Message from the Director Shozo Iijima, Ph.D

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Nosce te ipsum vs. Read thyself

In the Introduction to his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher of the 17th century, deplores the fact that the saying “Wisdom is acquired, not by reading of Books, but of Men” has been “much usurped of late” and recommends instead a truly useful manner of reading. Hobbes’s apprehensive attitude toward the trend of leaving books aside, not for the purpose of going onto the streets from the campus, but for the purpose of reading men, is, however, very ambiguous, for that tendency certainly contains an element that the radical philosophical innovator Hobbes warmly welcomes.

The contemporary trend of leaving books aside which Hobbes himself observes facilitates very rapidly the tendency toward the neglect, or even the rejection, of the Scholastic teachings, including, among others, the Aristotelianism that the old books had transmitted to his generation. Men must first get rid of errors and absurdities before the truth is accepted among the public.

But Hobbes is very doubtful of whether a person is really capable of acquiring wisdom through his or her reading of the men or women around him or her. The ideal itself of the congruence of speech and deed reveals very eloquently the fact that men are likely to be deceived more easily by speeches than by deeds. But men are in fact often deceived by deeds. What then should we do? By referring to another saying, that is, *Nosce te ipsum*, which he renders as *Read thyself*, Hobbes proposes a new method: “Search hearts!” Does this method of looking into your own heart run the risk of subjective fallacies? “He that is to govern a whole Nation, must read in himself, not this, or that particular man; but Man·kind: which though it be hard to do, harder than to
learn any Language, or Science: yet, when I shall have set down my own reading orderly, and perspicuously, the pains left another, will be only to consider, if he also find not the same in himself. For this kind of Doctrine, admitteth no other Demonstration.” This can be construed as the triumphant declaration of a Hobbes who is boasting of himself as the founder of modern civil philosophy. Alas! To Hobbes’s disappointment, and perhaps happily for human beings as a whole, his systematic philosophy has not been unanimously accepted as the truth.

_Nosce te ipsum_ reminds us of Socrates, who is said to be the founder of political philosophy. Judging from the academic standards of today, he may seem not to deserve the name of political philosopher since he has not written a single book or even article (although he won’t be seeking any post in academia!). An amazing and fascinating fact about this person who published no book in his whole life, however, is his love of reading old books and his manner of reading them. Xenophon, one of his best students, reports on the end of Socratic reading and his way of reading as follows: “. . . just as another is pleased by a good horse, or a dog or a bird, so I myself am even more pleased by good friends.... And reading collectively with my friends, I go through the treasures of the wise men of old which they wrote and left behind in their books; and if we see something good, we pick it out: and we hold that it is a great gain if we become friends with one another [or beneficial to one another].” _Memorabilia_, I, ch. 6.

Hobbes’s attitude toward old books and his manner of reading them are certainly quite different from those of Socrates. It is possible to say, nevertheless, that each of them in his own way has contributed to the continuation of a vital realization: _QUAE SIT SAPIENTIA DISCE LEGENDO_. In that tradition, it goes without saying that authors have played a crucial role and fulfilled grave responsibilities; I believe it is by no means an exaggeration to say that readers’ roles and responsibilities were, are, and will continue to be no less than those of authors.

References:
Thomas Hobbes, _Leviathan_.