

IS IGNORANCE BLISS?

Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* became a focus of much controversy when published last year. While highly praised by some reviewers, it has caused considerable resentment among many intellectuals. The book is a brilliant, relentless indictment of over a dozen luminaries of modern times. The first chapter is a brief biography of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, widely revered as the champion of the oppressed and the harbinger of their liberation. To many, who knew him only from afar, Rousseau appeared a saintly benefactor of mankind, for whom according to the poet Schiller "only Heaven's angels are fit company". Those who knew him better, however, knew better. *David Hume*, for example, at first a keen admirer of the Frenchman, said in his final assessment that he was a "monster who saw himself the only important being in the universe." And *Diderot*, a lifetime intimate, claimed that Rousseau was "deceitful, vain as Satan, ungrateful cruel and full of malice."

Among the 20th Century notables featuring in Johnson's book, the most towering genius is *Bertrand Russell*. Readers of his technical writings in logic and philosophy tend to be dazzled by their breathtaking brilliance, and his more popular compositions, which cover practically every topic under the sun, are invariably a pleasure to read owing to their witty, elegant and lucid style. The first volume of Russell's fascinating autobiography begins with the following lofty declaration:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

It is truly distressing, therefore, to learn that in fact throughout his long life, Russell has proven himself to virtually everyone who knew him, to be animated by far less noble sentiments, such as vanity, greed, cruelty, deviousness, to name but a few.

The rest of the book contains character sketches of other leading figures

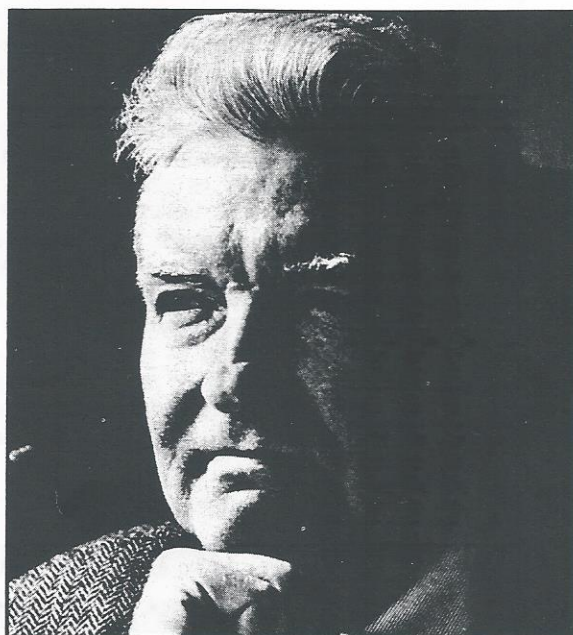
in their particular field of intellectual endeavor. What seems common to them all is, that each achieved great fame as a dauntless defender of freedom and equality, through carefully crafted public image that bore little resemblance to their real selves.

Are these artfully selected cases, or typical examples of the vices to which exceptional talents are markedly susceptible? There seems good reason to fear the latter. Prodigies are easily seduced into feeling entitled to special privileges and thus not bound by all the laws governing ordinary mortals. Also, a very clever individual is capable of manipulating less gifted ones, and is tempted to profess convincingly sentiments he does not have; he is smart enough to appear altruistic, while actually engaged in the pursuit of selfish concerns. An astute mind constitutes a strong enticement for being used as a sharp weapon with which to gain advantage over others.

Are we then to suggest that from a moral point of view the possession of high intellectual powers is a liability rather than an asset? That dull-wittedness is a prerequisite of righteous conduct, and that ignorance is in fact a spiritual bliss? That would surely be contrary to the basic teachings of Judaism. In the *Amidah* (Silent prayer composed of 19 blessings, which is recited daily), for example, we petition the Al-mighty for all our important needs, but our primary request, which precedes all others, is that He may "bestow upon us knowledge, understanding and discernment." Or when King Solomon was offered to be granted anything he wished for, we are told, he asked not for a long life, not for riches, nor for victory over his enemies, but for understanding and good judgement. There is plenty of evidence from traditional sources that

intelligence, wisdom and knowledge are not only desirable, but constitute the most precious possessions to aspire to.

The correct answer seems to be that a high intellect is a powerful instrument, and it is very tempting to misuse it as a device with which to pursue illegitimate objectives. At the same time, however, it can also effectively be employed to serve noble ends.



Intellectuals' author, Paul Johnson

And what needs special emphasis is this: given the complexity of some moral situations, often no amount of good will, compassion or generosity will yield the desired result, unless these altruistic sentiments are accompanied by a powerful intellect. According to a widely quoted saying of *Hillel* "An ignorant person cannot be pious". This is usually understood to mean that in view of the intricacy of the law, only the learned can determine in any given situation what his obligations are. In fact, however, I believe, there is more to Hillel's saying. Even when it is perfectly clear what my obligations are, that for instance I have before me someone whom it is my clear duty to help, it may still require a high degree of sophistication to determine precisely what kind of

help he needs and which is the best way to go about providing it.

A famous example of an act of kindness that would be inconceivable without an exceptionally brilliant mind is provided by the celebrated letter sent by Dr. Samuel Johnson (who was cer-

**Knowledge is power,
and power tends
to corrupt.
But it can also
effectively serve
exalted purposes...
Our sages treated
their intellect as a
heavenly gift, with the
help of which to elevate
and ennoble their
spiritual selves.**

tainly one of the "Righteous Gentiles") to a man sentenced to death for a relatively trivial offense. Many of us might feel a strong impulse to comfort a man paralyzed with fear as he faces imminent execution, but would find it impossible to think even of a single sentence likely to offer easement to a man bereft of all hope. No one, without exceptional wisdom and creative intelligence, (regardless how fervently he may have wished to), would have been able to offer solace and encouragement to someone sunk to the utter depths of despair, as Dr. Johnson managed to do. No wonder therefore, that after 200 years that subtle masterpiece is still studied and analyzed as a superb expression of a truly humane spirit. Incidentally, the letter is an apt illustration of what Johnson himself said elsewhere, "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless".

Let me conclude with a much lesser known example to illustrate the point. The great Gaon (Exceptional Talmudic scholar), Rabbi I.Z. Meltzer, used to deliver a weekly lecture in the Yeshiva "Etz Chaim" in Jerusalem. The lecture took place in a large hall packed by students and occasional auditors. Everyone was allowed to raise questions or objections, and if felt necessary, even to speak out in the middle of the lecture. On one occasion, (in the late 1940s) one of the students interrupted the rabbi before the latter could

conclude his exposition, and heatedly contended that the thesis he had advanced was mistaken. Now, as a rule, Rabbi Meltzer was ready with a clearly formulated reply well before his disputants managed to complete their objection, but this time he offered no rebuttal, virtually admitting defeat, to the bewilderment of many of those present.

An hour or so later, some of the students came running to the Rabbi's study to tell him that they discovered, after discussing the issue among themselves, that the student's objection was entirely groundless. In reply, the Rabbi admitted that he was aware of it and was about to point it out then and there, but quickly decided not to do so! He explained, that first of all he had been puzzled to hear someone who has hitherto never spoken in public, speaking so forcefully today. Then he noted that next to the student stood a well known businessman who was not at all in the habit of attending Talmudic disquisitions. "So it came to my mind that the purpose of the businessman's presence is probably to look over the individual seeking the hand of his daughter and that the young man was trying to make an impression on his future father-in-law. Well in that case, it was obvious to me that if I can help in to bringing together a young couple, then it is of no importance whatever anyone might think of my lecture".

Obviously, such a fascinating act of altruism required an unusual amount of unselfishness, a striking magnitude of humility. But these admirable qualities—for which Rabbi Meltzer was widely known and admired—would in themselves not have been sufficient. They had to be supplemented by his powerful mind's capacity to penetrate beyond the appearances, grasp at once what were the unexpressed needs of another, and determine immediately how to respond to them.

Mental aptitude belongs to the category of things of which the Talmud says, "To the worthy: it is the elixir of life. To the unworthy: a deadly poison". Knowledge is power, and power tends to corrupt. But it can also effectively serve exalted purposes. Our true Sages have always used their knowledge and understanding as a power to be harnessed for their pursuit of righteousness; they treated their intellect as a heavenly gift, with the help of which to elevate and ennoble their spiritual selves.

Professor George Schlesinger, is a professor of Science and Logics at the University of North Carolina where he has taught for the last 22 years. He was born in Hungary and started Yeshiva when he was 25 years old. He has published a number of books, of which the most recent is "New Perspectives in Old Religions".

YOUR KASHRUS QUESTIONS ANSWERED

A service Of
**KOF - K
KOSHER
SUPERVISION**
Call (201) 837-0500

For a copy of
KOF-K GUIDE TO KASHRUS,
send your name and address and \$1.00 to
cover postage and handling to:

KOF-K — KIS
1444 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666