

**MAKING THE MOST
OF ONE'S MIND**

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Making the Most of One's Mind by John Adams

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Making the Most of One's Mind

CHAPTER I

TAKING ONESELF IN HAND

AMONG the Romans of the old days when a boy had finished his education, and was regarded as fit to enter upon the responsibilities of life, he cast aside the scarlet-bordered gown that boys then wore, discarded the disc of gold, silver, or leather that hung from his neck, and put on the plain black gown, the *toga virilis*, that was worn by men. In those days this entrance upon manhood was taken seriously, and was accompanied by a certain amount of ceremony. The boy was led to feel that his new estate made heavy demands upon him. No doubt it meant the removal of certain restraints. Indeed, the manly gown was sometimes called the *toga liberior*, the gown of greater freedom. But it also implied the imposition of new responsibilities. Orig-

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inally the donning of the *toga virilis* meant the liability to military service, for at first the gown was not assumed till the completion of the seventeenth year. Later in the history of Rome it was assumed at an earlier age. Indeed, the age varied considerably, but it may be safely said that the scarlet-bordered robe was not discarded before the fourteenth birthday, nor retained much beyond the sixteenth.

This variation is natural, for it is not in human nature to become a responsible person at any definite age fixed beforehand. Boys develop at different rates: some are ready at fourteen for the manly gown, while others might fittingly retain the scarlet border till well over twenty. After all, the gown was only a symbol. What it signified was that the boy had taken over his life into his own hands. He was henceforth to be, as the saying runs, "his own master," though, as a matter of fact, he was less free from outward restraint than our modern boys.

We have no ceremony when we don our first coat with tails. In truth, we greatly prefer that no notice should be taken of the innovation, that our friends, in fact, should be considerate enough to pretend that we had been dressed in that way all along. Indeed, our gradual and unostentatious adoption of the garb of manhood represents more truly than the Roman method the process of coming to what are called years of discretion. No doubt there comes a time in most lives when the person is aware that he takes

A Guide for All Students

himself in hand, when he assumes the responsibility for the ordering of his own life. But in many cases the person cannot name any particular time at which the act could be said to have been performed, and we know that, after all, the assumption of the manly gown symbolizes only the completion of a process that has been going on for a long time.

This process is a very interesting one and may be called, in a general way, reflection. It implies the turning back of the mind upon itself. We are familiar with those verbs that are called *reflexive*. Their characteristic is that the action begun by the subject returns back upon that subject. The subject and the object of these verbs are one. If I wash myself, there is only one person occupied in the process. The *I* that washes is the same as the *myself* that is washed. It is true that in this case it may be said that one part of the self, say the hands, washes another part of the self, say the face. But when we pass from physical actions this separation cannot be made. When I say I blame myself, it is not one part of me that blames another. It would appear that the whole of me blames the whole of me. When Cranmer, at the stake, thrust his right hand first into the flames because it had signed the document of which he was ashamed, we feel that there is something wrong with the implied judgment. We cannot separate the responsibility on a physical basis. The whole Cranmer was at fault.

Yet there is a genuine difficulty implied in all

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reflexive action. Children can be greatly puzzled by such a sentence as "Says I to myself." Are there two persons, or only one? How can a conversation be carried on with only one person present? Even grown-up people have to recognize two aspects of the self. *I* as speaker say something to *myself* as hearer. There is only one self, but it is acting in two different ways. In one respect it is active, in another it is passive.

Now, at very early stages of life the child does not quite realize the extent of his "self." He will speak of himself in the third person. "Johnny wants a ride in Johnny's coach." By and by he begins to perceive that the Johnny he is talking about is different from every other Johnny. He has more interest in this particular Johnny than in all the remaining Johnnies in the world. He begins to realize that this Johnny who has the coach and other attractive things is a specially interesting person on his own account, apart from the things he possesses. When a child begins to pay special attention to this strange Johnny and to compare him with other children, he has reached the beginning of the conception of self. But there are here obviously two aspects of the self: the self that examines and the self that is examined. These two aspects are given different names. The examining self is called the subjective self, and the self examined is called the objective. When the subjective self appears for the first time it finds the objective self already existing.