



## Observation and Thinking

by

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In the previous article on the “Senses,” I drew attention to the fact that we have many more organs of perception than the usually acknowledged five. We are able on the one hand to perceive in a rather dim way the life processes in our own organism, and on the other to connect ourselves with the outside world, while beyond this we can develop perceptions which are connected with the world of thought. Yet however well we develop these senses, we are sooner or later led to a fundamental problem: “Do our senses really tell us the truth?” or “Are we able, by means of them, to grasp reality?”

We find many different viewpoints. On the one hand the average Westerner accepts the world as he knows it through his senses. He bases his life on the assumption that the objects around him are real and that thoughts and memories are shadowy reflections of the world of actual fact which is external to him. He feels that he approaches to truth when he widens his collection of data from the sense world. The Easterner, on the other hand, experiences the world around him as one of illusion, and he feels himself in touch with reality by escaping into the realm of his meditations.

How shall we harmonize these opposing views? Is one right and the other wrong, or have both something of the truth? Now we do not need to think very far to realize that the object world is not so reliable as we would believe it. It is only because we are so unobservant that we have come to regard it as in any way permanent. We are, in general, very much apt to take our surroundings for granted. If every day we pass through the same scene, then we feel a confidence that it remains there, unchanged in its essentials, from day to day. But supposing that we perform the following observation exercise.

Suppose that each morning, from the same window, we observe the landscape, carefully noting the salient features, and each morning before making this study we recall to memory as vividly as possible the view of the preceding day. Now, if on the first occasion we have observed with great care and

concentration, we may perhaps feel satisfied that we really know it. Yet however strongly we are able to recall the image of yesterday, the new one will appear as astonishingly different. We may often, in fact, receive a certain shock.

Owing to the changing of light and shadow, of mist or wind, objects advance or retreat, group themselves differently or take on an entirely new character. A tree which one morning seems the center figure of the whole scene, on the following morning may well have retired into obscurity, while a more distant group stands forth in clear outline. One day with light frost and in clear air, the coloring may vary from turquoise blue to silver white, but the next, under lowering clouds, the tones pass over to shades of dark olive, indigo and purple. The far hills, which yesterday frowned darkly down upon the valley, today are as dim as the clouds above.

Whereas at first we tend to pay more attention to the actual objects, for instance, the shape and form of trees and buildings, we soon realize that these are not the most important elements. A flight of birds, the galloping of a horse and the strange wayward movements of the wind change the character of the scene. Still more we observe how the whole appearance is dependent on the quality of the light and, how under its spell, the objects appear and vanish, advance and retreat, grouping themselves, as it were, in the movements of some solemn dance.

The contrast each day between the memory picture and the new appearance can be very disquieting, for we soon come to this experience: It is impossible to grasp the scene at all, it is for ever escaping us, it is for ever new. It is disquieting, for we can rely on nothing. On the other hand, it is life-giving, for in the very quickening of our observation, we begin to feel ourselves living within the landscape and we receive strength and joy from its activity. We begin to realize with quickened feeling the forever-transforming power of the light.

By way of illustration, I have chosen an observation exercise connected with the sense of hearing. But it is possible to make similar exercises with the other senses. Suppose, for instance, we are accustomed to hearing every morning a certain sound, perhaps the ringing of a bell. We normally take it for granted that each morning it sounds just the same. But supposing we, first of all, recall the memory of the day before, and then listen to the sound. It will arise as a new experience. Though our memory may have been very accurate with regard to the pitch and strength of the note, yet it will seem, in a certain way, new. We may hear this bell a hundred times, but so long as we remain mere observers, we are bound to feel: "I still do not grasp that sound. I hear it again and again, and always if I pay true attention it has something of a new quality, but I do not really know it, its reality escapes me." For we come to a twofold realization that whatever we observe in a living way comes to us as a new experience, but that so long as we are mere observers, we cannot feel any certainty with regard to what we perceive.

The more we develop our observation, the more we realize this uncertainty. Our senses bring to us beautiful images, reflections of activities which take place around or within us. But so long as we are only observers, we cannot grasp the reality of these picture images. In order to read their meaning, we need to develop the activity of thinking.

We cannot come to any certain knowledge by means of our senses alone. We receive reflections or images of activities around us, but these images are repeatedly changing, and, as long as we remain mere observers, we cannot know the realities which express themselves in these changing pictures. We will now take a further step.

As soon as our thinking becomes active, we make connections between our many sense impressions; we discover in them certain rhythms and sequences. For example, suppose that we look at a plant. We have seen it in many different forms: in the dried, hard seed, in its gradual swelling and softening, in the sending down of the first rootlet, and in the uprearing and spreading out of the early leaves. We have marked its refinement into the blossom with its scent and honey, and with its pollen-bearing stamens; and we have noticed the gradual withdrawing of life from petal and leaf, and the concentrating of strength once more into the seed. Our many observations do not seem to us entirely scattered and isolated; we feel that we can bring them into some kind of harmony and gain a conception of a cycle in accordance with which the plant unfolds and withdraws again.

With many others of our sense impressions, we are able to form sequences. We observe rain falling from the clouds, so that streams become swollen and waterfalls tumultuous. We see once more mist and vapor rising from the seas and lakes and resting as clouds on the mountainside. Our sense impressions are on no occasion the same. Their variety is infinite. But nevertheless, we form from them the conception of a rhythm of activity.

But now it is important to ask ourselves the following question: "Through what power do we bring together our many separate impressions to form a sequence?" In a discussion on this question the answer was once given: "We piece together our different observations like a jigsaw puzzle, and then we have a picture of the whole." I think that anyone who has been in the habit of observing the world of nature would be unwilling to accept this answer. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to recognize at once how our thinking is able to perform this act.

We need to realize that all the forms which we see in nature are only external appearances which have been brought into being by invisible powers. The hoarfrost and the dew, the lightning and the will o' the wisp are the results of hidden activities. So long as we concentrate on observing the outer forms and then on patiently piecing these together, we shall certainly come to no understanding of the powers which bring these appearances to birth.

Let us approach with another attitude. Suppose we observe the plant in the following mood: "I have before me a seed: hard, dry and wrinkled. From my past experience I am aware that under the influence of warmth, of moisture and of light, this seed will expand and send roots down into the earth and leaves upward to the air, and blossoms will unfold toward the light. That which now is invisible within the seed will become visible. Yet it is possible also for me in the realm of my own thought to go through these same processes. I have the power to think through the many changing forms from seed to leaves to blossom and back once more in to the seed. That which is invisible can become visible to me within my life of thought."

The more we follow through such a process in relation to the actual observations we have made, the more it will have value for us. But I think all who have performed this exercise will realize that thinking is by no means a mere linking together of many images, but rather it is an activity which can be at one with the activities weaving behind the world of the sense perceptions.

We may perhaps ask ourselves of what importance it is that we can add from our own thinking a counterpart to what we observe. We may see the plant at any one stage of its existence, but we cannot say, "This is the true plant." For we know well that tomorrow it will be different. Yet in our thinking we can relate the one from which we see today to the cycle which we have experienced. Our sense observations are changing images, but with our thinking we grasp the reality of which the one impression is only, as it were, a mirage.

More than this, so long as we observe naïvely, many of our sense impressions do not seem to have any special connections together. But the more that thinking is active, the more we find that the apparently separate impressions are but single threads in a multitudinous interweaving. If I observe the plant at any stage of its unfolding, I find that if I wish to know it in its totality, I have no right to separate it from its surroundings. It is arbitrary to consider it apart from its whole setting in the light of sun, moon and stars, in the air, the moisture and the earth, and amid the accompanying life of bird, insect and beast. I am aware of all these through my power of observation, but only with my thinking can I find the manifold connections.

We cannot, therefore, say that the plant which we see before us is real and our thought about it only a reflection. For the plant, as I see it, is only one very small part of reality, and in my thinking I am able to connect it with the whole universe. My thinking is able to add to the sense impression that which is at present concealed from my sight. Without my power of observation I certainly could come to no knowledge, but if I remain imprisoned in my senses and regard the object world as the ultimate reality, I can experience only perpetual change and confusion.

One of the greatest difficulties in the way of our experiencing our thinking as an activity and a power is that we make no clear distinction between thinking and having thoughts. That person is considered to be a “thinking man” who has accumulated much knowledge. But thoughts are only the finished products of our thinking, and our whole outlook would be changed if we could find the courage to let go many of the thoughts which have now become dead shell and trust to the creative power of our thinking.

The world around us is changing fast, all that we have most valued is in danger, and we are likely to be witness to the downfall of a civilization. Yet he who is active in his thinking need not fear what life brings him. Our traditional judgments will prove inadequate, and the object world, if we rely upon it, will fail us. But our thinking has eternally the power to form life anew, for it is at one with the creative powers of the universe.

**Notes:**

This article came from Great Britain and was made into a pamphlet in 1975 by good friends Nathan and Yolanda Melniker who ran St. George Imprints. The clarity and value of the contents suggest that it come to the attention of contemporary readers.

The Rudolf Steiner College Bookstore has published a booklet with more of Eileen Hutchins lectures entitled *Observation, Thinking, the Senses* available online at <http://www.Item #1361> available at <http://www.steinercollege.edu/store/product.php?productid=17806&cat=0&page=1>