

10th June 2021

Thinking

“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

Archilochus, Fragments

The Hedgehog and the Fox is an alternative telling of Aesop’s fable, *The Fox and the Cat*. In the latter version, there’s a discussion between a cat and a fox about how many tricks and dodges they have. The fox boasts he has lots. The cat confesses to only having one. When the hunters arrive with their dogs, the cat shimmies up a tree, but the fox spends too much time thinking which of his tricks he’ll use, he runs out of time and is caught by the hounds. In the former version, the hedgehog can’t be as fleet-of-foot but has the defence of rolling into a ball and letting its spikes ward off any predator. It’s what hedgehogs do, and it works.

In his 1953 essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, the Russian-born philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, used the fable to divide thinkers into two categories: hedgehogs, who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea, and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and aren’t able or willing to distil such a wide range of thinking into one single principle. Centuries earlier the Greek poet Archilochus had described it as, “A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing.”

A huge sculpture entitled *The Hedgehog and the Fox* by the American artist, Richard Serra, commissioned by Princeton graduate, Peter Joseph, in honour of his children, was installed in 2000 in the grounds of Princeton University. Students are encouraged to interact with the sculpture, walk in and around it, and think as they do so. Harold Foster, a professor in Princeton’s Art and Archaeology Department says: “There are those who follow one principle in all they do – the hedgehogs – and those who look to different approaches at the same time – the foxes. The suggestion is that students negotiate a balance between these two ways.”

Whether ultimately we fall into the “hedgehog” or “fox” camps as thinkers, let’s keep seeking that balance, in our own minds and with one another. Let’s not be so rigid in our views that we close our minds to other ways of thinking. If *we* believe we’re always right, little is achieved. But if we listen, think, share and remain open to other ideas, everyone benefits.

A prayer for today

Lord, you’ve given me a mind with which to think. Help me to use it well. Amen.

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