

Thinking and sense of thinking: How do we perceive thoughts?

Concepts, thoughts can only be perceived where they actually occur, where they are brought forth; otherwise they are not present. And that is through current thinking by a human being.

Dietrich Rapp¹

How does reality arise?

Reality is supposed to exist somewhere beyond the realm of human cognition. We are said to take cognizance of this reality through sense perception only. Our cognition is said merely to mirror this sense world.

Since modern times, the tendency developed to view cognition in this way. How do human cognition and reality relate for Rudolf Steiner? Of what significance is this for us today?

In his foundational works, Rudolf Steiner intensively pursued the question of how *reality arises in the process of cognition*. Rather than devising erudite academic theories, he breached a willed pathway into thinking, from which he sensitively *observed* the activity of cognition, exploring the role of thinking in the process of cognition through introspective (soul) observation with unsurpassed radicality.

He describes the process of *acquiring concepts through intuitive thinking* in his “Philosophy of Freedom” from increasingly comprehensive vantage points, only to concede *one* exception on the next to last page of the last chapter, in which we “bring concepts over into our own spirit in a pure form”, *unmixed* with conceptual content won through intuition.

Before taking a closer look at this exception, we should turn our attention to the regular process of cognition. How does the human being apprehend the world? What role does perception play therein, what role mental representation and what role conceptual thinking? How does reality arise? Based on introspective (soul) observation, Steiner describes the relationship between cognition and reality in a remark of 1924 to an early epistemological work from the year 1886 as follows²:

Within the inner life of the soul a content arises which craves external perception as the hungry organism craves food; and in the external world there is a perceptual content which does not bear its essential being in itself but mani-

1 From the essay by Dietrich Rapp „Begriffssinn – Vorstellungssinn – Denksinn. Über die Hüllen seiner Entbindung“ (“Sense of concept – Sense of mental representation – Sense of thinking. Concerning the sheaths of its uncovering”), in „Die Drei“ (11/1986).

2 Rudolf Steiner: “A Theory Of Knowledge Based On Goethe’s World Conception”, from the first note to the new edition of 1924. Retranslated by the author, with some segments taken from the translation of Olin D. Wannamaker, Anthroposophic Press, 1968.

festes this only when it is united with the soul content through the process of cognition. Thus the process of cognition becomes part of the formation of the reality of the world. The human being participates in the formation of this world-reality through the act of cognition. If a plant-root is unthinkable without the fulfilment of its predisposition in the fruit, so likewise not only the human being but the world itself remains unfinished without the act of cognition. In the act of cognition, the human being does not create something just for himself, but he creatively participates together with the world in making reality manifest. What shows in the human being is ideal appearance; what shows in the perceptible world is sense appearance; only the cognizant interworking of both brings reality into being.

There is no reality to be *found* through cognition, “because it must first be created as reality through cognition”. This realisation remained pivotal for Steiner throughout his life.

What is sense perception, what is mental representation?

Now the human being is met by the world of “sense manifestation” fractured into different fields of sense perceptions. The human soul constantly permeates these sense perceptions with concepts, arising from the soul as “manifestation of the idea”. In accord with these concepts, the human being, exercising judgement, brings the different percepts together. Only thus does one-ness come about in our experience of the world. Shortly before the first Waldorf school opened in 1919, Steiner remarked to the future teachers:

And now you can understand exercising judgement as a living process in your own body, which comes about through the fact that the senses confront you with the world analysed into fragments. The world confronts you with twelve different fragments in what you experience, and through exercising judgement, you bring the elements together, because what is apart does not want to remain apart.⁴

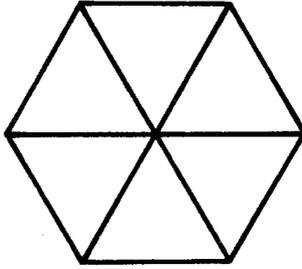
The human being thus constantly merges sense perceptions into mental representations, which are then experienced as coherent objects in the world.⁵

Forming these mental representations requires an activity of the will. This becomes particularly evident when we picture space forms, as the following figure can exemplify:

3 Ibid

4 At the end of Rudolf Steiner’s lecture from 29 August 1919 in “The Universal Human as a Foundation for Education” (less aptly known as “The Study of Man”). Passage translated by the author.

5 Also compare Detlef Hardorp: „Die Welt hinter dem Fenster. Wird Raumentiefe wahrgenommen?“ (“The world behind the window. How is spacial depth perceived?”), in „Die Drei“, January 1989



This can be seen as a three-dimensional cube. Suddenly, however, it can turn into a *different* cube! If we are attentive to the moment when the switch takes place, we notice that it is us who, by the power of our will, engrave the three-dimensionality into the two-dimensional picture.

Clearly outlined objects as well as black lines against a white background prompt us to follow the contours with our eyes. Each movement we do, including the movement of our eyes, is perceived through our sense of movement. Due to their spherical shape, the eyes are very special limbs: they move independent of the force of gravity.⁶ Now all movements performed by our limbs are acts of will, however only the movements of the eyes are acts of will performed in a weightless realm. And it is exactly the perception of *these* acts of will which are most likely to animate us to develop the activity of the will in the weightless realm of *mental representations*.

The sense perception of the two-dimensional picture can prompt us *to will* the three-dimensional representation of the cube. If people's experience were restricted to the sense world, a cube drawn on a sheet of paper would never be seen. That we can see it nonetheless is due to the fact that people divide the world into space-filling objects by forming *mental representations* and experiencing these *self-formed* mental representations in the world. *These mental representations are only mistaken for sense perception to the extent that our own thinking and representing activity are not sufficiently observed.*

When merging the different elements of sense perception into mental representations, the human being is active beyond this realm of sense perception. And here, in this realm of actively formed mental representations that reach beyond sense perception, concepts can emanate; they are "abstracted" out of the mental representations.⁷ Such concepts may well be *tied* to the sense world. That does not mean, however, that the concepts themselves are *content* of a sense perception. They simply are *formed in accord with sense perception*.

6 Eye movements in situations lacking the influence of the force of gravity require an identical amount of force as in situations with gravity.

7 Scientific concepts are generally formed in this way. Concepts can also be "condensed" or "individualised" to mental representations through sense perception. In particular, ethical and moral representations are formed in this way. Cf. Rudolf Steiner: *The Philosophy of Freedom*

Where do thoughts come from?

In 1909, Rudolf Steiner for the first time sketched the foundations of a comprehensive overview of the fields of sense perception to members of what was then the Theosophical Society. The title of the lectures⁸ was simply *Anthroposophy: Anthroposophy* as the link between *Anthropology* and *Theosophy*, as described at the beginning of the first lecture. Steiner then proceeds to describe the ten basic senses of the human being, the last of which he calls the *sense of concept* or the *sense of mental representation* (later he also calls it the *sense of thinking* or *sense of thought*). This sense does not empower us to perceive our *own* thoughts but *the thoughts expressed by our fellow human beings*.

Could it nonetheless be possible that this sense allows us to perceive other thoughts *beyond the thoughts expressed by other people*? Could it be that we grasp the concepts of outer world objects through a sense of concept as Steiner understood this sense?

What first weighs against this idea is that then the anthroposophical approach to sense perception would diametrically oppose the epistemological foundations of anthroposophy itself: Concepts arise from *within* the soul, whereas all sense manifestation streams in from the *outside*, engaging the soul. In his “Philosophy of Freedom” of 1894, Rudolf Steiner calls the arising of concepts within your soul “intuition”. There, the sense of concept is not mentioned. Did Steiner discover the sense of concept later on, with the consequence that his earlier, radical epistemological approach grew more moderate by allowing some concepts of outer world objects to *nonetheless* be perceived by the senses? Under which circumstances is a thought a perception of the concept or thought sense, under which circumstances does it originate in one’s own thinking or memory?

Some curious ideas seem to be rampantly spreading a fair measure of confusion about this issue within anthroposophical circles. I’ll give two concrete examples of this in the second part of my essay. First I’d like to focus on the questions I’ve just raised and, in particular, attempt to contribute toward the understanding of concept-, thinking- or thought sense.

When are concepts not acquired through intuition?

In the fourth of the five Anthroposophy lectures about the senses, a few days after mentioning the sense of concept or thought for the first time, Rudolf Steiner spoke extensively about the relationship between the outer world and the thoughts by which people grasp the objects of the outer world conceptually. He starts as follows:

⁸ The first four were published in „*Anthroposophie, Psychosophie, Pneumatosophie*“ (translated as “Wisdom of Man, of the Soul, and of the Spirit”), the fifth lecture in „*Kunst und Kunsterkenntnis*“ (translated as “The Nature and Origin of the Arts”). The content of these lectures were meant to appear as a written book; Steiner only managed to write a fragment (which was first published in 1951 under the title „*Anthroposophie. Ein Fragment aus dem Jahre 1910*“, published in English in 1996).

The human being must indeed think within himself. Objects don't think for us; they don't show us the thoughts from without, but rather we must bring the thoughts toward the objects. That is the great secret, one is inclined to say, of the relation of human thought to the outer world. No thoughts approach the human being through sense organs. If the sense organs themselves have irregularities, sensory illusions can easily occur. Whereas in normal life, the senses do not err, the mind, which cannot put itself in relationship to objects, can err. It is the first member of the human being that can err, because its activity is dammed up within the brain and this activity cannot reach out. What follows from this? It follows that it is quite impossible for people to have thoughts about the outer world that are right if we do not have an *inner* disposition which allows right thoughts to arise within us. Never – as can be seen from this – could the outer world provide people with right thoughts if the right thoughts would not well up inside us. It can provide them with right sense perception. Yet sense perceptions cannot think. A thought, however, is prone to error and the human being must have the inner strength for the veracity of the thought.⁹

In how far is it then justified to speak of a sense of thought or concept at all?

Cognition occurs when the right concept arises within us and unites with the percept. There is only one exception to this, when concepts cannot arise within ourselves: that is when we perceive our fellow human being, whose I, in its uniqueness, gives birth to freely begotten thoughts in the sense realm. I cannot grasp, in my *own* thinking, the germinating moment of *these* freely begotten thoughts of other people, because I am not you. I must silence my own thinking in order to sufficiently become you.

Toward the end of the last chapter of his “Philosophy of Freedom” of 1894, Rudolf Steiner already described the necessity of the sense of concept for the emergence of freedom within humanity:

Cognition consists in linking a concept with a percept through thinking. For all other objects, the observer must penetrate to the concept by means of his or her own intuition. Understanding a free individuality is exclusively a question of bringing over into our own spirit in a pure form (unmixed with our

9 Translated by the author. A translation of „Anthroposophie, Psychosophie, Pneumatosophie“ (Vol. 115 in the Bibliographic Survey, 1961) was made by Samuel and Loni Lockwood from the original German edition published in 1931, which was later drastically revised when better stenographs of the first set of lectures turned up. The translation was supposedly “carefully checked against the later edition of 1965, published by the Rudolf Steiner Nachlassverwaltung, in which complementary material derived from additional transcripts located since 1931 was incorporated” and “minor alterations in keeping with the new material” were made to the Lockwood translation “where necessary”, as noted in the 1971 Anthroposophic Press edition of this translation. The passage cited in this essay was, however, not an accurate translation of the text in the later edition.

own conceptual content) those concepts by which the individuality determines itself. People who immediately mix their own concepts into any judgment of others can never attain understanding of an individuality.¹⁰

In the sense world, it becomes possible to think freely begotten thoughts. This would split humanity, people would become increasingly isolated from one another in the sense world if the sense of concept or thought wouldn't make it possible to reconnect thoughts *directly, from one person to the other*.

What is perceived via the sense of thought?

We can best become aware of the necessity of the sense of thought when perceiving the *freely begotten* thoughts of the other human being, but of course this sense doesn't perceive only *those* thoughts. Through the sense of thought (or sense of concept or mental representation or thinking), I can perceive, while listening without interference of my own concepts and my own judgement, how the other person forms thoughts into personal, individualised mental representations.

Everybody's thoughts are initially imbued with his or her own mental representations. Each thought has its own shading, its own nuance of feeling, its own degree of sparkling intensity, according to how its author mentally represents the thought. Now the more *strength for the accuracy of thought* is brought forth, the deeper thinking breaks through to the *universality* of concept. As we universalise the personal content of our thoughts, the universal strength of thought becomes individualised. The way in which thought content becomes universal increasingly bears the signature of the I.

In order to be able to perceive, in its immediacy, *the way in which* a thought is coined by a human being incarnated in the sense world – be it the coining of every day thoughts or be it the coining of nascent individualised free thoughts – his fellow human being needs the sense of thinking, thought or concept.¹¹ This sense in fact allows people developing between birth and death to grow into the body of the social organism. It is not the concepts of the objects of the outer world that penetrate the human being through his sense of concept, but the concepts which live in the *inner world* of the other person that manifest themselves through this sense.

Concepts are only sense-perceptible to the extent that other people bring them to manifestation. This is why children put their never-ending questions to everyone around them. The child itself must also meld sense perception with the corresponding concepts out of *its own* discerning thinking activity. The child doesn't begin by bringing forth concepts out of its own thinking, it first devel-

10 Cf. Rudolf Steiner: "Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path – A Philosophy of Freedom", Centennial Edition, Anthroposophic Press 1995, p. 229, translation by Michael Lipson.

11 Cf. the essay by Dietrich Rapp „Begriffssinn – Vorstellungssinn – Denksinn. Über die Hüllen seiner Entbindung“ in „Die Drei“ (11/1986), p. 848.

ops its own thinking through the concepts taken in from the people around it.¹² It is an innate gift of the child to be able to take in concepts in their immediacy through the sense of concept. The young child cannot but immerse itself in its human surroundings with love and devotion.

The stronger the *personal* discerning power of thinking develops, the more problematic it becomes for the sense of thinking. Personal thinking awakens one's self to self-awareness; this self-awareness is at first egocentric. The thinking of the egocentric self, however, does not tolerate the self-less devotion that is prerequisite for the sense of thinking. Therefore this sense only functions when the egocentric self falls into deep sleep, thus not impairing perceptual ability. The only reason we don't take notice of *our* thinking's deep sleep is simply that our consciousness is completely filled with the *other* person's thoughts. While listening, my own thinking intermittently wakes up slightly from its immersion in the thoughts of the other in order to mentally incorporate the other being's thoughts into *my* thought organism. To the extent that the mind awakens, the perception of the sense of thinking recedes. These moments of "blackout" regarding the thinking gestures of the other person, which are due to our own thinking activity, are sometimes experienced as gaps in consciousness during a conversation: you just manage to notice that the other has just said something, without, however, perceiving any of his thoughts (because you yourself were engaged in thinking). At best you bridge the gap by trying to bring the last spoken words to consciousness out of the lingering resonance of word-recollection, in order to quickly make sense of them out of your *own* thinking.

What occurs when listening?

Rudolf Steiner's most precise description of how it is possible to "bring over" concepts (unmixed with our own conceptual content) via the sense of concept is found in the first appendix to the second edition (1918) of his "Philosophy of Freedom": During the act of perception through the sense of thinking, the other person's thinking is momentarily taken over into my spirit as if it were my own. While perceiving another personality, I am compelled, as a thinking being, "to extinguish my own thinking as long as I am under its influence, and to put *its* thinking in the place of mine. I then grasp *its* thinking in my thinking as an experience like my own. I have really perceived another person's thinking."¹³

It is then primarily the *individualised* way of coining or forming of concepts by the other person that I experience.¹⁴ Steiner continues:

12 More precisely: Thinking develops in conjunction with progress in the development of kinaesthesia (self-movement). Kinaesthetical ability gets "nourishment that pours forth from within" through the sense of concept (cf. the lecture by Rudolf Steiner "Human Spirit and Animal Spirit" of 17.11.1910).

13 Translation of this and the following quote by Michael Wilson, p.221.

14 A concept is individualised by the way it gets mentally represented. As already mentioned, when Rudolf Steiner spoke about the sense of thinking or concept the first time, he also called it *sense of mental representation* ("*Vorstellungssinn*", cf. the lecture of October 26, 1909 in the "Anthroposophy" lectures).

“(...) it is a process lying wholly within my consciousness and consisting in this, that the other person’s thinking takes the place of mine. Through the self-extinction of the [outer, bodily] sense appearance [of the other person], the separation between the two spheres of consciousness is actually eliminated^{15, 16}. This expresses itself in my consciousness through the fact that while experiencing the content of another person’s consciousness I experience my own consciousness as little as I experience it in dreamless sleep. Just as in dreamless sleep my waking consciousness is eliminated, so in my perceiving of the content of another person’s consciousness the content of my own is eliminated. The illusion that it is not so only comes about because in perceiving the other person, firstly, the extinction of the content of one’s own consciousness gives place not to unconsciousness, as it does in sleep, but to the content of the other person’s consciousness, and secondly, the alternations between extinguishing and lighting up again of my own self-consciousness follow too rapidly to be generally noticed.”¹⁷

Eight years earlier, Steiner had phrased it as follows in the fragment of his book “Anthroposophy”: “What we can experience within our own soul as a concept, we can also receive as revealed from an external being. (...) With the concept that lives within another human being, we perceive what lives, soul-like, within ourselves.”¹⁸ It lives soul-like within ourselves because the thinking of the other is of the same nature as our own thinking and because it is “brought over into our own spirit in a pure form” in the moment of thought perception, “unmixed with our own conceptual content”.¹⁹

15 Michael Wilson here uses the word „overcome“ (Michael Lipson the word “suspend” in his translation). We have translated the German „aufgehoben“ with “eliminated”.

16 In the eighth lecture of *The Universal Human as a Foundation for Education* (often called “Study of Man”) on August 29, 1919, Rudolf Steiner describes the “vibration of the soul” between “abandon to the other” and “inner defence” as basic gestures of the sense of ‘I’ and refers to his characterisation of this sense in the new edition of his “Philosophy of Freedom”. In fact, he there mainly describes the “vibration of the soul” as basic gesture of the *sense of thinking*. The sense of thinking and the sense of ‘I’ are obviously different aspects of *one sense continuum* with the same alternating basic gesture. It can be viewed as one sense realm, but also as two. The statement that “the separation between the two spheres of consciousness is actually eliminated” clearly refers to the sense of ‘I’, which borders on the sense of thinking and resonates within it. Insofar as thoughts are presently being begotten by a thinker, it is always possible to direct the attention more toward the *begotten thoughts* or toward the *begetting thinker*. There is thus a gradual transition from the sense of thinking to the sense of ‘I’. – The basic gesture of oscillation between sympathy and antipathy can have very different qualities, even up to the point that the realm of ‘I’ and the realm of the other amalgamate into a common realm, reaching beyond sympathy and antipathy.

17 Rudolf Steiner, first appendix of 1918 to the *Philosophy of Freedom*.

18 Cf. Rudolf Steiner: “Anthroposophy (A Fragment)”, 1996, p. 94f.

19 From the previously cited last chapter of Steiner’s “Philosophy of Freedom”, written 24 years before the just cited in-depth remarks from the first appendix to the new edition of 1918. Steiner’s discovery of the sense of concept became a life-long theme of research.

The quality of social discourse now depends decisively on how a person “awakens” from this “bringing over”, this “deep-sleep” listening activity.²⁰ Because the child acquires its self-consciousness through the development of its self-centred personality, the waking-up moment is connected with an aggressive self-assertion. When it slackens, the child again “falls asleep”, as it were, into the thoughts of the other being. Insofar as a person does not take his social development consciously in hand, this will remain so into adulthood.

Through self-observation in adulthood, however, we can become conscious of the inherent anti-social nature of this waking-up of our personality to its own thinking. If, out of this awareness, you dampen your own personality, a foggy state of mind ensues, excluding yourself from playing an active role in any social setting. At the threshold of awakening one stands *unavoidably* between deep sleep of devoted listening and the antisocial nature of thinking.

How does listening interact with thinking?

It can happen that when listening intently to another person, one experiences and fully understands the lively depiction of this other person’s thoughts in all their richness and depth. However, shortly thereafter one may remember the richness, the depth, the vitality of the lively depiction of the thoughts, but may find oneself hard put to reproduce their content. An autonomous understanding is something quite different from the immediacy of understanding while perceiving with the sense of thinking. During the latter, thoughts blossom between speaker and listener, momentarily living into the listener’s organism of concept²¹, *still carried by the speaker’s power of thought*: the *other’s* thinking is active instead of one’s *own*. Whether or not we are then able to reproduce the other’s thoughts out of our *own* power of thinking depends on our ability to think the thoughts independently.

After abandoning oneself to the *other* person’s thinking for a while, the effect of the thought perception on your own life organism, this rooting of foreign thoughts in your organism of concept, can increasingly be felt as an intrusion, arousing one’s *own* thinking in defence. When consequently one expresses one’s own thinking activity through words or gestures, the whole process begins anew, now with reversed roles. This is how a rapid alternation between extinguishing and relighting of your own self-consciousness comes about.

This alternation can come to life in a variety of ways, in particular by training my thinking, *while awakening*, to be less influenced by my personality. The more universal my thinking, the longer it can remain devoted to the foreign thought, *out of which* it then unfolds its own strength while awakening. Immediately, though, we are liable to revel in the strength of our own thinking, there-

20 Regarding social discourse, compare Steiner’s lectures of December 6 and 12, 1918 in “Social and Anti-Social Forces in the Human Being” and the first lecture to the delegates conference on February 27, 1923 in “Awakening to Community”

21 Cf. Chapter 7 of Steiner’s 1910 fragment “Anthroposophy”.

fore unable to properly “fall asleep” into the other thinking again. A proper rhythm must develop between one’s own thinking activity and devout, dedicated listening. When that happens, the conversation can rise into a shared realm of spiritual and soul intimacy. This kind of conversation nourishes souls. It constitutes the building material out of which social art arises.

It is, however, possible that the development of our self-centred thinking (our intellectuality) weans us so radically from the surrounding world that we are no longer able to assimilate foreign thoughts through the sense of thought. It is not surprising that, in an age of “cool” self-centredness, the willingness to “fall asleep” into the thoughts of another person, to think them as if they were your own, declines considerably. Here a certain unreflectedness still protects the child, as it can’t do otherwise than experience the thoughts around it most intently, long before it is able to think them independently. The adult, in particular after having undergone an intellectual training (and who has not in this day and age?), is in danger of shutting himself up in his *own* thoughts to the degree that his disposition as a truly social being wanes. He then constantly expresses his own thoughts; when he doesn’t express them, he thinks them. He is no longer capable of truly listening. When strengthening your own thinking, it is likewise necessary to strengthen the other pole: devotion toward what is not I. Only then can the antisocial nature of exercising judgement be integrated into the social organism. Devotion towards the other being is in particular nurtured by deliberately silencing your own thinking, no matter how wise it may be; otherwise it is like light reflecting on the surface of water, impeding sight to penetrate into the water’s depths.

We develop full individuality by lucidly and wilfully strengthening our thinking. Consciously caring for developing devotion towards other people builds community. These two poles are interdependent: the deeper we penetrate one, the deeper we can enter into the other. Neglecting one weakens both: If we spin ourselves into the cocoon of self-referential thinking, the sense of thought becomes obscured and can no longer take in foreign thoughts.

How do we perceive concepts while reading?

Under which circumstances is a thought a perception of the concept-or-thought-sense, under which circumstances does it originate in one’s own thinking or memory? This question was asked and dealt with in the first part of this essay regarding the nature of *listening*. Is *reading* different from listening in this regard? How do we perceive concepts while reading?

We can speak of *sense* perception “whenever cognition comes about without involvement of reason, memory, and so forth”²². Rudolf Steiner proposes precisely this necessary condition to delineate sense perception when introducing the sense realm beyond the sense of hearing in the fragment of his book “Anthroposophy”.

22 Cf. Rudolf Steiner: “Anthroposophy (A Fragment)”, 1996, p. 92.

Now while reading, I am constantly dependent on my reasoning mind; without it, I would experience mere words and not understand the weaving of thoughts behind them. It is only through the power of my own thinking and mental representations that I can perceive thoughts when reading. To be sure, I form these thoughts *based on* the sense perception of what is written, however this does not mean that the thoughts are contained, sense perceptibly, in what is written. When reading a book, I can only work myself through to thoughts by means of a lucid mind that is capable of thinking. Here the perception of thoughts is *supersensible*.

Exactly the opposite is the case when perceiving via the sense of concept (or sense of thought or thinking): I can perceive nothing through this sense while my reasoning mind stays awake. In order to perceive the thoughts of my fellow human beings in their immediacy, my own reasoning mind must be willing to fall asleep, so that during the act of perception via this sense I can live devotedly within the thinking power of *the other*. Rudolf Steiner once characterised the field of perception of the sense of thinking as follows:

(...) when I perceive a word I do not as intimately connect with the object or with the external being as when I perceive the thought through the word. At this stage, most people cease to make any distinctions. But there is a distinction between perceiving the word, the meaningful sound, and the veritable perception of the thought behind the word. *You can also perceive a word, after all, when it has been separated from the thinker through a phonograph or even through writing. However, while in a living connection with the being who is forming the word, to transpose myself directly through the word into the thinking and mentally representing being, this requires a sense that goes deeper than the usual word sense, this requires the sense of thinking, as I would like to call it.* And an even more intimate relation to the outer world than through the sense of thinking is given to us through that sense which enables us to feel with another being in such a way as to feel at one with this being, to sense it as one senses oneself. That is the *sense of I: through the thinking, the living thinking which the other being turns towards me*, I perceive the ‘I’ of this other being.²³

“Word” and “thought” should not be taken too literally. In the sense of Steiner, the realm of perception of the sense of tone²⁴ or word encompasses all of hu-

23 Cited from the lecture of August 12, 1916, contained in “The Riddle of Humanity”, translated by John F. Logan, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1990. Logan has a mistake at the end of his translation of this paragraph, where he incorrectly attributes the “living thinking” through which the ‘I’ of the other is perceived to the *perceiver*, whereas Steiner is speaking of the living thinking of the *perceived*. The paragraph has been largely retranslated by the author.

24 The German „Laut“ is here translated by „tone“ (which should always be thought of as ensouled), the German „Ton“ by „sound“, consistent with the English translation of „Anthroposophy. A Fragment”.

man body language, including all expressed gestures of the soul insofar as they are perceived *in their immediacy*²⁵. Facial expressions of a human being also shows the stirrings of the soul, including the other person's thinking, which can be perceived by the sense of thought accordingly; insofar as the 'I' comes to expression in the soul, it can be perceived by the sense of 'I'. Being together in silence with another human being can thus also provide a field of perception for these three upper senses.²⁶

The sense of concept enables one to "delve into another being (...) through sensing what lives in that being as concept".²⁷ When (sensorially) delving into another 'I', first its stirrings of thoughts are perceived (as sense perception), before awakening, enriched, to one's own thinking. While *reading*, the order is reversed: we must first awaken to our autonomous thinking before the thoughts of the other can be perceived (now super-sensibly!).

When I read what has been written in a book, I face someone else's thoughts in a similar way I face nature. I realize: here beings acted creatively, but I myself face only the accomplished work. These condensed gestures allow me to surmise that this work arose out of life-imbued creativity, however, *within the realm of sense perception, I can never reach the creative beings* because they themselves are no longer present in the condensed gestures of the accomplished work that I behold.

In the written text, the complete content is there; I must simply learn to read it. I can only learn to read it by exercising my thinking activity, so that it itself forms the language. While reading, I retrace the gestures inwardly and experience their movement. The willing activity of my thinking must make them flow so that my thinking can grasp the *unifying impulse* of the movement – the unmanifest thought. While reading, I am not on a par with a thinker. I am confronted with mere letters, dead, petrified signs of former thinking activity; I only break through to the thinking activity, which condensed itself into these letters and words, when, out of my *own* wilful thinking, I cause the words to flow again and thereby the thoughts to resound. "The reader comprehends, because he himself fills the given text with meaning. (...) And not only does thinking make connections, but a power which arguably gives thinking its impulse to do so: the imagination", writes Michael Bockemühl in his excellent essay "Reading and comprehension"²⁸. I understand what I read only to the extent of what I am able to grasp through my *autonomous thinking*. Apart from that, I can merely parrot words.

25 For this distinct sense realm, see in particular the well documented work of Peter Lutzker: „Der Sprachinn. Sprachwahrnehmungen als Sinnesvorgang“. The book was translated from English, but the English manuscript was never published.

26 Together with the sense of hearing, the sense of phonetic tone or word, concept and 'I' are often called "upper senses".

27 cf. "Anthroposophy (A Fragment)", p. 95.

28 „Lesen und Verstehen“, published in: „Lesen im anthroposophischen Buch. Ein Almanach“, Verlag Freies Geistesleben 1987.

Do I read when listening?

Now I can also *listen* to someone present in an uncommitted fashion by “reading” the words he utters as if they were written in a book, instead of paying attention to *his* thinking. Persons with a dysfunctional sense of thinking in fact cannot listen in any other way. They hear sequences of words which they then try to connect and to enliven into thoughts out of their *own* thinking activity. If I listen in this way while the other speaks, I will be able to understand him in a way, although he will never feel understood. The unifying meeting of beings (through the sense for the ‘I’ of the other), for which the percept of the sense of thinking becomes permeable and which resonates with each perception of the sense of thinking, is circumvented when “reading” the words of a speaker, because the sense of thinking is bypassed altogether (which also disables the sense for the ‘I’ of the other). When listening in this way, people do not *truly* meet. A conversation of this sort is not “more invigorating than light”²⁹.

When listening to audio recorded or radio broadcast language, much more content of perception is given sensorially than while reading: the remote speaker who is transmitted via a loudspeaker conveys his intonation, his cadence of speech etc. as carrier of a whole world of soul.³⁰ Through accentuation in the flow of speech, a particular understanding can be induced in the listener. A content so communicated is thus sensorially richer and easier to understand than when read. Precise soul observation will, however, not fail to notice that when

29 Cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily”, a fairy tale.

30 A listener reacts to the articulated structure of words with precisely synchronised movements that correspond to those of the speaker (this is called “entrainment”). This was studied by William S. Condon. “One of the most significant and unexpected results (for Condon as well) of this unique study of the relation between speech and movement was the realization that not only is there a continual and exact coordination of a speaker’s movements with his or her own speech, but that the *listener* moves in precise synchrony to the articulatory structure of the speaker’s speech almost as well as the speaker does”. Furthermore, “no synchronization was found with non-speech sounds. It has also been shown that a two-day old American infant was capable of entraining to Chinese speech while at the same time not showing a synchrony of movement with tapping sounds and disconnected vowel sounds. These results were also duplicated when tape recordings were used.” This is how Peter Lutzker summarises the experiments of William S. Condon and L.W. Sander which were published in the magazine “Science” in 1974. Cf. Peter Lutzker: „Der Sprachsin. Sprachwahrnehmungen als Sinnesvorgang“, 1996, S. 44. (Lutzker’s book was originally written in English, but only published in a translated German version. The quotation above is taken from the author’s unpublished English manuscript.)

In a hand-written fragment of a text that was printed under the heading “Regarding listening and speaking” by the publisher as an appendix to the book “Anthroposophy. A Fragment” (p. 205 of the 1996 edition), Steiner delineates the perception of a sound of a lifeless object from an empathetic listening to a phonetic tone from a human being. After a longer exposition, he concludes “that in the case of human tone, the listener imparts his or her I to the I of another, while in the case of a sound of a lifeless object, the I is imparted only to the sound itself.” Prior to this passage, he had written about the “mystery of *empathy* with the I of another” and described it as follows: “We sense our own I in the I of the other. If we then perceive a tone coming from the other I, our own I lives in that tone, and therefore in the other I.”

listening to someone on the phone or to canned speech, the thoughts of the speaker are *not* perceived with the same immediacy as when people meet face to face, in spite of an empathy for the other “I” that can still be conveyed purely on the level of phonetic tone. In fact you need to *continuously follow* the thoughts of the other inwardly in *full waking consciousness*. It is hardly possible to sensorially “fall asleep” into the thoughts of the other while being spoken to on the phone or when listening to canned speech.

A certain relationship of beings can nonetheless occur while telephoning. Sensorially, insofar as the I of the listener perceives “a tone coming from the other I” and empathetically “lives in that tone, and therefore in the other I” (cf. the quote at the end of the last footnote). Furthermore, a relationship can also connect to an inner image, if one carries an inner image of the other human being with whom the indirect communication is taking place. This relationship of beings is not sensorial, however. It arises by turning our attention *inward*. In case of sense perception through the sense of thinking and the sense of I, our attention is *outward* bound. – It is even easier to realise that, within the process of reading, an encounter of beings is not mediated by the human sensory organism, but by our own *supersensible* thinking and feeling. When reading, I can notice how the thought, which is petrified in the written text, quivers slightly when touched by the will-power of my thinking and so begins to delicately resound within my own thinking. It resounds to the degree that *I* form the thought anew. The wider my comprehension of the interconnections of inner threads that manifest through the text, the more my own thinking – in the will-quality of the ‘I’ – becomes the bearer of the being who created the written work I behold. Reading thus becomes the starting point of a conscious advance into the supersensible worlds of the spirit.

Thoughts in a book can, however, be set into such solid clusters of mental representations that they are no longer able to resound. The petrified thoughts have passed under the threshold of possible reanimation. They may never have been alive in the writer himself. In that case only dead mental representations, schematically combined, are rigidly strung together through associations of word. In both cases, my thinking cannot perceive any thoughts.

Thinking and the sense of thinking muddled

In the last few decades, attempts at describing the anthroposophical view of the senses unfortunately often lack a clear line of demarcation between the forming of one’s *own* thoughts and the realm of *perception* of thought or concept. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, some curious ideas seem to be rampantly spreading a fair measure of confusion about this issue within anthroposophical circles. We will now take a closer look at these.

In 1984, Georg Kühlewind described the sense of thought as being involved in the *act of reading*, a role which in fact should be attributed to the *activity of thinking*, kindled by word perception, as described above. Extremely

problematic is the way in which Thomas Göbel treats the sense of thinking in his book *Die Quellen der Kunst. Lebendige Sinne und Phantasie als Schlüssel zur Architektur* (The Origins of Art. Living senses and imagination as keys to architecture)³¹. Some of the claims disseminated by this book cause confusion to this day, also in circles that have never read it, because some of its content lives forth by word of mouth and in different popular exposés as in those of Albert Soesman³² (1995) and Wolfgang-M. Auer³³ (2007).³⁴

The first third of Göbel's book deals with an approach to the senses. For each of the senses, Thomas Göbel attempts to delineate the qualities belonging to its realm of perception and to grasp its entirety by contrasting and combining "archetypal qualities". For each sense, Göbel presents a diagram that is meant to cover the supposed spectrum of sense qualities of this particular sense. Göbel gives most of the twelve sense realms the same names as Steiner does. Simply using anthroposophical terms does not, however, guarantee a connection to the foundations of anthroposophy. Göbel actually accomplishes the feat of propagating an approach to the senses that, in parts, diametrically opposes Steiner's foundations of anthroposophy.

31 Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag, 1982. Book reviews appeared in *Die Drei* (5/1983) by Michael Bockemühl as well as in the weekly „Das Goetheanum“ (Nr. 14/1984) by Werner Barfod.

32 Albert Soesman: „Die zwölf Sinne. Tore der Seele“, 1995 (translated from Dutch).

33 Wolfgang-M. Auer: „Sinnes-Welten. Die Sinne entwickeln. Wahrnehmung schulen. Mit Freude lernen“, 2007.

34 The author of this essay had contact with all the authors named in this paragraph (except for Auer). When the bulk of this essay appeared in the weekly „Das Goetheanum“ in 1984 (in No. 31/32 and 33/34), Thomas Göbel remarked in a reply that appeared in the following issue that he had written his book from the point of view of the sentient soul, the author of this essay his remarks from the point of view of the consciousness soul, wherefore no contradiction existed. – The author and Dietrich Rapp personally visited Kühlewind not long thereafter and attempted to reach an understanding about how the sense of thought is understood. Kühlewind stuck to the position he had committed to paper in his essay „Bemerkungen zur Belehrung der Sinne“ (Das Goetheanum 47/1985): “The sense of thought is active in an experience to the extent that thoughts already known to me and well practiced thoughts are involved: it is these that are directly, ‘simply’ perceived.” He lived this attitude in all its consequences, only allowing-in thoughts previously known to him in the conversation. This prompted the author as well as Dietrich Rapp to each write an article on the relationship of the sense of thought to intuition in „Die Drei“ (11/1986). Parts of the then published essay by the author „Denksinn oder Intuition? Zum sinnlichen und übersinnlichen Wahrnehmen von Gedanken“ have been integrated into this essay. Dietrich Rapp's essay „Begriffssinn – Vorstellungssinn – Denksinn. Über die Hüllen seiner Entbindung“ builds on sensitive and very detailed soul observations and can be considered a significant step toward a better understanding of the thinking-regard (“Denkblick”) and the sense of thinking. The motto of this essay is taken from this article. – In an exchange of letters, Soesman made clear that he was urged to write up the oral accounts of the senses he gave in a series of lectures. This he did, but without high scientific aspirations. – Lastly, the author corresponded with A. Ganter on this theme, from whom stem the thoughts about the sense of concept which Göbel expanded upon in his book. Ganter first propagated these in a group of students in the 1950s in Freiburg, Germany and still did not doubt their veracity near the end of his life nearly half a century later.

In his chapter on the sense of tone (which for Steiner and Göbel is synonymous with the sense of word, for Göbel also with the sense of shape and which should not be mistaken with the sense for hearing sounds), Thomas Göbel writes (p. 77f):

Through the exercises with the two Escher prints [reproduced in the book], one can experience that there are different possibilities of penetrating material given to the sense of sight – when suitable – with the sense of shape. In order to check this possibility further, let us look at figure 10 [reproduced at the beginning of this essay], which depicts a regular hexagon, the corners of which are connected by three diagonals. (...) Finally, figure 10 can also be seen as a space-filling cube (...). This exercise also shows that we've been working with at least two senses: namely with the sense of sight, which perceives the "light and dark", remaining unchanged in all cases, and with the sense of shape intervening in different ways.

Here the *activity of mental representation* (see the beginning of this essay) is nowhere mentioned. According to Göbel, we perceive the shape of space-filling objects through a "sense of shape", which supposedly is the sense of word or tone of the anthroposophical approach to the senses, "intervening in the field of vision".

He expresses the consequences of this point of view for the *concept of reality* in the last sentence of the ensuing paragraph (italics added by the author):

The reason why the sense of shape can see different cubes when it apprehends a cube in figure 10 is connected to the lack of elements in this figure which are present in reality: for example, an opaque, structured surface, different lighting conditions of the visible sides, a base on which the cube stands, perspective and so forth. When all this comes together in the field of vision, the sense of shape also operates in accordance with reality. *The manifestations of nature as perceived by all our senses shall here be called "reality"*.

At the end of the chapter on the sense of tone or word (p. 83), Thomas Göbel reproduces in sequence the word "cube", the above figure and a photo of a wooden cube. For the senses of sight and shape these three shapes of the cube are different, he writes. "Solely for the sense of thinking, no difference exists. It can apprehend the same concept from the shape of the writing, the drawing and the photograph" (p. 80). "Here the sense of sight is the basic sense into which the sense of shape or tone as well as the sense of thinking and of the I intervene in such a way as to bring forth that which meets the eye" (p. 93). The last sentence originates from the chapter "Interplay and totality of the twelve senses", in which he calls the senses of hearing, seeing and touching the three basic senses, into which the three "integrative senses" – sense of tone, sense of thinking

and sense of 'I' – intervene respectively. For the sense of touch, he describes this intervention as follows:

Eyes blindfolded, have a sculpture, for example, placed on the table in front of you. If we try to experience the shape through the perception of our fingers and hands, this is only of difficulty because here our sense of shape is inexperienced. This applies to the sense of concept accordingly. It can also intervene in the touch realm. We will be able to perceive a table or chair by touching them with our hands.

According to Göbel, we perceive the concept of chair or table via the sense of concept or thinking in the same way we apprehended the concept of “cube” in seeing. Not only spatial forms, but even the concepts of objects are perceived sensorially. If a theory of the senses is constructed in this way, all of reality is in the world outside and manifests itself entirely through our senses.

In his chapter on the sense of thinking, Thomas Göbel writes that reading is also *perception of the sense of thinking*.

We consider it self-evident that we can apprehend other people's thoughts while listening or reading. It is less self-evident to understand this as an activity of the senses. The “cube” in the section on the sense of shape showed that word-shape and meaning-content are two different qualities, which consequently must be perceived by two different senses. We will now try to structure the different meaning-contents of language.

According to Göbel, the sense of thinking or concept perceives the *meaning-contents of language*. The greater part of this chapter therefore deals with grammatical analysis. The author doesn't reach beyond that: he penetrates the world of thoughts only to the level of language.

Are I and its style one and the same?

In the next chapter, the author claims that the sense of 'I' perceives the style of a personality. In order to illustrate this, he reproduces a black and white print.

(...) [Look at this reproduction] and only continue reading when you have come to a perception of the artist's personality, whose work of art you're looking at. The artist in question is very well known but this work of his is rather unknown. He who knows this artist but not this reproduction and recognises his “handwriting” therein can realize that this recognition must be related to the fact that he previously developed a sense for this artist. One does not form a judgement as to who the artist is, (...) the sense of 'I' grasps the human being who created this piece of art.

Here Göbel overlooks the fact that the ‘I’ of a human being and the unique style it may coin are not one and the same. Just as we perceive the gesture of speech through the sense of tone or of word, even in petrified, written words, this same sense of tone or word can indeed also be involved in the recognition of the gesture or the style of a work of art. One certainly speaks of the “signature” of a work of art or – as Thomas Göbel himself states – the “handwriting” of an artist. But just as we would never think of mistaking a signature for the kernel of the I of a human being – even though the signature may well be an unequivocal sign for the personality – we should not mistake the style of a person with his or her individuality. In each incarnation, the individuality may coin a truly unique style – but *is not* this style. *Just as with reading, there is nothing to perceive for the sense of thinking and the sense of ‘I’ when we look at a work of visual art.* The creative activity is imaginatively condensed in the work of art, ready for the artistic *activity of the beholder* to again lift it into the sphere of becoming. To experience this activity, this co-creating while beholding, indeed distinguishes the experience of art from mere gazing. – In the performing arts (as in music, theatre or eurhythm), the artist’s creative activity and the spectator’s or listener’s creative activity interpenetrate. This engenders a *shared* inner space of becoming. Insofar as the artist creates art out of the vigour of the I, all of the upper senses can certainly participate in the act of perception of a person currently present. Within such “a living relationship with the being that is forming the words”³⁵ – but already no longer in case of a phonograph, a film, a book or while looking at a painting or a sculpture – the senses of thinking and of ‘I’ can facilitate a direct transposition into the other human being, feeling “another being as yourself”³⁶.

Is there only a sense world?

It generally remains a problem for conventional science to understand how thinking is related to “reality”, which it imagines as a realm somewhere completely beyond thinking and cognition. Most strikingly, although more or less ignored, is the question why, of all things, mathematics – which lives in pure thinking – can be applied so remarkably well to the “real world”.³⁷ All these problems would be solved if one could but find hidden senses with which the human being could perceive the *concepts* of the objects of the outer world *sensio-*

35 From the already cited quote of August 12 1916, contained in “The Riddle of Humanity” as cited above

36 Ibid

37 Related questions are touched upon in the section „Mathematik wird Anthroposophie“ (mathematics becomes anthroposophy) at the beginning of the essay „Zwei biographische Schlüsselerlebnisse Rudolf Steiners. Zur Entwicklung und Ausbreitung der Waldorfpädagogik“ (in „Basiswissen Pädagogik: Reformpädagogische Schulkonzepte“, Volume 6: „Waldorf-Pädagogik“, 2002). They are gone into in more depth in Detlef Hardorp: „Mathematik als die erste Stufe übersinnlicher Anschauung und ihr Bezug zur Sinneswelt“ („Mathematics as the first step of supersensible perception and its relationship to the sense world“) in „Die Drei“, May 1989.

rially (as, for example, the concept of the cube): thinking would then be applicable to the sense world because it would handle concepts that are still contained in the objects; these concepts would merely be mirrored into the human soul through a sense of concept. Then all reality would be outside in the world and would consistently reveal itself completely through the senses. – *Observation* of your own activity of thinking and of mental representation shows, however, that this is not so.

If this observation is missing, we can easily come to the wrong conclusion, namely that we get to know the world around us only through sense perception. This is how Wolfgang-M. Auer positions himself in the introduction to his book “Worlds of the senses”³⁸ published in 2007: “What we know about the world, we know through perception. This holds without exception.” That he means sense perception when speaking of perception is made clear when he proceeds: “Imagine for a moment, as concretely as possible, that we would be deprived of one sense after another”. He continues by depicting how the world would successively shrivel if seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, the sensation of warmth, touch and finally the self-perception of the body would fall away. “And if now any remnants of self-perception would be withdrawn from us, we could experience nothing from the world nor from our own body. They would not exist.”

Thinking is not touched upon in Auer’s book, let alone other supersensible perception. He adopts Göbel’s vocabulary and also speaks of a “sense of shape”, to which he adds a “sense of meaning” and a “sense of style”. For Auer, the “sense of meaning” also encompasses the ability to perceive “the meaning from the objects” (Auer, p. 122). In the corresponding footnote, Auer deems that Steiner named this realm of perception “sense of concept” or “sense of thought” and that Göbel named it “sense of thinking”. Not only did Steiner already call it “sense of thinking”, he clearly defined it as referring to a much more specific realm of perception than Göbel and Auer, for whom thinking no longer has a necessary role to play in the cognition of the world because, for the child, “the step from the perception of shape to the perception of symbol or from emotional to cognitive understanding” (p. 103) simply means stepping from the “sense of shape” to the “sense of meaning”. *Everything* is accessible through sense perception – if not, it simply does not exist. Nothing exists apart from a finished wrought world directed towards the senses, a world of objects, which simply manifest their meaning sensorially to the “sense of meaning”. Cognitive understanding is completely subsumed into sense experience. Auer (p. 113):

(...) first we must perceive the meaning from the pictorial elements or from the objects, so that the corresponding associations can appear. From all this it

38 The book by Wolfgang-M. Auer was (only) published in German in 2007 under the title: „Sinnes-Welten. Die Sinne entwickeln. Wahrnehmung schulen. Mit Freude lernen“.

follows naturally that we also perceive a meaning from the single object, namely the meaning which the particular object possesses. From the table we perceive the meaning “table”, from the chair the meaning “chair” and from the pistol and knot similarly “pistol and knot”.

A theory of knowledge can hardly become more primitive than that: Meaning in the world gets delivered as *part and parcel of sense perception*. As long as we don't see the necessity to develop ourselves toward becoming aware of our own soul activity while engaged in the process of observing phenomena in the world around us, and as long as we don't acknowledge this soul observation as an equally valid phenomenon, the whole scientific approach will remain one-sided. Deprived of this attention toward our own soul activity, conventional science will continue to advance as usual and as envisioned by Francis Bacon – bypassing Goethe and Steiner.

The only source bringing forth thoughts that is also able to manifest its essence in the world of wrought work³⁹ is the human being. Without human thinking as “the translator that interprets the gestures of experience”⁴⁰, inorganic nature manifests none of the concepts by which it can be grasped; these concepts – along with all meaning – must arise from *within* the human being. Organic nature manifests its concepts to the degree that the human being ascends to supersensible perception of these concepts in an act of cognition wherein thinking not only acts as “translator [of] the gestures of experience” but *itself becomes experience*.⁴¹ The so experienced germinating moments of thinking are only to be found in the world of becoming, not in the world of finished form, towards which the human sense organisation is directed.

The source of perception from which our own thinking wells is intuition. This source is of supersensible nature. The source of perception for the one and only life of concepts which can express its being in the world of otherwise finished form is the sense organ of the sense of concept or thinking which, directed towards the wrought world, is source of perception for the germinating moments of thinking of another human being.

Detlef Hardorp
Translated by Elisabeth Hardorp and the author

39 Cf. Rudolf Steiner, “Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts”, leading thought no. 112. The German “Werkwelt” is there translated as “accomplished Work” instead of “world of wrought work”.

40 Cf. chapter 11 “Thinking and Perception” in Rudolf Steiner, “The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception”, also translated as „The Science of Knowing”

41 Compare, for example, „The Nature and Significance of Goethe's Writings on Organic Development”, in Rudolf Steiner's introductions to Goethe's scientific texts, translated as “Goethean Science” by William Lindeman (volume 1 in the edition of collected works).