

A Phenomenological Sketch

## On Thinking

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Many teachers make an attempt at teaching their students to think, but eventually conclude that only a small portion of them have any potential for it. After looking carefully – phenomenologically – at the act of thinking, I have come to believe that their despair is rooted in a misconception: They see thinking as something that happens only in our heads. It is this limitation that in turn limits their view of their students' potentials.

But let's start with that traditional, internal kind of thinking. Take a look at your own thought processes: What do you find? Muffled words in your own voice, perhaps accompanied by throat and tongue movements? Pale images, cartoon-like, seen only a portion at a time and then fleetingly? Unexpressed actions and unfulfilled perceptions? It doesn't seem like much to work with, does it?

The words and images are "pale" because we are not looking at the sights and sounds themselves but at our *readiness* for them. When we are ready for a sight or sound or act, that readiness becomes the background that reveals the absent figure. We are set, prepared physically and mentally, for a certain word or image and, though it doesn't arrive, it feels as if it did.

The most robust aspect of thought, oddly, is *affect*. Feelings mark our presence, our involvement, in our own experiences. They are there in our thoughts as well. It is these feelings that we usually refer to as the *meaning* of an experience: If we imagine a blue sky, we don't so much see a blue sky in our minds as "see" the feelings we have on a crisp autumn day or at a midsummer picnic – what a blue sky *means* to us.

Some might object and mention that their images are quite intense and detailed, and I would have to acknowledge that readiness and feelings can be extraordinary. But only when we cannot or will not compare our thoughts with fuller experiences do we mistake them for fuller experiences. Otherwise, thinking – at least the kind that goes on in our heads – seems a rather introverted, inhibited, incomplete thing.

Incomplete though it may be, thinking is something most of us teachers are quite good at. As kids, we could "do things" in our heads, silently, remaining seated and disturbing no one. This quality endeared us to our teachers. They valued it, so we valued it. Now that we are teachers ourselves, we value it in our students. When we don't find it, we are disappointed and complain about motivation or intelligence or prior teachers.

***But thinking doesn't have to be silent and still.*** Readiness and feelings are part of all our experiences. So, in a sense, thought is a part of all our experiences. It's a little harder to see it when it's blended into perceptions and behaviors, but I suggest it is much more powerful this way.

For example, most people, even ones who aren't good at silent thinking, can and do talk. In fact – isn't it amazing? – when I talk, I don't usually put the words together carefully, grammatically, beforehand in my mind. They come out of my mouth already so arranged! Speech is not preceded by thought; *speech is thinking out loud.*

And others can hear me when I talk. Instead of having to take both sides of an argument myself, I can engage someone else to take a side. We can have a *dialog*, a conversation. Conversations are much more entertaining – and have much more creative potential – than any solitary cogitation.

The same thing with images: We can draw, diagram, graph, paint, sculpt, and otherwise turn our "readinesses" into realities. They are clearer then; they hold still longer and can be pondered; we can interact with them. We can show them to others.

We can also turn our images into *actions*. As human beings, it's no surprise that most of our images are human ones. And, as human beings, we are equipped to demonstrate these images with our own bodies. In elementary and secondary school, we're always trying to keep children from "acting out" their problems; perhaps we should *encourage* it. Perhaps they're just thinking!

And we can let go of some of those unexpressed actions mentioned earlier. There's a great advantage to doing that: The world responds to our actions as it will, not as we want it to. In other words, the world, too, can be engaged in a dialog, with all the potential for creativity inherent in any conversation.

The feelings, of course, will still be there, at least if these perceptions and behaviors and dialogs have any meaning. Beware: If there are no feelings – positive or negative – there is very little thinking of *any* sort!

When my parents taught us kids how to play a card game, we always played the first few hands with our cards face up on the table. We do this when we teach people how to think, too. But with thinking, it doesn't really matter if you ever learn to keep your cards to yourself. Real thinking can and does occur in our interaction with the world and others. So let's drop this notion of thinking as something inside our heads. Perhaps there really isn't that much going on in there.