

CHAPTER I

The Pleasure of Thought

Ma raison en définitive
Se perd dans ces huit lettres là
Elaeudanla Teitēia.

Serge Gainsbourg (1963)

J'ai toujours trouvé une certaine beauté à une personne qui pense, que ce soit un adulte ou une enfant. L'apaisement donne à son visage des traits réguliers. Parce qu'elle s'isole, je peux la regarder à son aise. L'attention qu'elle porte à ce qui se passe en elle se réfléchit dans l'attention avec laquelle je la considère

Jean-François Billeter (2012, p. 100)

The reader may therefore read this book as an intellectual detective story, where the pleasure accompanying the quest for truth has precedence over other particularities.

Yair Neuman (2017, p. 11)

This book is about the pleasure of thinking. We all do think, as we breath – sometimes without noticing, sometimes with more intensity. Thinking is an activity in which we engage when sitting in the train, walking, taking a shower, trying to solve a problem, planning ahead, or arguing over a dinner table. We are absorbed, we appear lost somewhere, or we are excited, cheeks flushed, when engaged in a lively debate. While thinking, ideas can come to mind, or can be harsh to find. People do think alone or with others, morning or evening, purposively or not. We all think, even though only some people become 'professional thinkers' – philosophers and scientists, among others (Arendt, 1978).

This book stems from the realisation that I do enjoy thinking. I enjoy sharing ideas, debating, trying to catch an intuition; I enjoy reflecting, looking for a new fact, seeking to understand, and even not getting it. I love being able to

make a new order in complex thoughts, I find fantastic when I realise something new. I know that thinking alone or with others can let me exhausted and famished, as if I came back from a long hike, yet that if I had a good discussion or thinking session, I feel invigorated and happy for a few days. I started to share that idea with friends; I recalled my trajectory, and also my analysis; I was reminded of passages of novels and films in which people engaged in thinking are represented. I realised more and more clearly that thinking can be exciting, satisfying, and exhilarating – and at times, of course, frustrating and despairing. Thinking, our more abstract capacity, is affective through and through. And in many, many cases, thinking is pleasurable. My core point, here, is that thinking can be a vital experience and that there is pleasure in the activity of thinking. But then, why don't we speak more about the pleasure of thinking?

This is where things become more complicated. I am psychologist, and I know that a great deal in psychology is written on thinking, its mechanisms, its functions, and perhaps, its mishaps. I went back to theories of thinking, to see how pleasure was included. I assumed that the fact that there is pleasure in thinking would be part of such theorizations. But when I started to explore the history of psychology and recent productions more systematically, I realised that affects were rarely considered as part of thinking in psychology, and certainly not pleasurable ones. I then wondered: if, as I thought can be easily demonstrated, thinking can be pleasurable, and all theories of thinking do not mention its affective underpinning, then do theories of thinking not miss something fundamental? If we kept this intuition in mind, how much do we have to revise psychology? Even more, given how much psychological theories shape people's everyday understandings of the mind, how would a different take on pleasure in mind change people's relation to their own thinking? These are some of the starting points of that volume.

In this chapter, I first explore non-psychological productions to search for evidence of the pleasure of thinking in the arts, in philosophy, and in the self-writing of a few authors. This enables me to identify modalities of the pleasure of thinking. I then pose the theoretical and conceptual frame within which I will approach the issues and the methods I adopted; I finally present an outline of this volume.

1.1 Discovering the Pleasure of Thinking

As I stared this enquiry, I was sure that many treated of the pleasure of thinking before me – such a natural experience. Doing a literature search, I was rather surprised that very few papers and works explicitly contained the locution 'pleasure of thinking': one paper on Hannah Arendt (Gray, 1977),

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Figure 1.1 Auguste Rodin, 1880, *Le penseur*, Ca' pesaro (Venise)¹

another one on Karl Bühler (Valsiner, 2007b), and one of the privation of the pleasure of thinking in Chinese political camps (Xiaobo, 1999); and I found only one book in French by psychoanalyst Sophie de Mijolla-Mejor (1992) – the only systematic exploration of the phenomena, to which I will come back in Chapter 3. It is not that other authors never mentioned their own, or others' pleasure of thinking; only it is never frontally exposed, and it is very rarely discussed in psychology, as we will see. I became curious about this absence, and wondered: is there some resistance in describing the pleasure of thinking, or a form of pudor among specialists of the mind, because, as suggested by art historian David Lubin, 'we do live in puritanical times, nowhere more so than in the intellectual professions' (2009, p. 8)?

Because of the difficulty of finding explicit treatments of the pleasure of thinking, I turned to other domains of cultural production to support my intuitions, starting with the visual arts. Here, if thinking is at times represented in a work of art and named in its title, pleasure is rarely perceptible. The most emblematic representation of thinking in occidental art is of course Auguste Rodin's *Thinker* – a lonely, tensed, man engaged in a painful inner experience (see Figure 1.1). It is actually hardly surprising:



Figure 1.2 Rembrandt, 1632, *The philosopher in meditation*, Le Louvre (Paris)²

the thinker was a detail of *The Hell's door* ('Portes de l'Enfer'), based on Dante's *Hell*. Rodin's other representations of thinking are as tormented, as his 1885 *Meditation*. I went on to gather a wide range of representations of thinking in painting, of which I show only a representative selection. I did not do a systematic study of the evolutions of the representations of thinking in occidental art, which would be beyond the scope of this volume, and has partly been done by others³; I here rather follow a logic of gleaner.

In European art, most figures of people thinking or meditating, or having an inspiration, share characteristics with these: usually a lonely character is represented, standing or sitting, watching something inwardly (Braun, 1994). Rembrandt thus represents a philosopher pressed by the weight of his knowledge (Figure 1.2).

The dark tonality, a tension between pain and smile, silence and exhalation, can also be found in some more recent work, such as here in a figure of a woman by Aristide Maillol (Figure 1.3).

But thinking is not always represented as painful. Sculpture or paintings of people thinking, meditating, or being inspired also often represent thinking as a gaze turned either inside, or somewhere up and side, and also

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Figure 1.3 Aristide Maillol, 1905, femme (ou Méditerranée), Musée D'Orsay (Paris)⁴

show a soft smile, as a form of appeasement, on their lips. It is the case in a Monet painting of a woman in meditation (Figure 1.4).

Other works, without naming the activity of thinking, present comparable experiences; consider for instance 'L'enfant au Toton' by Chardin, at the eighteenth century (Figure 1.5) mentioned by the philosopher Jean-François Billeter (2012) as example of the beauty of someone absorbed in thinking, or Ferdinand Hodler's painting of a young woman with a poppy flower at the end of the nineteenth century (Figure 1.6).

All these explicit or implicit figurations of thinking thus suggests a state of appeasement, a relative withdrawal from the environment, accompanied by a form of inward tension. Is it as if one was looking, or listening, or contemplating some inner life; and in most cases, it is experienced with a form of enjoyment or pleasure, suggested by the shadow of a smile. Thinking in the arts thus is shown as an enduring activity, requiring some inner tension or attention, and bringing a form of inner satisfaction.



Figure 1.4 Claude Monet, 1971, *Méditation* (Mme Monet au canapé), Musée d'Orsay (Paris)⁵



Figure 1.5 Jean Siméon Chardin, 1738 *L'enfant au Toton*⁶



Figure 1.6 Ferdinand Hodler, 1889, Mädchen mit Mohnblume

Also, as alternative to the lonely thinker, there is a rarer series of paintings representing people engaged in thinking dialogues – such as Raphael's 1511 *School of Athens* describing Socrates' entourage, or representations of Rabbis studying the Talmud (e.g., Figure 1.7). There thinkers are tensed, focused, engaged, and in dialogue.

Finally, what I felt was absent from these representations was the exhilarating experience of having a sudden good idea. The only depiction of this pleasure of thinking, I found in the character of Wickie the Viking, a cartoon from the 1970s, in which young Wickie is having an 'eureka' idea that allows him to solve a problem in each episode.

Hence, the arts do represent the activity of thinking; they show what can be observed, which is a state of tension, at times bringing a form of inner satisfaction, and sometimes shared with others; exceptionally, it appears as a sudden and fulgurant experience – as the naivety of a cartoon suggests. Thinking and its pleasure thus appears difficult to represent, much more than meditating or praying. Of course, it is not impossible that most models in portraits (especially when they are philosophers such as Spinoza



Figure 1.7 Carl Scheicher, 1862, Beim Rabbi⁷

(Figure 1.8), Descartes...) are actually thinking while posing – but this is not thematised...

The next place to look for indications of the pleasure of thinking is, thus, the reflection of thinkers about their own practice.

1.1.1 *Thinking and Pleasure – As Practice and as Realisation*

Some philosophers consider thinking and happiness as indissociable. A line of medieval thinkers considered that thinking and studying constituted the main ways to approach wisdom, or proximity to God. It is the case for Maimonides (1138–1204), who, in dialogue with classical philosophy, authors of his time as well as the Jewish tradition of interpretation of texts, saw in study and the cultivation of intellect the only way to achieve prophecy, that is, approach a true knowledge of God (Maïmonide, 1168/2021). But, according to Maimonides, studying and thinking should not only be a serious and painful endeavour: it not only engages mastery, reasoning, but also it needs imagination and humour. Such an idea remained strongly present in

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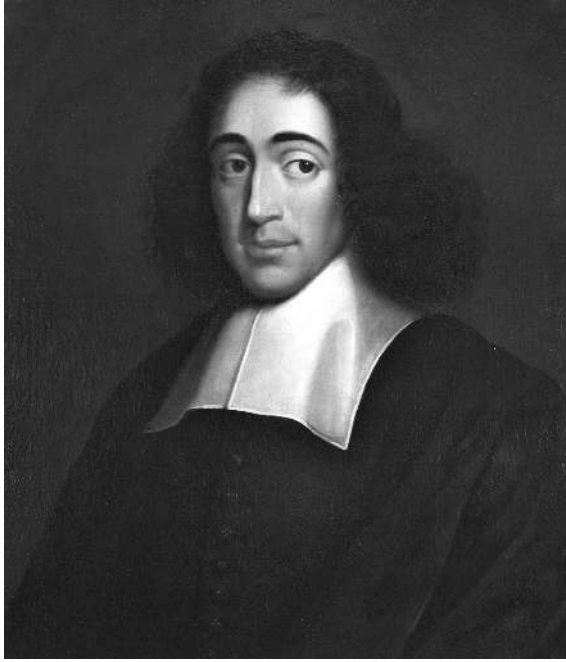


Figure 1.8 Anonymous, around 1665, Portrait of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–1677)⁸

the Jewish tradition of studying and commenting the scriptures (Zittoun, 2007b) and especially in some sub-traditions, such as Hassidism, for which learning and studying were both vital yet also associated to a form of core pleasure, seen as a way to celebrate God and his creation (Ouaknin, 1994).

Stemming out of this tradition yet excommunicated from the Jewish Community in Amsterdam, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) took the question of pleasure associated to thinking very seriously. In what has been shown to be an early text, *The Treatise for the Amendment of Intellect* (1655), Spinoza explains that having searched for happiness in honour, richness, and lubricity, he realised these were all futile and did not enable to reach happiness. From this point, then how to achieve it? What is it that, ‘once discovered and acquired, I would enjoy a continuous and supreme happiness for eternity’ (m.t.) [imo an aliquid daretur, quo invento et acquisitor, continua at summa in aeternum fruer laetitita] (Spinoza, 1655, pp. 17–18)? In this small book, happiness seems to be possible in reasoning perfectly. But this idea is fully achieved and demonstrated only in Spinoza’s last book, the *Ethics*, achieved twenty-two years later in 1675 (Pautrat, 2009).

Spinoza works there with the idea that there is only one substance that can appear as body or as soul; his core principle, a dynamic understanding, is that everything that expands our power to act – mind and body – is experienced as happiness, while everything that diminishes it is experienced as sadness. In Ethics III, affects are thus defined: when the soul expands its capacity to act, it is joyful; it is mainly our intelligence that brings us joy, and it occurs every time our understanding moves towards a better understanding [Ethics III, Définition des affects; *Laetitia est hominis transito a minore ad majorem perfectionem* (Spinoza, 1677, p. 320)]. This will then be later developed:

Ethics III, proposition 11: Every thing which augments or diminishes, helps or upsets the power to act of our body, the idea of this thing augments or diminishes, helps or upsets our soul's power to think (Spinoza, 1677, p. 257, m.t.). Scolie: It is why we see that our soul can passively undergo great changes and at times reach a bigger, at times at a lesser perfection, and which are these passions which explain affects of joy and sadness. This is why in what follows I will mean by *joy* (laetitia) the passion through which the soul achieves greater perfection, and by sadness the passion by which it reaches a lesser perfection. (Spinoza, 1677, *Ethics III*, p. 259, m.t.)⁹

Happiness, or joy – the latine ‘laetitia’ – appears thus here immediately as our soul's experience of such increase of power. Yet this form of experience can be reflective, and active (Manzini, 2014): ‘Proposition 53. When the soul represents itself with her power to act, she rejoices (laetatur); and she becomes even more joyful as she imagines herself more clearly with her power to act’ (Spinoza, 1677, Ethics III, p. 307, m.t.); and thus, ‘the soul thus tries to imagine only its power to act’ (Spinoza, 1677, proposition 54, p. 309, m.t.).¹⁰ Consequently,

There is no life worth living without intelligence, and things are good in so far as they help men to enjoy the life of the soul, which is defined by its intelligence. At the contrary, these that prevent men perfect his reason and to enjoy a rational life, these we call only bad. (Spinoza, 1677, p. 435, m.t.)¹¹

Eventually, happiness is achieved through as ‘third type’ of knowledge, intuition, which is oriented towards the essence of things – and with it, especially the intuition of God, that is nature, and our own soul (Spinoza, 1677, Ethics V, proposition 36, scolie, p. 489, and proposition 43, scolie, p. 497). Finally, ‘if joy (laetitia) consists in the passage to a greater perfection, beatitude (beatitudo) surely consists for the soul in reaching perfection itself’ (Ethics V, proposition 33, scolie p. 487, m.t.)¹² – a happiness that is a virtue in itself, without being religious (Manzini, 2014). For Spinoza,