

## Do You Think or Just Follow?

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Philosophers say we tend to think in herd fashion. Sociologists know that this can be changed. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.

- Charles Mackay, Scottish author, poet, songwriter (1814-1889)

I'm uncomfortable with this quotation. Though I agree that people act in herds and recover one by one, with sociological studies in abundance to support it, I disagree with Mackay's claim that men think. It is precisely the lack of thinking that causes them to act in herd fashion.

Most of our waking hours are spend managing things that require manipulation with the hands, repetition of routines and saying essentially the same things to many different people, using different words as much as possible. That, I submit, requires no thinking. It's nothing more than any other animal does on any day in its natural environment.

Observe what happens with house pets as they get older. A kitten, especially one that is kept indoors full time, will be endlessly curious. In the beginning it wants to learn its surroundings, as a wild cat would, in order to know when everything is in place, when something is amiss and when it can expect attention or food from the humans it owns. It sleeps when it's exhausted, not before.

As the cat ages, it retains its curiosity, but demonstrates an interest in it far less frequently. Meanwhile it gains an interest in sleep and rest for their own sake. Adult house cats reputedly sleep or rest for 20 to 22 hours each day. For what purpose? Usually it's to be ready for something that never comes. It develops routines, such as annoying its humans for food, rubbing against them when it wants to be petted, grooming itself and using its litterbox, routines that differ little from day to day.

A house cat never needs to search out or kill its food, something that may require its wild equivalent from four to ten hours per day, and it never has to watch out for predators. When all the natural risks of life in the wild are removed, the house cat falls into routines that require it to do no thinking. It's curiosity shows less frequently. It even exercises less often.

Old house cats tend to be dumber, though usually more lovable, than younger cats. These are generalizations, of course, that do not necessarily apply to all house cats.

Many cats gain weight as they get older. They eat the same amount, or more, but feel less need to exercise. Don't change their routines or move them to a different home in their older years or they will be mighty upset with you. They hate to have their routines changed.

Are those descriptions not ones that could apply to many adult humans as well?

One of our cats--the older one--likes to pause when eating her canned food. Often she walks away, even if only for half a minute. Just a breather, to her. She forgets that our other (younger) cat, that gobbles his food like a starving wolf in a pack, will move in with lightning speed to finish off any food left in her bowl when she steps aside. The male will not interfere while the female is eating, but he swoops when she moves away from her dish. The female just doesn't get it. She forgets because she doesn't think about the consequences of moving away from her food bowl.

Many adults give little thought to the consequences of what they do. Or what they don't do (neglect), even if they fail to complete duties required of them by their bosses or their position in the family.

Debate over whether 65 should be a mandatory age for retirement has heated up in the past decade. It's driven by "seniors" who may well be at the top of their game intellectually. They don't want to be put out to pasture. But their cause is a tough sell when most adults today know lots of people in their 60s who might forget to take their

cars keys when they leave in the morning if they weren't required to start their cars. Or they can't remember what is recyclable and what isn't. Or when their doctor's appointment is. Or {shudder} the date of their anniversary or their wife's birthday.

They don't think. Individually, they do more dumb things than they have ever done before in their lives. They act in herd fashion because they leave thinking to others. Those others, with rare exceptions, have their own best interests at heart when they make decisions or venture to advise others about how they should think. For example, American citizens took eight years to understand that President George W. Bush represented his oil industry supporters better than he represented the citizens of the state of which he was leader. At election time they simply believed the propaganda they heard on television. The US media are largely dominated by conservative Republicans.

Did Americans move to the Democratic candidate for president recently because they thought it through that Barack Obama better represented their best interests than John McCain or did they simply switch in herd fashion to the party they disliked less?

We can be certain that they learned to dislike President Bush one at a time. What we can't know for certain is if they will think about the work of President-elect Obama as much as they thought about how much they grew to dislike his predecessor.

The scientific name for our species is *homo sapiens sapiens*, which means "man who thinks above the level of other thinking species." Do we really?

Bill Allin

***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for parents and teachers who want to raise children who can think, who can cope with every challenge they face in life.

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