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Upon Reflection

Review of ‘Think again:
The power of knowing what you don’t know’
by Adam Grant

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(excluding references)

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Thinking is the ultimate human resource. Yet, we can never be satisfied with our most important skill. No matter how good we become, we should always want to be better.

- Edward De Bono (1985/1999, p. xi)

Edward De Bono expressed a sentiment shared by many thinkers and writers who have looked under the cognitive hood. My Facebook feed recently showed a ‘philo quote’ – now lost – with Bertrand Russell saying that the thinking man (person) holds reasoned beliefs and is willing to abandon them in light of new evidence. Karl Popper’s (1962) entire theory of science sits on the notion that beliefs are rather conjectures we should be ready to exchange for better ones. The Bayesian school of thought formalizes the interplay of belief and evidence, a philosophy that itself does not appear to be open to refutation given its advocates’ fierce loyalty to it (Lindley, 1975).

The cognitive psychology of the habits of thought held by the rest of us is rich with demonstrations of insufficient detachment from belief. We often form beliefs and make decisions rashly. Many trade books are dedicated to bemoaning this state of affairs and offering ways past this myopia. A good book of this genre is eye-opening without putting the reader on the defensive. At its best, such a book offers pieces of wisdom beyond the narrow confines of the academic literature. In my opinion, Adam Grant’s *Think Again* is such a book. Grant looks at the general issue of the insufficiently open mind from many angles and his book brims with enlightening research findings and stories and anecdotes that capture the critical lessons. Grant explains that he seeks illustrative stories and anecdotes *after* a research point has crystalized. This is good practice and his note on the matter is appreciated. Not a few authors work in reverse order.

Before reviewing some of the main lessons found in *Think Again*, I wish to lodge two notes of caution. The first, and larger, note is that although it is clear that an open-ended

journey towards greater *verisimilitude* (Meehl, 1990) – that is, a greater concordance of belief with Truth (with a capital T) – must forever continue (the property of open-endedness makes this definitional), people have to make decisions in real time. Time is a cost factor and being lost in thought courts catastrophe when reality demands decision and action. There must be a contingency that tells us when to stop thinking for the sake of decisive action. Grant's first example raises the issue. This is the story of a Mr. Dodge, a smokejumper who in 1949 survived the Mann Gulch wildfire by charring the grounds with a fire he himself set so that he could lie on ground whose fuel cover was removed. Dodge thought of this tactic in a split second. He had never used it before and it was not in the manual. He thought again, and differently, and lived. He did not engage in what is known as System 2 thinking in contemporary parlance (Kahneman, 2011). In fact, Grant never uses the language or imagery of two-systems theories, nor does he articulate a meta-theoretical paradigm of his own. This is just as well. We can be content with grouping Grant loosely with Hume, Russell, Popper, and De Bono. To be fair, Grant raises the unresolved issue of rational closure in the epilogue, and only in a margin note (p. 248). The question "is when rethinking should end – where should we draw the line?" Indeed.

The second, and lesser, caveat is that while Grant emphasizes the active nature of rethinking, there is also a passive variant. Bertrand Russell (1930) described this in his book on happiness. Often, Russell recalls, he gives up after thinking hard about a problem for a length of time. He lets things rest to allow his unconscious mental faculties to complete the job. This strategy is now known as incubation, and its contribution to creative cognition is well documented (Sio & Ormerod, 2009). Arguably, the benefits of incubation extend beyond the realms of problem solving and creativity to making up one's mind about many

issues. The mind comes to those who wait – and are lucky enough to have the time for the wait.

Having cleared the way by noting these caveats, we can now turn to some of the book's positive highlights. First, we meet again the cognitive miser and the motivated thinker. Grant introduces confirmatory hypothesis testing, wishful thinking, uncertainty aversion and overconfidence, *dichotomania* (binary thinking), and stereotyping as the closed mind's familiar midwives. All these cognitive leanings and limitations are well documented and, again, we are reminded that a little mental elasticity and intellectual humility can mitigate them. The common denominator of the remedies is the ability to see one's beliefs not as ego-defining possessions, but as temporary best guesses. In other words, believers should relax and take a Popperian stance. This issue is thus not entirely intellectual, but also emotional. Grant explains that humility is related to humor, and specifically the ability and willingness to laugh at oneself, one's foibles and defeats. One anecdote told to drive this point home (and the theme of an entire chapter) is a conversation with Daniel Kahneman, where Grant tells the Nobel laureate about findings that refute one of his pet theories. Kahneman, Grant reports, was delighted, not so much by the findings themselves, but by the knowledge that he now knew more than he did before.

Kahneman's delight is an interesting bit of mental acrobatics. Popper taught that we cannot know how much we know relative to the ceiling of omniscience. Having learned something, though, we can conclude, like Kahneman, that we know more today than we did yesterday. Yesterday, though, we felt as knowledgeable as we do today. The perceived increase in knowledge is only achieved if we today retroactively upgrade our relative state of

ignorance we inhabited yesterday. A skeptical interpretation of this line of argument is that any sense of learning is a cognitive illusion. If so, why rethink anything?

Second, along with the ego-infused emotionality of belief, thinking again often occurs in a social context – as exemplified by Grant’s conversation with Kahneman. Here, in its center, *Think Again* shines the brightest. We learn that unconditional agreeableness, confrontational negotiation tactics, and zealous persuasion attempts are ineffective. The trait of agreeableness, Grant shows, is often a poor mask for cowardice. “Avoiding good arguments is bad manners” (p.87) he puts it politely, while also recognizing that criticizing others is rarely well received. The trick, he writes, is to separate task conflict from relational conflict. The former can be productive, whereas the latter rarely is. Alas, Grant offers few hints as to how to cultivate a climate in which spirited debate can flourish, where “the tone is vigorous and feisty rather than combative or aggressive” (p. 88). References to classic work on assertiveness training (Bower & Bower, 1976) and recent research on how to provide constructive performance feedback (Gnepp, Klayman, Williamson, & Barlas, 2020) would be useful here.

In negotiation, debate, and persuasive speech, the main causes of failure are confrontationality, egocentrism, and the attempt to overwhelm the other with the sheer number of arguments or facts (Sivanathan & Kakkar, 2017). Grant counsels a lowering of the temperature. A theme here is the use of questions, which, it seems, is designed to invite the other side to *think again*. The savvy social interactant avoids the onslaught of reason and evidence in favor of a motivational approach that induces the other side to open up. Upon reading these chapters, the mature reader is reminded of Carl Rogers’s person-centered approach to human encounter (Rogers, 1951). Rogers achieves this aim by letting the other

do the cognitive work. His Tao of psychotherapy succeeds through inaction. Again, though, questions remain. On the one hand we have the call for feisty arguments, and on the other hand we have the kind of “influential listening” (p. 155) some people attribute in their dogs (p. 158).

Debates are most easily compromised by relational conflict if moral values are at stake. Here, Grant loops back to cognitive limitations, suggesting that the bias of binary thinking accentuates disagreement and the emotional reactions that come with such thinking. “The color of truth is grey,” André Gide wrote, and Grant submits that this grey can come to light when interactants are willing to “complexify” (p. 165) their perception. Along these lines, Grant questions “idea cults” (p. 176), that is collective allegiances to debunked myths. Among these we find the claim that the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a valid measure of personality, that detox diets work, and that authentic behavior always carries the day. The followers of these cults should think again; but what of the rest of us? Each of these culty ideas is an empirically assessable claim, and the evidence, as best as we know, does not support any of them. Where then is our onus to think again? Or is it the case that for these claims we have reached the point where we can consider the case closed? I am reminded of the work of an APS Task Force, which found precious little evidence for the claim that high self-esteem causes good behavior (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). We anticipated that such dragons cannot be slain, and indeed the *American Psychologist* has accepted an article reviewing alleged successes of the self-esteem hypothesis (Orth & Robins, in press). Who is to say that the Myers-Briggs won’t rise again? If it does, we’ll have to think again. Or do we? Grant, as noted earlier, might have helped us with an epistemological note telling us when enough is enough.

As the book winds toward its end, Grant takes up questions of teaching, learning cultures in general, and, finally, happiness. In teaching, the open re-thinking mind eschews lectures and contractual syllabi. Grant recalls that one of his professors, the philosopher Robert Nozick, sought to learn with his students. Teaching would be incidental to the shared work. Dialogue, disagreement, and task conflict would rule the classroom, along perhaps with the hum of Rogerian questions. This point resonates with me. When I was accepted by the Department of Psychology at the University of Oregon to pursue a doctorate, the then-director of graduate studies, Lew Goldberg, wrote in his welcome letter that he was pleased I had “chosen to study with us.” These were profound words, which the teachers among us may take to heart. In his description of the optimal learning environment, Grant distinguishes between psychological-safety cultures and performance cultures. The call for psychological safety is not new (recall Rogers), but we need to learn more about how it is achieved. If you thought that psychological safety permits personal authenticity, though, think again. Grant acknowledges the dilemma here. We want both safety and productivity, but again, both involve forces that pull in opposite directions.

In the final chapter, Grant returns to the theme that thinking and the conclusions it produces must remain provisional. When beliefs are locked in prematurely, the ego freezes into what Grant calls “identity foreclosure” (p. 230). But, he asserts, “our identities are open systems, and so are our lives” (p. 243). This is indeed so, and it is also one reason for why we cannot meet the high epistemological standards of experimental science. We cannot live in a treatment group and also see what life would be like in a control group. Yet, all hope and all happiness are not lost. Grant (p. 242) cites E. L. Doctorow who wrote that life “is like driving

at night in a fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”

With life being an open system where everything is in a heraclitean state of flux and where everything is a work in progress, *Think Again* itself should be too. Grant brings this final realization home with humor and humility. His six-page epilogue is presented as a document that shows its growing pains, complete with strike-outs, margin notes, and revisions. This is a rather brilliant self-recursive illustration of what Grant is trying to tell us. Read the book and then think again . . . and again.

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