died in poverty, and Kepler figured out how planets move.

Beethoven once said that for the person "who understands my music, all the problems of life will be solved." And after listening to the *Pastoral* symphony, we might almost agree (no, not the *Eroica* symphony—too strident). But even though *A History of Knowledge* is a symphony of ideas, it will not solve all the problems of life—even intellectual life. The ice-mind David Hume, for example, who has been called the greatest philosopher to have written in the English language, is not even mentioned. Nor is Wittgenstein. Nor Voltaire.

And so *A History of Knowledge* is something less than a pocket university. It is, however, a dazzling performance by Van Doren. If Wittgenstein is not there, then Avicenna is. And Seneca. And Tacitus. Averroës is there, and Montaigne, and Erasmus. If Van Doren passed over Hume, he lingered over Newton, offering one of the best concise statements of Newton's contribution to the mind of the world. And Van Doren had depth; he was not star-struck in the presence of alpha-geniuses like Newton:

> Newton, with all his brilliance, did not understand why the force of gravity acts as it does; that is, he did not know what gravity is. Nor do we. He only knew that it acted the way it did. He was right about that, to his eternal credit. But the reasons

> of things, as Pascal might have called them, still lie hid in night.

One of the best features of *A History of Knowledge* is that Van Doren forcefully pushed his discussion into the twentieth century, providing students (and their teachers) with a strong discussion of modern thought. Van Doren discussed DNA, modern findings about the universe, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the challenge of AIDS, and genetic engineering. But he also discussed the arts; Picasso, Braque, Pollock, and Rothko are there. There is a discussion of Forster, and even of Samuel Beckett.

What, you want four more thinkers? Well, as Old Kinderhook, Martin Van Buren, wrote, *OK*.

9. He mockingly described the Idols of the Tribe, those intellectual faults that are common to all human beings, such as the tendency to oversimplify, which makes us see more order than is there, or the tendency to prefer novelty, which sometimes makes us discard good theory for new theory.

10. With his friend Petrarch, he deliberately set about to create a Renaissance of ancient literature and knowledge, and the two of them successfully devoted the remainder of their lives to the project.

11. His great message consisted of Four Noble Truths. The first is that human existence is full of suffering, the second is that our difficulty and pain are caused by

selfish desire, the third is that we can free ourselves from pain, and the fourth is the way.

12. He inspired a fervor that would lead his followers to conquer the Byzantine and Persian Empires and create a land empire rivaling both in size and organization the Roman Empire at its greatest.

The Idol-mocker was Frances Bacon, Petrarch's Renaissance buddy was Bocaccio, Buddha enunciated the Four Noble Truths, and Muhammad's followers swept up two great empires.

Students who have read Van Doren's book have angrily asked why their history textbooks never told them these things. What is the answer? (We fear that the real answer would test our tolerance for the bleak.) For anyone who believes in real education, *A History of Knowledge* is a solid contribution.

Chapter Two

Civilisation
Kenneth Clark

How often have you dreamed of a time machine—one that would let you go back and see the dinosaurs, or witness thundering Waterloo from a protected hilltop, or walk up the mount to hear the Sermon? With a time machine, we could go to see Plato, or Socrates, or Amelia Earhart, or Joan of Arc. We could hide and watch Henry the VIII or travel across unpaved Europe to meet Catherine the Great. We could go to Assissi and see Francis. We could talk to Harriet Tubman and hear the stories. We could look at the gentle face of Lincoln or at the awesomely handsome face of Frederick Douglass. We could meet Leonardo and watch him paint Mona.

Just imagine.

But there is no time machine.

Is there?

Well, what if we had beautiful video documentaries of these individuals, and we could see their real faces, and hear their real voices, and watch the movements of their hands as they taught us, through the medium of video, what they wanted us to know?

By some unlikely and fortuitous miracle, that is what we have in the case of Kenneth Clark and his improbable masterpiece, *Civilisation*, which is available today both in book and (better) video form.

Kenneth Clark—Lord Clark of Saltwood, that is—was nothing less than the Director of the National Gallery in London and the Surveyor of the King's Pictures. Educated at Winchester and Trinity College, Oxford, Lord Clark had perhaps the most distinguished and admired career of any modern art historian. He was Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford from 1946 until 1950, and he was the Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain, as well as a Trustee of the British Museum. And much more.

He may actually have been the most cultivated man of his century.

To have Kenneth Clark as your art teacher would be like, oh, having A.C. Bradley as your Shakespeare instructor.

But, see, you can have.

Clark, that is, as your teacher.

Through video.

Old video, too.

Even though *Civilisation* has been reissued in a restored, affordable format, no one would mistake it for a glossy recent product, or Kenneth Clark for a contemporary man. Heavens, no. He is hopelessly wrong for our time and was

probably an anachronism even in 1969, when *Civilisation* debuted. With his Tweedle Dum body, and his funny crooked teeth, and his partial head of hair, and his cute silk handkerchief stuck aristocratically in his elegant pocket, and his heartbreaking sincere smile, and his gentle voice, he is an anti-hero, as removed as possible from the Age of the Action Hero. In almost Chaplinesque fashion, he pops up happy in front of the landmarks of Western culture: here he is in front of the Pont du Gard aqueduct near Nîmes, stepping over stones; here he is peeping out tiny from the pedestal of Michelangelo's colossal *David*, pleased with himself for having thought of it. Here he is, admiring a Viking ship, which he calls the symbol of Atlantic Man (the Greek temples were his symbols of Mediterranean Man).

And everywhere, he casts a light of admiration on the objects of attention, the paintings, the sculptures, the illuminated manuscripts, the monastery arcades, the cathedrals.

If this were only a personal tour of the fine art of the Western world, it would be a privilege to come along with Kenneth Clark as our guide. But *Civilisation* is more than a televised art lecture; it is a controlled and penetrating examination of, well, civilization.

With the mushroom cloud rising lurid in the background, Clark considered that it was a good time to understand what it means to be civilized. We can no longer afford, he thought, the alternative.

And of the options available to humanity for understanding civilization, Clark argues into the camera, the best is art, for art reveals truth. He quotes Ruskin on the trustworthiness of art and adds, "If I had to say which was telling the truth about society, a speech by a Minister of Housing or the actual buildings put up in his time, I should believe the buildings."

There it is.

Believe the buildings.

From this lucid beginning, Clark proceeds to examine those human qualities that give civilized life its value, and he does this with a language and style that is as elegant and refined as any we are likely to hear. More so.

What does the fall of the mighty Roman Empire show us about civilization?

> It shows that however complex and solid it seems, it is actually quite fragile. It can be destroyed. What are its enemies? Well, first of all, fear—fear of war, fear of invasion, fear of plague and famine, that make it simply not worthwhile constructing things, or planting trees, or even planning next year's crops. And fear of the supernatural, which means that you daren't question anything or change anything.

You daren't question.

Well, it is the Interrogative Heroes who become the stars of Clark's survey of Western cultural history. He admires the "brilliant, enigmatic" Peter Abelard, who contradicted

Anselm's doctrine of unquestioning belief: "By doubting we come to questioning," Abelard reasoned, "and by questioning we perceive the truth." Strange words, Clark subtly observes, to have been written in 1122.

Clark leads us through the ruins of Greek temples and the Roman roads, through the court of Charlemagne, whose scribes rescued pagan literature from the ravages of time, to the frosty and remote island of Skellig Michael, where Christians hid their cherished faith from the roving barbarian horror. He pauses at Chartres Cathedral, shows us the solidity in Giotto's frescoes, and eulogizes Dante, "a man who is unequaled—the greatest philosophic poet that has ever lived."

Clark takes us to the lovely palace at Urbino, shows us the duke's quarters, and wanders off to Florence, where this business of questions comes up again; Clark quotes the Renaissance art historian Vasari on the spirit of criticism in Florence that makes minds free and discontented with mediocrity, adding:

> And this harsh, outspoken competition between Florentine craftsmen not only screwed up technical standards but also meant that there was no gap of incomprehension between the intelligent patron and the artist. Our contemporary attitude of pretending to understand works of art in order not to appear Philistines would have seemed absurd to the Florentines. They were a tough lot.

Clark admired a tough lot and viewed the Florentine spirit of criticism as essential in keeping the vigor of civilization alive.

Gradually, Clark takes us past the high water marks of civilization: Michelangelo's chapel ceiling, and Leonardo's notebooks, and Mozart's music. We rediscover Gutenberg and Erasmus and Albrecht Dürer, Aldus Manutius and Raphael and Descartes, Bacon and Spinoza and Vermeer. It is an interdisciplinary journey.

But it is Clark's ideas that keep delighting us. He shows us, for example, that civilization depends upon a balance between the "male and female principle." Or, in discussing Baroque Rome, Clark warns against the excesses of grandeur:

> The sense of grandeur is no doubt a human instinct, but carried too far, it becomes inhuman. I wonder if a single thought that has helped forward the human spirit has ever been conceived or written down in an enormous room: except, perhaps, in the reading room of the British Museum.

This right-you-are plain sense of Clark's disarms us; we keep expecting lofty pronouncements from the great man who stands beside, or on top of, or underneath these "important" buildings or artworks, but Clark was, ultimately, a deeply human being who used art in a deeply human way. It is people, Clark saw, who are important.

With art, Clark believed, we can understand ourselves and use what is best in our intelligence to build and continually

rebuild not just a culture but a civilization, and the work of building civilization falls finally not to any system or abstraction but to the individual human beings who must find in their own humanity the answers to their questions. It is in this light that Clark viewed the contributions of the great artists, architects, poets, and composers. "Above all," he tells us, "I believe in the God-given genius of certain individuals, and I value a society that makes their existence possible."

Civilisation has been called the "documentary by which all others are measured," and now that the film is available in an affordable edition, we can show students why. Not only did *Civilisation* create a new genre of powerful, extensive, profoundly educational documentary, a genre that would be used brilliantly by Jacob Bronowski in *The Ascent of Man* and James Burke in *The Day the Universe Changed*, but *Civilisation* established a precedent of quality that has challenged subsequent thinkers and has provided the new generation of *Homo videoensis* with something worth watching.

And not the least of the benefits of *Civilisation* is the example of Clark himself, a gentle and affable man, courteous and soft-spoken, who provides a salutary contrast to the strong-jawed, ham-fisted action heroes of the cartoons and cartoonish adult adventure films that saturate our popular culture. In Clark's own words, he was a "stick-in-the-mud" who believed in courtesy, "the ritual by which we avoid

hurting other people's feelings by satisfying our own egos." In our age of ego-apotheosis, we watch Clark's beautiful film with a feeling of increasing affection, both for him and for his human ideas, values, and questions.