

In Defence of (Over)Thinking

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Abstract

‘You are overthinking that!’ The article argues against the popular idea that too much of the activity of thinking is bad for individuals. Wrong thinking, I argue, is what is bad or unhealthy, irrespective of the length of time it is done for. Wrong thinking can lead to worrying, stress, and impedes practical action. But if thinking is done right, then you can’t have too much of it.

Introduction

Often words float around whose meaning we do not quite understand. They are used in different contexts to mean different things. One word which I came across many times (I have a hunch that students of philosophy often do come across), is ‘overthink’. (There is also a podcast ‘Overthink’ by Ellie Anderson and David Peña-Guzmán.) To me, the word came laden with various emotions

- (a) Surprise: ‘Oh I didn’t know you are such an overthinker!’
- (b) Care: ‘your overthinking worries me’
- (c) Sadness: ‘I am very disappointed with your chronic overthinking’
- (d) Disgust: ‘I’m tired of your overthinking about everything!’ lastly,
- (e) Anger: ‘F*** you and your overthinking!’.

As it came in various shades and in various situations, I was convinced that it not only had a common occurrence in people’s vocabulary, but also

that people felt rather concerned about it. Often, we feel strongly about many things without knowing why we feel so. I thought I would use some space in my computer (I cannot say ‘will spill some ink’) to try to understand what exactly people mean when they use the word. Thus, my attempt at thinking about overthinking. This is more of an attempt to understand and put up a philosophical defence of a basic human activity, namely the activity of thinking, against everyday misunderstandings.

Thinking, understood broadly, is a cognitive engagement with an issue. Overthinking then would mean too much thinking – something like do-overdo, work-overwork, produce-overproduce, etc. That is, excess of some activity. Overthinking is not feared for nothing. There are three reasons for fearing overthinking. People believe it

1. Leads to worry
2. Impedes practical action (which includes decision-making)
3. Is of no ‘use’, in the sense of being unproductive

Thus, there is supposedly a threshold of thinking, such that when one goes beyond it one ends up worrying, not performing practical action, and often the results of the activity are useless.



Although I learnt about these from the persistent warnings from my peers, however, one can also see similar thoughts on popular well-being websites. One defines overthinking as ‘thinking about a certain topic or situation excessively, analysing it for long periods of time’. Another says that overthinking brings to mind ‘the age-old adage “too much of a good thing”’.

The claims of this article are: (i) There is right thinking and wrong thinking; (ii) wrong thinking, irrespective of whether one does it more or less, leads to worry and obstructs practical action; (iii) if thinking is right, then there is no such thing as ‘too much thinking’. As human beings we should think without any obligation to produce immediate outputs – in terms of action, decision or production of objects of utility – in short, with no obligation to make our thoughts ‘useful’.

Thinking Right, Thinking Wrong

If thinking is a cognitive engagement with any issue, therefore right and wrong thinking would

suggest right and wrong kinds of cognitive engagement with the issue. Wrong thinking, or wrong cognitive engagement, could be of two kinds –

- a. *Asking wrong types of questions to understand an issue:* This kind of wrong thinking could infect us in all spheres of life – from the most mundane experiences to academic ones. If one tries to understand how friendship works by measuring the utility of individual friendships, then one would end up not knowing what true friendship is. To understand how a shirt is made we need to understand the craft. A botanical explanation on the growth of the cotton plant will be of little use. If one looks at laws of physics to understand economic behaviour of humans then one would be very confused about how economic agents rationalize.
- b. *Asking right questions at the wrong time:* We often hear people say, ‘It is not the right time to think about this issue.’ That means the thinking is right, but the timing is

wrong. When a practical situation demands right action, thinking about questions unrelated to the issue can cause serious problems. It is not possible (at least not in a short article) to provide rules or criteria as to what can be accepted as related and unrelated questions. Generally speaking, related questions are those which will generate reasons for action that aim at resolving the issue, or at least, attend to the issue in the way it presents itself.

Robin's granny is very sick; Robin knows it; he is concerned about her. But Robin is unable to decide whether or not to hospitalize her, since he is concerned about the system of private healthcare being deeply unjust. The concern with private healthcare is legitimate and demands attention. But at that crucial moment this question will not generate reasons which would tell him whether or not his granny needs hospitalization. That will be resolved only when Robin asks a competent doctor and works on the doctor's expert advice. Again, suppose Nimrah requests Robin to come over because she is in distress. Robin realizes the seriousness of the situation. But he could not make it on time because he was pondering over the Categorical Imperative – what would a universalizable response be? A caring hug instead would be apposite. Lastly, cricketer Robin was admonished by his coach because he missed a catch while wondering that an extra fast bowler would have been a good addition to the team. Being alert to the game – which involves a bodily awareness – was most required. Robin can value both the things – concerns of justice, friendship, game strategy, *and* his granny, Nimrah, the game – but he has to time his concerns right. Asking right questions at the wrong time will prevent him (and others) from attending to the other things he values (intrinsically or instrumentally), which demand immediate attention. But here too, a complete cessation of thinking is not warranted. Robin needs to recognize whether the twitch in his ankle feels

serious or not; what kind of distress Nimrah is in – is it work-related or related to her personal life? If the doctor prescribes hospitalization, should he wait for the ambulance or should he himself drive granny to the emergency clinic?

‘... there is supposedly a threshold of thinking, such that when one goes beyond it one ends up worrying, not performing practical action, and often the results of the activity are useless.’

One may contend that impulsively asking questions (of the right type, at the right time) without waiting for answers is also a kind of overthinking which leads to anxiety. I doubt if such an act qualifies as thinking or is only an attempt at thinking. If it is the latter, there is no question of ‘overthinking’. I question whether it is an instance of thinking because here thought seems to be subverted by impatience, and as Jonathan Benson claimed, often ‘fear or impatience, may prevent one from thinking clearly, *or thinking at all*’ (emphasis added).

The task is, therefore, to understand what the right questions are and when to ask them. Surely it need not be an isolated individual activity. Help from peers (or professionals) is always welcome and is needed at times. Wrong types of questions, and wrong timing of right questions, constitute wrong thinking or the wrong kind of cognitive engagement.

Conversely, right cognitive engagement asks the right questions, at the right time. Ways to

come to know what the possible right questions are could be many – if one has had training in the field, or if one asks the experts, or if one conducts possible explorations which may involve asking wrong questions at the beginning. Two clarifications are due. Firstly, asking right questions does not mean asking precise questions with clarity and rigour. It merely means aiming the inquiry in the right direction, well-paced – neither rushing to conclusions nor waiting too long for answers. Unless one is an expert in a field one cannot ask precise and rigorous questions; and that would be too strict a requirement of people in general. Secondly, asking right questions does not mean that everybody (who asks thus) will get the right answers (in the sense of the answers being factual, empirically verified or logically consistent). Not getting answers, arriving at new questions or puzzles could be outcomes of this exercise. Encountering new wonders and puzzles may leave people perplexed (Harry Frankfurt mentioned in *The Reasons of Love* that ‘thinking about things’ may make us ‘dizzy’ sometimes, just as Socrates was left dizzy when he tried to solve certain logical, linguistic and/or conceptual problems). There is also no guarantee that everybody who asks right questions will get the same answer. People can end up having different right answers suited to their purpose or their context. Asking right questions suggests having a general idea about the nature of the issue and asking questions accordingly. And we are often quite good at doing that.

How to know what the right time for the questions is? That would depend on whether or not the person can accommodate all other concerns – thoughts and activities they need or value. One way for that could be having an ordinal ranking of the priorities and attending to them in the order of importance. But there could be many ways to negotiate the diverse commitments we have.

Woes and Thinking, Woes of Thinking

Wrong thinking leads to worrying or anxiety issues. This can happen in two ways. If the right questions are asked in the wrong moment, then that can keep time-appropriate issues (granny,

Nimrah and catching the ball) unattended. One may miss the right window for action; that can generate stress (other things pile up and become too much to handle), anxiety (not being able to attend to or resolve many things at once) or guilt (for not being prompt in acting). (This does not suggest that wrong timing of questions alone leads to anxiety, stress or guilt. Many things may lead to anxiety, stress or guilt. Here I only highlight the point that it is wrong thinking, *not* overthinking, which leads to worry, stress or anxiety.) Again, wrong types of questions, although they demand cognitive labour, do not produce the right answers. This causes much frustration and can lead to self-doubt and depressive episodes. He may read Einstein and Max Planck cover to cover, but Robin will not get answers to questions of economic behaviour of humans. This can lead Robin to depressive episodes where he doubts his intellectual abilities.

Thinking wrongly could lead to such woes. Surely, thinking wrongly for too long can lead to severe episodes. But a little of it can also be harmful. For instance, if Robin spent time thinking about the injustice of private health care when he should be calling an ambulance then that could come back later to fill him with angst and anger. Again, if this angst and anger occupies Robin from attending to other necessities then that would amount to a vicious cycle of wrong thinking, possibly resulting in guilt, anxiety or depression.

On the contrary, if right thinking – that is, asking the right type of questions, and at the right time – leads to worrying then that worry is probably not undue. We were worried about our health, and we sought ways to protect ourselves and our loved ones during the early days of the covid pandemic. Whoever did not worry enough was considered to be either ignorant (unaware of the need to be careful and how to be careful), or careless (aware of the crisis, knowing how to be careful but not being attentive to it), or both (not knowing how to conduct oneself and inattentive to advice). (This obviously excludes the essential workers who often had to, and are still having to, take huge risks, despite full knowledge of the dangers.)

However, if one right worry paralyses us and prevents us from attending to other necessities of life, then the problem is again one of wrong

timing of questions, solutions to which can be obtained by timing the questions right. We were overcome by apocalyptic thoughts at the start of the pandemic. Waking up in the morning was difficult for many people; for many others getting enough sleep was laborious. Getting out of that phase was possible only by asking the right questions at the right time. We sought ways to look after ourselves, and our loved ones. Eventually we reduced the time for attending to those questions, made those questions more precise, and organized our lives around worries and consolation. This way we could accommodate many other concerns – those of work, health (which involves good sleep), household, etc.

Is Too Much of a Good Thing Always Bad?

The point I want to emphasize is that there is no such thing as excess or surplus thinking. If one is thinking right – that is, asking the right questions at the right time – then one must not stop that activity. Thinking in circles is often condemned for generating anxiety. But that is not as harmful as it is made out to be, only if one can accommodate other thoughts and concerns. For many people often read the same text over and over again to find new ways of understanding the piece (poem or art or treatise or academic papers), or for finding ‘that missing piece’ in some puzzle (and this is not just a preoccupation of academics). It becomes an issue when rumination over one issue is done at the expense of attention to other concerns of life. The issue is not so much surplus of thinking as the wrong way of thinking. Wrong thinking – surplus or not – can cause problems.

‘The issue is not with *thinking too much*. The problem lies in erratic and erroneous thinking.’

The everyday pejorative use of the term comes without qualification. Sometimes it does say that asking right questions at the wrong time is harmful. But the prescribed procrustean solution of coming ‘out of [your] head and into the real world’ advises you to limit the activity of thinking as such. It is this that I dispute.

Everyday life demands practical action. That does not suggest, however, that our lives are merely active lives. There is much more to life than efficient production and practical action. Our lives are also contemplative lives. Often contemplation helps in figuring out ways of swift and strategic thinking, something that is essential to the ‘real world’ of practical action. That does not make better practical action the end goal of contemplation. Contemplation could simply be for the sake of itself. David Roochnik writes that cognitive apprehension of the world, according to Aristotle, is ‘a basic human activity’. Aristotle maintained, according to Roochnik, that we are cognitive beings: ‘we look at the world, work hard to see it and then talk about it’. Aristotle discussed three forms of knowledge with three kinds of goals –

- (a) practical knowledge – the goal of which is to understand what virtue is, how to become good humans
- (b) productive knowledge – the goal of which is a well-made object
- (c) theoretical knowledge – the goal of which is ‘truth’

For Aristotle, theoretical knowledge – the knowledge of mathematics, physics and theology – was something that could be gained for itself, without it producing a human action or any object. By right thinking, or contemplation, I do not suggest contemplation over mathematics, physics and theology only. What I do suggest is that there can be right contemplation over many matters, the goal of which need not necessarily be production of an object or a human action. Such contemplation can enrich life and reveal truths about us, make sense of our

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surroundings, history, etc. Thoughts can branch out in new directions. Resolution of one issue often generates questions about another. One can choose whether or not to attend to the newer issues. Contemplation, in other words, can be ‘useless’, that is, it may not produce objects of (immediate) utility; nonetheless it is valuable.

The issue is not with *thinking too much*. The problem lies in erratic and erroneous thinking. Resolution of this problem is not cessation of thinking; it is systematizing one’s thinking. If thinking is systematized, then too much good thinking is no vice. I therefore urge my well-wishers to stop thinking about overthinking, and start thinking about right and wrong thinking.

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