

Thinking about thinking: Rudolf Steiner and modern science

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In the course of writing an essay at the University of Manchester (Gange 1990) in 1989 I noted that some of the experimental investigations currently being pursued in the sphere of cognitive psychology are relevant to aspects of «The Philosophy of Freedom». I was interested particularly in the references, in chapter 3, to the process of observing one's own thinking – «the most significant observation one can make». The book is addressed to the general public, especially those with an interest in science, and I was particularly interested in the way the book would be understood by the non-anthroposophical reader today.

The following extract is from page 23 of «The Philosophy of Freedom», translated by «R. Stebbing», 1988:

«I can never observe the thinking in which I am actually engaged; only afterward can I make my experience of my past thinking the subject of my present thinking. If I wanted to observe my present thinking I would have to split my personality in two, one part to do the thinking, the other to watch it being done. That I cannot do; I must accomplish it in two separate acts. The thinking to be observed is always different to that which is actually in process of being produced ... It is not possible to contemplate and create at the same time.»

«... when thinking is observed we apply to it the same procedure that is normal for perceiving anything else, only normally we do not apply it to thinking» (p. 21). «The object that is perceived is qualitatively the same as the activity that is directed upon it.» (p. 26).

It is thus humanly impossible to engage in two different mental activities at the same time, such as to think and to watch it being done, because a splitting in two of the personality (or consciousness) would be required. Active production and its contemplation are mutually exclusive, for the same reason.

However, in reading these passages, it has to be remembered that the study of psychology has made great strides since *Steiner's* book was first written a hundred years ago.¹ (*Baars* 1986) Many experimental and theoretical investigations of Divided Attention and Dual Task Performance have been made – see, for example, the reports

1 John R. Anderson (1995): *Cognitive Psychology and its Implications*, p. 104, «There has been a gradual shift in the way the field of cognitive psychology has perceived the issue of attention ... There is no reason to suppose that there is a single limitation of resources or that there is a single mechanism for resource allocation.»

of the International Society for the Study of Attention and Performance. (Proceedings 1985)

Today's reader may be a trained musician or a skilled operational controller. An air traffic controller, for example, may be responsible for ten or more aircraft at once: «He or she must keep track of the flight path of each aircraft, preserve appropriate spacings between the aircraft, maintain communication with the pilots, and be on watch for emergency situations.» This requires the division of attention between many activities and inputs. (Proctor and Dutta 1995)

Individual experiences and abilities vary widely. Brian Keenan describes how he was able to engage in two different thinking activities, simultaneously, during his captivity in Bierut. In his book «An Evil Cradling» (1992) he writes: «I can ask and answer questions on each of these very different subjects at one and the same moment ... They neither cross over nor blur into each other.» (p. 69).

In a further essay (Gange 1993), I quoted an extract from a lecture given by Steiner in 1918 published under the heading «Methods of Spiritual Research»:

«... real self- observation ... includes something that even earnest psychologists maintain is impossible ... They point out that if we have learned a poem by heart and then wish to recite it, but at the same time observing ourselves as we recite, we begin to falter and interrupt ourselves ... Now it must be said that those who find that this is in fact so, that it is impossible, will not get anywhere with the science of spirit, because this 'impossibility' is just what the scientist of spirit has to achieve ... We have to be able to split our soul-life wide open so that we can observe scientifically what we ourselves do ... It is absolutely possible to achieve self-observation in this way.»

Steiner's written works are usually regarded as taking precedence, in terms of accuracy, over reports of lectures. However, the above extract is consistent with the lecture as a whole and there is no reason to regard it as misleading.

The previously quoted extract from chapter 3 of «The Philosophy of Freedom», p. 23, has been the subject of much discussion. According to the widely accepted explanation given by Georg Kühlewind (1984) in «Stages of Consciousness», Steiner assumes, in Part 1, that the reader's mental approach is that of «dead thinking», only during Part 2 does he, or she, achieve «living» thinking.

This explanation is not accepted by all serious students, some of whom consider that the statements in Chapter 3 (p. 23) are to be taken literally, as generally valid, or on the grounds of personal experience.² Others are puzzled by the apparently contradictory descriptions.³ There are also differing views in regard to the relevance of modern science. One view is that modern science can add nothing to what Steiner has written.⁴

2 See Caughill (1994), p. 8: «It seems to me perfectly plain that one cannot actively think about two different things at the same time.»

3 See Zilberberg (1993), p. 45: «The quotations from Steiner on pp. 17 and 18 seem to be saying opposite things. I wonder how your readers have resolved this for themselves.»

4 See Stebbing (1993): The nature and purpose of the book are described but there is no mention of the relation to contemporary science which formed the subject of my earlier article «Thinking about Thinking».