

## Philosophy in Review



# Zena Hitz, "Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life."

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Volume 41, Number 3, August 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081585ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081585ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Piercey, R. (2021). Review of [Zena Hitz, "Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(3), 191–193.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081585ar>

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**Zena Hitz.** *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life.* Princeton University Press 2020. 240 pp. \$22.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691178714); \$16.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691229195).

This book describes and defends ‘the intellectual life’ (20): a life devoted to learning ‘for its own sake, because of its effect on the learner rather than because of its outward results’ (26). It draws a sharp distinction between intellectual life and *academic* life. Intellectual life is not just for professional scholars, since learning is ‘a natural good, available in general to all human beings’ (24). Indeed, according to Hitz, academic institutions can obstruct and even corrupt it. *Lost in Thought* describes the key features of intellectual life, explaining how it can go astray and what, if anything, it has to do with politics. The book illustrates its claims with a wide range of ‘images and stories’ (49) drawn from literature, film, and history.

The lengthy prologue, ‘How Washing Dishes Restored my Intellectual Life,’ is an engaging piece of biography. It relates how Hitz became fascinated with the life of the mind as a bookish child in 1970s San Francisco. This love of ideas deepened during Hitz’s undergraduate years at St. John’s College, a liberal arts institution whose great books curriculum led Hitz to a period of ‘spectacular growth and excitement’ (4). She expected this growth to continue when she went to graduate school, only to receive ‘a different kind of training’ there—one in ‘how to navigate the byzantine social hierarchy of the academic world’ (7). Hitz learned to pay attention to who was in and who was out, who had ‘status and prestige’ (9) and who didn’t. Eventually, Hitz says, the ‘twin plants of intellectual joy and of achievement in prestige and status had grown together so closely’ (10) that she could no longer distinguish them. She describes her years as a junior professor as unhappy ones, full of ‘boredom,’ ‘loneliness,’ and ‘desperate restlessness’ (13). Hitz eventually discerned a religious vocation and joined an isolated religious community in rural Ontario, where she ‘thought hard about the point of higher learning, pondering what connection the professional activities of intellectuals might have with the simple, human reaching out of thought that [she] had experienced as a young person’ (21). Realizing that she would be happiest teaching at her own undergraduate college, Hitz eventually found a position at St. John’s, and rekindled her love of ideas from the other side of the classroom.

The rest of *Lost in Thought*—an introduction, three chapters, and a brief epilogue—fleshes out Hitz’s view of learning. The introduction, ‘Learning, Leisure, and Happiness,’ explains how the love of learning differs from the pursuit of ‘fame, prestige, fortune, and social use’ (26). Learning’s value is intrinsic, not just instrumental, and it is directed at objects worth knowing for their own sakes: ‘people, numbers, God, nature’ (27). Learning about such things is connected to our ‘highest good’ (32), which Hitz describes as ‘the thing to which we are most fundamentally committed’ (35), or the end that structures all our other choices. Learning is thus closely connected with leisure, since it is not done for the sake of some higher goal, but *is* the goal. Each of the book’s three chapters say more about what the love of learning looks like ‘in real life’ (47). Chapter 1, ‘A Refuge from the World,’ portrays intellectual life as a retreat from the social and political sphere. The love of learning seeks to ‘cultivate the inner life’ (63) by fixing our attention on ‘something concrete, real, impersonal, and good’ (93). According to Hitz, cultivating the inner life is a route to dignity, and it fosters a profound connection with other human beings. The author illustrates these claims with examples including Muriel Barbery’s novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, and stories from the lives of Augustine, Einstein, Gramsci, and Malcolm X. A recurring theme in chapter 1 is that an intellectual life is an ascetic life: a life marked by ‘discipline’ (85), ‘self-denial’ (85), and ‘sacrifice and suffering

for the sake of some good' (98). Hitz insists that 'ascetic' does not mean 'joyless,' and that taking pleasure in the senses is fine as long as it is in the service of 'a committed search for something more' (138). Other passages in the book—such as a warning not to care too much about 'fine wines and trips to Europe' (15)—evoke an asceticism of a more familiar kind.

Chapter 2, 'Learning Lost and Found,' describes how a life of learning can go astray. Though it is a sort of retreat from the world, intellectual life is still 'part of the social world,' and as such it sometimes 'participates in that world's vices' (113)—vanity, ambition, and love of spectacle. Hitz explores the lure of these vices through readings of Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. The reading of Ferrante is especially interesting, with the character Lila—'a great artist, whose works are never seen or read' (156)—serving both as a model of someone who spurns the social uses of her art, and as someone who misses something valuable because her learning is 'trapped within one person' (156). Chapter 3, 'The Uses of Uselessness,' extends this theme by describing how learning can be corrupted by politics. According to Hitz, intellectual life should be a refuge from the political world, and when it is subordinated to a desire to make the world a better place, it suffers. Hitz is therefore critical of 'opinionization'—'the reduction of thinking and perception to simple slogans or prefabricated positions' (167). Though Hitz grants that opinionization is a pitfall for everyone, most of her criticisms target the political left—'progressive activists' (193), the 'liberal middle class of New York or Chicago' (178), and the promoters of a 'viewpoint diversity' that is 'nearly as superficial and dehumanizing as the forms of indoctrination it is meant to replace' (193). Whatever one thinks of this, the artistic and historical examples cited in Chapter 3 are nicely done. There are interesting discussions of the lives of Dorothy Day and Simone Weil, as well as more remarks on Ferrante's novels and a stimulating reading of Jonathan Rose's *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. A very brief epilogue, 'The Everyday Intellectual,' closes the book.

There is plenty to like about *Lost in Thought*. It is at its best when pointing out the ways in which academic institutions fail to live up to their ideals—as when Hitz says it is 'a disgrace to our system of higher education that person-to-person teaching belongs only to a handful of liberal arts colleges and to elite doctoral programs' (197). But the book leaves me with two big questions. One concerns its frequent appeals to a particular view of human nature. Throughout the book, Hitz defends her views, and criticizes those of others, with claims about what *we* are, what *we* naturally want and need, and 'how human beings are meant to function' (142). Learning is a natural good because *we* naturally seek 'something more, and then something more, until (and if) we reach a point where there is no "more"' (148). When this search goes astray, it is because of *our* natural failings: 'We want the splendor of Socratic thinking without his poverty. We want the thrill of his speaking truth to power without the full absorption in the life of the mind that made it possible. We want the profits of Thales' stargazing without the ridicule' (116). And while some people might *think* they have found fulfilment in fine wines or video games, that is only because they have 'lost contact with our rustic roots—our roots in simple, natural goods, in hard work and embodied practical excellence, and in the basic pleasures' (121). All of these claims are simply asserted, and Hitz seems to view them as self-evidently true. But if we want to go deeper into the intellectual life—and how could we not?—we will want to know more about the view of human nature that grounds these claims. Obviously a short book aimed at a general audience cannot give a fully developed philosophical anthropology. But it would be nice to hear more about what *sort* of picture underlies the book's claims, and about why we should accept it—especially given the book's exhortations to seek 'something more, and then something more, until... there is no "more"' (148).

Second, I wonder what we lose by characterizing intellectual life as Hitz does. Even to speak

of *the* intellectual life strikes me as potentially problematic, since it suggests that such a life doesn't come in degrees: either one is living it, or one isn't. Stark binaries of this sort run through *Lost in Thought*. Near the end of chapter 2, for instance, Hitz argues that intellectual life must ultimately take one of two forms: we must 'end our striving either at God or at the abyss where God's absence is' (148). Hitz presents Augustine as an example of the former sort of intellectual, and Ferrante's Lila as an example of the latter sort. While Hitz grants that 'a *sort* of flourishing' (148, emphasis added) can be achieved by non-theistic intellectuals, such flourishing—or at least the form of it that Lila finds—is 'infertile' (156). Ultimately, it seems, a genuinely intellectual life rests on a vision of reality much like that of the Abrahamic religions.

I can't help thinking about all those who, by this standard, wouldn't count as leading genuinely intellectual lives. John Dewey certainly wouldn't: he spent his life urging us not to look for anything 'beyond' our concrete practices and problems, neither a theistic first principle nor a Nietzschean abyss. More generally, I suspect that none of the thinkers whom Isaiah Berlin calls 'foxes' would meet Hitz's standard. As is well known, Berlin suggests that thinkers are either hedgehogs or foxes. Hedgehogs 'relate everything to a single central vision,' a 'universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance' (Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1953). Foxes 'entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal: their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing... single vision' (Berlin, 1-2). From the standpoint of *Lost in Thought*, it seems, the foxes aren't leading intellectual lives at all, since the quest to relate everything to a single, central vision is constitutive of that life. That's fair enough. Any account of intellectual life will have to strike a balance between reporting and stipulating. It will have to apply to at least some of the people widely recognized as leading lives of learning, while also decreeing that *these* people over here and *not those* people over there are the *real* intellectuals. I cannot fault Hitz for striking this balance in the way that captures the features of intellectual life that are most salient to her. For my part, though, any account of intellectual life that implies that John Dewey wasn't a real intellectual gives me pause.

In the end, *Lost in Thought* offers an intensely local vision: a description of one specific form that intellectual life can take. To the extent that this form is overlooked or maligned in some corners of the contemporary world, Hitz's defense of it is a useful thing to have. That it says everything essential about *the* intellectual life and why *we* should value it is something I cannot accept without hearing much more.

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