

Tuning Thinking to Reality

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To penetrate to the truth can seem a daunting task, especially in the face of modern academic expertise. In any sphere, be it evolution, economics, physics, psychology, cosmology or whatever there is a "book mountain" to be climbed, which includes numerous academic papers on the subject. Layfolk are effectively disempowered from having an opinion worth listening to if they have not climbed these mountains. In mathematics alone ten years postgraduate study only lifts the veil on a fraction of all the work that has been done. I have cited my academic qualifications - such as they are - to show that I have climbed one such mountain (now in the distant past): engineering. So do we abdicate our judgement on current affairs to the experts? For the individual an understanding of a subject is important not because it must be shared with and approved by the academic world, but because it is needed to conduct the serious affair of life. Even to accept the expert view is itself to make a judgement. Experts have been wrong too often to be taken "ex cathedra" as it were. Rudolf Steiner provided a practical method to cut through all this and attempt to reach reality for ourselves.

Thinking is the "Cinderella" of modern science and philosophy. It is necessarily used in all enquiry, yet its role is never acknowledged in the results. When asked about thinking a philosopher at Cambridge University replied "The term thinking is a vague generalisation referring to explicit activities like calculating, organising etc.". In a scientific magazine an author wrote "If thinking is not calculation, what is it?", implying it could not be anything else. Yet all such statements result from thinking, and are certainly not mere calculating! Rudolf Steiner (Ref. 3) posed the question: why do philosophers, whose profession it is to think, keep making mistakes? His reply was that they cannot think! Now that seems somewhat insulting as they seem to be very acute thinkers. So what did he really mean?

One approach to understanding that is to take an example where thinking simply fails. In discussing what "blue" is with a materialistic friend I found myself up against an impasse. I was trying to show that there is more to the world than numbers and measurement, and used the colour blue - as we experience it - as an example of a "quale", a unit of quality as it were. All our perceptions come to us through qualia i.e. qualities such as blue, the sound of a violin playing middle C, the taste of an apple and so on. The term "qualia" refers to the qualities of our direct experience prior to thinking. All quantities are arrived at by thinking about qualia e.g. the frequency of oscillation of pressure waves in the air associated with a musical note is not evident to direct experience but requires experiment and measurement guided by thinking. I could inform a deaf man that a particular note has a definite frequency, but he could not form any idea what the note sounded like merely from that. So I said to my friend that there is an aspect of our experience that is not explained by mere numbers and material particles dancing about. The relation between what I see as blue and the numerical properties of the accompanying light waves is an empirical one i.e. that relationship is determined by experiment, not by philosophy or theory. The two are most certainly not identical. He replied that "blue" is merely an adjective, a label taught to us as children. After a long discussion he simply could not appreciate that there is a fact - my experience of blue - that is part of my world and is certainly more than an adjective. Even if, as he maintained, my experience when I see blue differs from his (the theory that qualia are subjective), that does not nullify the fact that I - and he - have an experience, subjective or not. He simply could not think beyond his materialistic prison. Although he experiences blue everyday of his life, he cannot reckon with it as part of reality.

Steiner's claim that seemingly acute thinkers cannot think could be seen in the light of this example, for the most interesting kind of thinking is just that which "goes out of the box". He must surely have meant such thinking rather than very clever manipulations of concepts that remain inside the box. Anyone who has presented original thoughts is likely to have encountered profound scepticism if not ridicule. I have encountered this a number of times, starting at college when I presented a new theory of gravity. Every

presentation was given an award except mine¹! Why is this? One answer, which seems the most likely, is that there is a lack of courage in the realm of thinking. Academics who associate themselves in any way with riské subjects like homeopathy, UFOs, clairvoyance and so on risk their careers. Jacques Benveniste, who found experimental evidence for homeopathy, was just one example. Julian Jaynes, who discovered cosmic thinking through his clinical practice as a psychiatrist, was another (Ref. 1). Both were treated disgracefully by the academic community. Unfortunately there are many such examples.

Who is most likely to think out of the box? Often ordinary people, the non-specialists. An original thought requires much specialist checking, but the originality itself does not and may even be hampered by specialist knowledge. When we observe specialists making crass mistakes we should take courage in our own thinking and judgement. Examples are the current economic crisis, the dismal failure in the design of the millenium bridge in London (which had to be rectified by German engineers), the embarrassing foul-up when Terminal 5 was first opened at Heathrow (just think of the years of experience by then available), the very poor academic record of education in Britain when compared with other - sometimes third world - countries, the failure of a mission to Mars because the Americans and Europeans used different units of measurement, and so on. Another amusing example, not of mistakes but of a failure of sound thinking, is that philosophers have yet to reach a consensus on whether there is an outside world or whether what we think of as that is merely a construct of consciousness. The great philosopher Bertrand Russell appealed to common-sense, not philosophy, to say that there is (Ref. 2).

It is of course easy to point fingers like this and overlook many other examples of competence. The point is to free ourselves from two things: treating specialists as infallible, and under-rating our own abilities to make sound judgements. Most of us will have made mistakes in the course of our lives, sometimes bad ones. But we have learnt from them, and crucially we can recognise them as such. Steiner suggested (Ref. 4) that if we have the courage to think something through to a conclusion rather than sitting on the fence, then the spiritual world can answer us. A dialogue with the spirit is possible if we think courageously. Indeed he went further (Ref. 5) and reported that if four times twelve people could develop real moral courage then the materialism of our time would be overcome. This brings us back to the earlier diagnosis that people, specialists especially, are trapped in the box because of a lack of courage. How can we work with this? Is there a way, then, to develop or tune our thinking so that it may reach reality?

This brings us to "feeling". We commonly say that when we have mastered something we have "got the feel of it". This is no mere phrase but rather points quite directly to a reality, as feeling plays a particular role in our lives beyond merely subjective liking, pleasure, disliking and so on. A feeling is a perception of myself. If I feel pain in my leg I am perceiving my relation to my body, if I feel sick - to my metabolism, if I feel pleasure in meeting a man - of my relationship to him, if I have aesthetic experiences in the realm of art - of my relationship to something soulful outside myself, if I feel religious piety - of my relation to the spirit. Are these not different categories of feeling? Certainly, related to different aspects of my relation to the world which I perceive through ever more refined feeling, starting with the body and ending with the spirit. Feeling may become an ever more trustworthy perception in so far as I can free it from egoism, free it from merely personal liking and disliking. Then it enables me to reach beyond my mere self, but this requires training.

Rudolf Steiner (Ref. 6) gave a method enabling us to penetrate reality with our thinking, by accompanying it with feeling. In any research we usually begin with a sense of wonder in some way or other. "Why" usually means "I wonder why". If this is not a passing question based only on curiosity then the feeling of wonder may be a perception of my karmic relation to the subject I wish to investigate. The wonder then lives in me as a need to penetrate the subject. Wonder points me to where I should start, whereas intellectual thinking could find endless possibilities, for it cannot assign a proper value. Value too is an affair of feeling, individual to me as what is of value to one is not to another, or else the degree differs. Then thinking is

1 Later I won a prize for the same theory, so the problem did not lie in a defect of the theory.

brought to bear as research begins, initiated by wonder. True wonder includes awe, a recognition of something higher, worthy of respect.

Once the investigation starts wonder has played its role. Now I need to remain true to my karma, true to what I am researching, by feeling reverence for the subject. The importance of reverence is stressed at the start of every genuine spiritual path (Ref. 7), and the attempt to apply thinking to reality is a spiritual path. Reverence persists as a means of perception that I am genuinely related to my quest - that I am on the right path - and accompanies the thinking used in the project. In particular it allows the associated spiritual beings to approach and inspire me.

However, I could go on for years like this, never making much progress! Sooner or later I should get somewhere. This is not a rationale for the egoistic longing for success, but rather an objective criterion that if I am to reach reality I must surely move beyond the path marked out by reverence to some definite end. Steiner refers to this as feeling in wisdom-filled harmony with the laws of the world. It is an exciting moment when first experienced! Now I begin to move out beyond my personal question, albeit a karmic one, to contact with reality. He says "Our relation to thinking must not be that we make thinking sit in judgement upon objects, but rather that we make it an instrument whereby the objects can express themselves". This lies very much in the realm of Goethean-style research which seeks to allow the world to speak to us rather than imposing theories upon it.

Finally the feeling of devotion, of self-surrender, is needed to reach the goal. It is all too easy to have a pre-conception of what sort of answer I expect related to pet-theories, prejudices and so on. This is particularly a danger for the specialist in a subject, who is trained in what is "acceptable" and what theoretical framework "should" embed the result. This step is one of the will, for considerable will power is required to lay aside prejudices and norms. The feeling of devotion to the whole enterprise helps in this. Steiner says "I ought not to expect that my thinking can give me knowledge of the truth, I ought rather solely to expect of my thinking that it will educate me". In other words I find the truth with its help, for self-surrender allows a spiritual union with the archetypes, which is Intuition.

There, then, is the path for thinking to reach reality, and it is open to everyone regardless of education, profession or particular beliefs. Every individual can approach events and problems in this spirit. But, you may be saying, all this takes too long! Well, the first time it is tried it will take time, but like any other skill it can be developed by practice. What makes it slow are the impediments of prejudice and lack of courage.

When confidence grows in this method of reaching to the heart of a matter we may approach the issues of our time as independent thinkers unfettered by academic or other norms. This is not to have contempt for the expertise of authorities and academics, but to be able to engage creatively in their subjects without feeling disempowered by their expertise. Freedom from authority is not the rejection of everything it says but rather the ability to evaluate it on its merits with an open mind.

References

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