

Reason, not knowledge, can uproot mountains

Thought for the Day

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Graduations have been much in the news this weekend, and congratulations are due not just to William Wales MA of St Andrews and Mark McConnell MA of Dundee, but to tens of thousands of other Scottish students who are about to graduate, and to many more school pupils who are collecting prizes and sporting trophies.

I know these events celebrate a competitive culture which is out of fashion with some, but how can we square doing away with competition with wanting to see UK plc – or Scotland plc – leading the world? Competition is part of life, and if school sports days are reduced to non-competitive games with wet sponges, we can hardly complain if our well-trained non-competitors can't compete where it matters. Don't you *want* your children taught by the best and brightest? And how will you even know who they, are if we buy the orthodoxy of Devil take the foremost!

There is an obscure passage in the Talmud which asks whether Sinai should take precedence over the uprooter of mountains. Sinai, the location of the giving of the Torah, represents knowledge; uprooting mountains means reason. The Talmud concludes that Sinai, knowledge, comes first – but it also tells that reason goes further. Understanding trumps knowledge; reason trumps memory. Memory can only tell you what you already knew; reason can carry you forward indefinitely, in countless new and original directions.

The Talmud also describes four kinds of students:
the sponge, who absorbs everything and lets nothing go;
the funnel, who lets everything through and retains nothing;
the strainer, who lets the wine through and keeps the dregs;
and the sieve, who lets the chaff pass and retains the wheat.

It does not need to add that it is the sieve that should serve as our model. To be sure, it needs the raw material of knowledge to work with, but it is the intelligent use of reason to sort the wheat from the chaff which can *really* uproot mountains.