

The Way to the Heart is through the Head:  
Today's Urgent Need for a New Kind of Thinking

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“[The real nature of thinking is] warm, luminous, and penetrating deeply into the phenomena of the world... [it is] the power of love in its spiritual form.” —Rudolf Steiner, From the 1918 addition to *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

Within and behind our everyday world is another world, inaccessible to our present-day perceiving but accessible, if we make the effort, to our thinking. For the Greek initiate Plato in 400 BC, this other world was more real than our everyday world. It was a world of living shining forms of which the physical objects of our natural environment, as beautiful and precious as they are, are merely the shadows. Plato saw two different worlds, one light-filled and enduring, the other shadowy and transitory. He felt the contrast starkly. Thus his philosophy is dualistic, a view of two interpenetrating but distinct worlds.

For the great majority of us, since Plato's time and continuing today, the everyday world of transitory objects and events is experienced as the *real world*. That other invisible world of Forms or Archetypes, so important for Plato, has been called the *ideal world*. The ideal world can reach into the human soul through *thinking* – by means of ideals, images, concepts, and ideas.

The dualistic worldview of the contrast between two worlds, between *spirit* and *matter*, between “I” and “world,” between soul and body,

persisted for centuries in human consciousness. Putting it very simply, one could say it has been the task of theology and religion to study the ideal world, the task of science to study the real world, the task of philosophy to describe our human experience of reality as a linking and bridging of these two worlds, and the task of the arts to bring the ideal within the real to greater expression and visibility.

For two thousand years after Plato in the West (and for longer in the East), it was universally acknowledged, and by some experienced, that the invisible ideal world was the home of God, of conscious, living spiritual beings and forces out of which our material world on Earth had descended, condensed, and evolved. In these ancient world views, which persist today in indigenous cultures, the Sun, Moon, planets and stars belong to the world of creative spiritual beings and forces. Even into the modern world poets and artists have often felt the ideal world living in their souls when they are seized by creative imagination and inspiration.

The poet and playwright Schiller wrote the following lines at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

Truth seek we both,  
Thou outside in life,  
I in the heart within.

Surely each will find it,  
For the eye, if healthy,  
Encounters God in outer life.  
And the heart, if healthy,  
Surely mirrors all Creation.

By using the qualifier “if healthy,” Schiller was perhaps diagnosing a soul illness in those contemporaries who were not convinced of God’s presence in the outer world of phenomena, nor in their inner thought-world of mind and heart. If so, the illness can be traced back to the sea change in thinking that had begun gradually two centuries earlier from the influence of Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton, known today as the Scientific Revolution. This change in consciousness spelled the end, in all scientific thinking from that time onward, of Plato’s ideal world of divine living spirit-forms from which intelligence and life flowed into each individual in the huge variety of plants, animals, and humans on earth.

Now there would be just one world, a self-sufficient world of matter energized from its own innate mechanisms and needing no help from the ideal or the divine. God was still in heaven, but heaven, for human thinking, had become an abstract, distant realm. God had wound up the clock of the universe and now, as viewed by the new science, it was running very well by itself according to its inherent mechanical laws.

The momentum and global spread of this new one-world scientific thinking was unstoppable, and has continued to the present day, not only in science but in all realms of thought, including religion. Early on, objections were raised by poets, artists, and others who had a strong feeling of active spiritual impulses in their lives, their work, and in the world. The poet and artist William Blake declared:

“...May God us keep  
From single vision  
And Newton’s sleep!”

Goethe, friend of Schiller, scientist and poet, also opposed the dominant thinking of his time. For Goethe, the active participation of the ideal world in all the phenomena of Nature was not a theory; it was a living, direct experience. Out of this direct experience he wrote scientific treatises on the metamorphosis of plants, and on color as a spiritual-physical interplay between light and darkness. For Goethe, scientific discovery of the true workings of the natural world was only possible if the scientist was motivated by a love and reverence for Nature.

The nineteenth century was not yet ready for a science based on a loving partnership with Nature, because too few were able to see in Nature what Goethe's thinking saw. Not even Schiller's thinking was alive enough to enable him to follow Goethe in seeing the living ideas/ideals within the natural world. Goethe was not clairvoyant, but his powers of thinking and observation were far ahead of his time. Goethe was able to liberate his thinking capacities and achieve a degree of freedom from the materialism of his age.

In the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner revived Goethe's scientific approach and developed it further. This resulted in a remarkable creative output: biodynamic agriculture, anthroposophic medicine, Waldorf education, eurythmy, rhythmical massage, and new approaches to speech, drama, singing, painting, sculpture, design, architecture, botany, and economics. In these disciplines, the practitioner's work is both scientific and artistic. Scientific because, through practice, one seeks *to know* factually and objectively the spiritual ideal elements (and the physical elements too) within one's discipline and their characteristic ways of working. Artistic

because, through practice, one seeks to bring one's own creative forces into play to enhance and develop the expression of the ideal elements living in the discipline.

For Steiner too, the ideal world was a concrete experience. Like Goethe, he experienced it not as a world separate and remote, but abiding with us and in us and in inseparable union with our perceived reality, as expressed in the maxim, "Matter is never without Spirit." For Goethe and Steiner there was just one world, a shared reality of matter and spirit.

By contrast, one who observes science as it is practiced today can have the impression that the two worlds of Plato have returned, but in an inverted form. For Plato and the other ancient philosophers who acknowledged an ideal world, it was an *active* world from which proceeded the causes of all happenings in the real world: "*As above, so below.*" But today, our biomedical science assumes that the ultimate causes for health, illness, and all that goes on in the human body and mind are working at the sub-microscopic level of our molecules and genes. This assumption, called reductionism, leads modern biomedical scientists to dissect down to ever deeper levels of living organisms, always seeking ever smaller parts whose activities are thought to trickle upward to determine the health of the whole organism: "*As below, so above.*"

The study of this netherworld of molecules (molecular biology, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, etc.) would of course be impossible with our unaided senses, so powerful and sophisticated instruments are necessary, like the electron microscope and many others.

There is no doubt that the reductionistic approach to medicine and its accompanying technology have made life-saving discoveries, like insulin, antibiotics, and other hormones and drugs. Steiner clearly applauded such

discoveries. Yet he also said that the most perfect knowledge of the molecular and biochemical processes underlying an illness might still not help us in understanding how to *heal* the illness because, in order to heal, we must direct our observation and thinking not from below upward but from above downward. He said in his first lecture course to physicians that the most important forces working in cells are the same forces that work in the universe around us, fully accessible to our *experience*, i.e. to the observation of our unaided senses and to our healthy thinking.

We usually use the noun *experience* to describe the result of active participation in life and the world, especially having lived through an event and learned from it. The learning is conditional on being awake and on one's interest, courage, and good will in actively grasping the lesson offered by the experience, even though, due to our errors, the lesson may be painful.

Most of us have found that what we learn through experience is far more valuable than the knowledge gained through studying and thinking. With experience our knowledge is put to the test by life itself. Is our knowledge realistic and practical? Does it work? Thinking alone cannot answer these questions because our thinking today is abstract. Thinking is not immersed in *reality*. It seems to function in its own virtual sphere within our head, insulated from the workings of the great universe in which we live. Our thinking is usually just a pale reflection of the physical reality around us. But to regard this "virtuality" as expressing the true nature of thinking is like mistaking the shadow of a human being for the real human being. Thinking has not always been so abstract and shadowy as it is today. Nor will it be so in the future. We are living now through a low point in the evolution of the human faculty of thinking.

To help us ascend from that low point was Steiner's mission in writing *The Philosophy of Freedom* [first published in Berlin, in 1894] and in all his

subsequent labors. In a letter to a friend, Steiner said of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, “I was not setting forth a doctrine, but simply recording inner experiences through which I had actually passed ... personal experience in every single sentence.” Steiner then said that writing the book was an intense personal struggle that he compared to climbing a mountain for the first time and having to find the right path as you go.

Thus the book itself is a record and an example of the kind of thinking into which our ordinary thinking must evolve if our global culture is to become healthy. Thinking must not remain only in the head, but must become alive and as immersed in real life as the practical experience of our hands. As thinking connects with its living source and becomes heart-centered, ideas can become life-forces.

Scientific thinking today is “head- thinking” only. It lacks the warmth and spiritual power to motivate researchers to work for the highest good, so they are easily tempted to work instead for personal gain. In this way the mission of science is corrupted, and the health of the Earth and all its inhabitants suffers.

Only a scientific thinking based on love and reverence for the natural world can lead researchers to the hidden truths within Nature. These must not be mere sentiments grafted onto an arid intellectual science that seeks to control Nature. Love and reverence for the world are pulsing in the heart of any scientist who learns to bring life into thinking.

A new, enlivened and whole-hearted thinking experience must be the basis for the renewal and redeeming of today’s amoral science that leads to nuclear weapons and food crops with sterile seeds and built-in pesticides.

Einstein was correct when he said, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.” We are indeed drifting, not determining our own course, but being carried by forces beyond our understanding and control. Besides the physical horrors of nuclear war and radioactive contamination, we also drift toward a massive health catastrophes -- physical, mental, emotional, social and political.

In the US, use of prescription and mind-altering drugs is increasing while many important indicators of health are declining. One report I found particularly disturbing was of a poll of over 2000 UK young people ages 16 to 25 in 2009 (1). More than a quarter of them felt depressed and were less happy than when they were younger. Ten percent of them stated that they found life meaningless. Something is terribly wrong. We can assign blame to many social factors, but they would all be secondary. The primary factor is the accelerating pace of what could be called the “starvation of the human thinking faculty.” A child’s thinking slowly starves if all the thinking it meets growing up in the world is abstract and lifeless because it is not nourished from living ideals.

We now come full circle to this article’s beginning. I believe Plato was one of the first to warn of the decline in health of the human soul. This is a very gradual process over the past five millennia, the span of time called the Kali Yuga in the ancient wisdom of India. For Plato -- and for Steiner over two thousand years later -- the primary cause of this slow loss of vitality has been our increasing separation and isolation from the deep spiritual roots that nourish us. Humans are twofold beings in the sense that our bodies are nourished from the Earth and our souls are nourished from the Universe, from the ideal world. In order to become truly independent

and free, as it was destined to become, the human soul has had to sever its roots in the ideal world, despite the danger that the soul would sicken to the point of death until it discovered purely out of itself how to send new roots into the realm of its origin.

Our soul not only thinks, it also feels and wills. Through the possibility of connecting our thinking to the ideal world, our thoughts can become selfless and love-imbued. Thinking can then impart these qualities further to our feeling and will, so that through our actions selfless ideals can flow into practical life. The path to right action begins with right thinking. Or as Lyndon B. Johnson once declared in response to his critics, "It ain't doing what's right that's the problem, it's *knowing* what's right."

In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner surprisingly asserts that it is incorrect to consider thinking as purely our subjective activity. "*Thinking*," he says, "*is beyond subject and object.*" Thinking is a *spiritual activity* -- present in the universe, entrusted to us. We are now the stewards of the world's thinking, and we are responsible for its health and its future direction. In his addition of 1918 to *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Rudolf Steiner terms this thinking to be "warm, luminous, and penetrating deeply into the phenomena of the world... [it is] the power of love in its spiritual form."

Science has clearly shown that physical processes in the brain are related to thinking. Typically, we imagine that these processes create the thoughts. But Steiner, using an altogether different model of the nature of thinking, stunningly reverses cause and effect and asserts that it is *thinking that creates* the physical processes in our brain, much in the same way that a step leaves a footprint behind. Again he stresses that ideas, concepts and ideals are powerful living forces that can change human beings and

change the world. Yet they are only able to do this if they arise freely within us, through our own striving or inspiration. We must actively will ourselves to think, but we don't create the thoughts out of ourselves. Rather, we sift through the thoughts that are teeming in our spiritual environment near and far, accessible to all human beings, and we select those thoughts that we make our own.

A healthy art of education nourishes, awakens and encourages the love of the world and the love of truth that most of us bring with us, like a delicate seedling plant into the world. Based on this love, the roots of our developing thinking will then seek for the ideals in our world as a root seeks the water that gives it life. This is the naïve idealism of youth and it needs to be nurtured and led into practical life.

If the love of the world that we're born with is not fostered through healthy parenting, healthy education and healing healthcare, then our inner seedling can wither as we fail to connect with the ideals in life that nourish thinking and questioning. A malnourished thinking imparts its illness to our feelings and will also. In this way we can become depressed and find life meaningless. This is an illness of the soul. If not healed, soul illness leads inevitably to a breakdown of the body's health also.

This is the point we've arrived at today, a health crisis for the Earth, for our global social-economic order and increasingly for individual human beings. What is the way through to healing?

In order to heal, one must first diagnose the illness correctly. Some might say that our modern illness is a lack of love and compassion for our fellow human beings and for all living things. Certainly that is true. But most people's hearts are capable of feeling love, at least within their circle of family and friends. To greatly expand that circle to include all humanity

requires first expanding one's field of vision, i.e. one's perceiving and thinking, to begin to see what is lovable in all human beings.

In 1970, when I first read the maxims repeated by Steiner, "the way to the heart is through the head," and "thought is the father of feeling," my youthful prejudices rebelled. But he was simply stating an obvious truth that is nevertheless easily overlooked. My feeling for another person depends entirely on what kind of picture I have formed of him or her in my mind. As the common expression goes, how we feel about something literally "depends on how we look at it," that is, on how we think about what we perceive.

To see in a new way, we must learn to think in a new way. Thus, Steiner's diagnosis is that in order for deep insight, compassion and selfless values to flow constructively into human affairs today, our thinking faculty now has to emerge into the sunlight from the cold, dark cave of the physical body into which it has fallen over the past five millennia. We must now learn to think with the sun's power of spiritual warmth and light that enlivens our whole organism; we must learn to think with our 'life' – *with our etheric body*. (2)

The wonders of modern technology stem from the sharp precision and clarity of the physical body's thinking, but the *inherent* lifelessness and lovelessness of this physical thinking have inevitably led to today's worsening world crisis. Rudolf Steiner clearly saw it coming, over a hundred years ago. Although precision and clarity of thought will continue to be necessary, only a new kind of thinking, an etheric thinking, can lead us out of our modern impasse.

All our attempts to solve the world's problems start from our thinking about them, so before anything else can be healed, our thinking must be healed.

Many of us today carry love in our hearts but often the love is ineffectual because we lack love in our intellect. A loving intellect is nothing soft or sentimental -- it is rigorous, truth-seeking and practical. But rather than contracting into a narrow focus to study molecules, a loving intellect expands its field of vision to include the ideal world in its scientific worldview. Such an intellect works not from the head alone, but from the integrated and healthy whole human being. The thinking of the loving intellect is not content to reflect the world as “through a glass darkly,” but it courageously seeks to meet the world in living experience, face to face.

1. <http://www.truthout.org/010509HA>

2. For information about the etheric body, see the basic writings of Rudolf Steiner. See also “The Etheric Body” by Adam Blanning in the Spring, 2012 issue of LILIPOH.