

# A Path to the Reality of the Sense World<sup>1</sup>

*Rudolf Steiner*

**T**he ancient Greeks said that wonder must be the starting point for healthy human thinking if we hope to reach reality. And what they said still holds true today: All human inquiry must start from wonder. If we want to work our way to truth, we must stand before the universe in wonder. Anyone who comprehends the whole gravity of this statement will say: when we start from wonder—and from nothing other than a feeling of wonder in face of the facts of the world—then it is as if we place a seed in the ground, and then a plant grows up out of it. All knowledge must have wonder as its seed.

It is quite a different matter when we do not proceed from wonder. Take a young person whose teachers have drummed into him some principles, and on that basis he becomes a philosopher. Or perhaps he becomes a philosopher since in the walk of life in which he grew up it is the custom to learn philosophy, and so he comes to it purely by virtue of circumstances. It is also well known that the examination in philosophy is the easiest to pass. In short, there are hundreds and thousands of starting points for the study of philosophy other than wonder. All such starting points lead merely to an engagement with truth that we can compare with making a plant out of papier-mâché and not raising it from seed. The comparison is accurate. For all real knowledge that hopes to deal with the riddles of the world must grow out of the seed of wonder. We may be ever so clever thinkers—and even suffer from a superabundance of intelligence—but if we never pass through the stage of wonder, nothing will come of the effort. We may bring forth a cleverly constructed coupling of ideas, containing nothing that is not correct—but correctness does not necessarily lead to reality. It is absolutely essential that before we begin to think, before we so much as begin to set our thinking in motion, we experience wonder. Thinking that sets to work without the state of wonder remains nothing but a mere play of thought. All true thinking must originate from wonder.

But that is not enough. For the initial wonder will not help us if we are predisposed by our karma to develop

a penetrating mind, and become arrogant and take pleasure in putting all our energy into intellectual performances. Even if wonder has been present, we cannot come to reality if our thinking does no more than merely “think.” Let me emphasize that I am not saying we should become thoughtless and that thinking is harmful. Thinking must continue. But after wonder we must develop another condition, which we best describe as reverence for all that we approach in thinking. Veneration or reverence must follow wonder. Any thinking that is divorced from reverence, that does not behold in a reverent manner what it considers, will not be able to work its way to reality. Thinking must never go dancing through the world in a light-footed way. It must take firm root in the feeling of reverence for the depths of the world once it has passed through wonder.

Here the path of knowledge stands in strong opposition to what is called science today. Suppose you were to say to someone who is standing in the laboratory with test tubes, analyzing and synthesizing substances: “You cannot really hope to investigate truth. You will analyze and synthesize beautifully, but what you have are mere facts. You approach these facts without any piety or reverence. You really should stand before

what occurs in your test tubes with the same pious and reverential feelings that a priest feels standing before the altar.” What would today’s scientists say to you? Probably they would laugh at you. From the standpoint of present-day science one simply cannot see that reverence has anything to do with truth or knowledge. Or, if they do not laugh at you, they may say: “We can feel great enthusiasm for what goes on in our laboratories, but enthusiasm is only a private affair. You can never persuade a reasonable person to believe that enthusiasm should have anything to do with the investigation of truth itself.” You are bound to appear foolish in the eyes of present-day scientists if you venture to say that research and thinking about things should never be divorced from reverence, and that one should not take a step forward in thought without being filled with reverence for the object of one’s inquiry.

But if we attain a certain feeling of reverence, and then want to press forward with mere thought, we would again arrive at nothing essential. We would not get any further. We would make some correct discoveries, and

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because we had gone through these first two stages, our correct knowledge would be imbued with some well-founded perspectives. But we would inevitably fall into uncertainty.

A third disposition must take hold in the soul after we have experienced wonder and reverence. We may describe this third stage as feeling oneself in wisdom-filled harmony with the laws of the world. And this feeling can be attained only when we have recognized that, from a certain perspective, mere thinking is worthless.

It is not easy to place ourselves into wisdom-filled harmony with reality. If it were, we would not presently be experiencing—nor would we ever have experienced—the temptation that comes through Lucifer. For what we call discriminating between good and evil, acquiring knowledge, or eating from the tree of knowledge, was most assuredly planned to come for humanity by the divine leaders of the world, but at a later time. Where humanity went wrong was in wanting to possess too early the knowledge of good and evil. The only possible outcome was inadequate knowledge, which has the same relation to the true knowledge as a premature birth has to a normal one. The old Gnostics actually used this expression, and we can see now how right they were. They said: Human knowledge is in reality a premature birth, an “ectroma,” because we could not wait until we had undergone all the experiences that could have led us to knowledge. A time should have been allowed to pass during which we developed inner dispositions, and then knowledge would have come. This original sin of humanity is still being committed. For if we were not guilty of this sin, we would care much less how quickly we acquire this or that as truth. We would be concerned instead about how we might grow mature enough to comprehend truth.

It is really essential to be sustained and carried by the consciousness that we cannot reach reality with all our critical judgments. We can make every effort in forming judgments, and errors will still occur. A true judgment can only result when we have attained a certain maturity, when we have waited and the judgment comes to us of its own accord. A judgment we form will have to do with reality when we take pains to make ourselves mature enough for it to come to us, and not when we strive to make a judgment. We can exert ourselves ever so strenuously to form a correct judgment, but

we should never expect to arrive at a competent judgment through such effort. We can hope to come to a true judgment only when we apply due care in making ourselves ever more mature, so that we can receive judgments as revelations that come to us.

It is possible to have quite strange experiences in this connection. A person who judges quickly will naturally think that someone has drowned who has fallen into water, and is pulled out dead. But a person who has become wise, who has grown mature through life experience, will know that general correctness of thought has no significance. Rather, in each single case we need to surrender to the facts as they present themselves and let them form the judgment. You may see the truth of this confirmed in life.

When we have acquired wisdom, we will always reserve judgment. We hold back with judgment even when

we think we might be right. Suppose someone makes a statement today and then two months later says the very opposite. In such a case we can completely exclude ourselves, we have nothing to do with the two facts. And when we look at the two statements and let them make their own impression upon us, we need not contradict either of them, since they contradict each other. The judgment is made by the external world and not by you. Then, and then only, does a wise person make a judgment.

It is an interesting fact that we will never understand how Goethe pursued his study of natural science unless we have this conception of wisdom: let the things themselves do the judging. Goethe made the following interesting comment (you will find it in my introductions to his scientific writings): We should never make judgments or hypotheses concerning external phenomena—the phenomena are the theories and they themselves express their ideas when we have grown mature to receive them in the right way. It is not a matter of sitting down and pressing out of our mind something that we consider correct. Rather, it is a matter of reaching a maturity through which the true judgment can spring to meet us out of the facts themselves. Our thinking should not sit in judgment upon things, but should become an instrument through which the things speak. This is what placing oneself in harmony with the world means.

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Even when we experience this third stage, we cannot let thinking stand on its own feet. Then comes what is in a sense the very highest state of soul to attain if we want to arrive at truth. And that is the state to which we may give the name devotion or self-surrender. Wonder, reverence, wisdom-filled harmony with the phenomena of the world, and surrender to the course of the world—these are the stages through which we have to pass and which must always run parallel with thinking, never deserting it. Otherwise, thinking arrives at what is merely correct and not at what is true.<sup>1</sup>

We can achieve such surrender only when we try resolutely to face up to the inadequacy of mere thought. To stimulate and strengthen within us the mood of surrender we can say to ourselves: Do not expect your thinking to give you knowledge of the truth. You should only expect thinking to educate you. It is extremely important to develop the idea that our thinking educates us. If you make a practice out of this principle you will be able to overcome hurdles in life in wholly new ways—in ways that would have otherwise not been available to you.

I imagine that not many of you have made a thorough study of the philosopher Kant. It is not necessary. I only want here to refer to the fact that in Kant's most important and revolutionary work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, you will find proofs both for and against a proposition in question. Take, for example, the statement, "the world once had a beginning in time." You will find that Kant puts, perhaps on the other side of the same page, the statement: "The world has always existed, for all eternity." And then he proceeds to give valid proofs for both statements, notwithstanding that the one obviously expresses the very opposite of the other. That is to say, Kant proves in the same manner that the world has had a beginning and that it has had no beginning. He speaks of "antinomies" and wants to show that the human faculty of knowledge is limited, since we are compelled to arrive at such contradictory conclusions. As long as we believe that by thinking and working with concepts—by working through experience in thought—we can come to truth, that is, to an agreement with some objective reality, we are in a sad situation when someone shows us he can prove a particular statement and also prove its opposite.

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If, however, we have learned that thinking in important matters cannot say anything decisive about reality, and if we have persistently educated ourselves instead to look upon thinking as a means to become wiser—as a means to take in hand our own self-education—then it does not disturb us that we can both prove something and its opposite. For we very soon make the following discovery. The fact that we are not disturbed by reality when we work with concepts is the very reason why we can work with perfect freedom within concepts and ideas, and thereby educate ourselves. If we were perpetually being corrected by reality, then we could not educate ourselves freely in working through concepts. I ask you to give careful consideration to this fact.

What do I mean when I say we are not disturbed? What sort of disturbance could reality cause when we work through concepts? We can picture what such a disturbance would be like if we contrast our human thinking with divine thinking. I mean this purely hypothetically for the moment, though, as we will see later, it need not remain entirely hypothetical. We cannot conceive of divine thinking as having nothing to do with reality. When we try to picture divine thinking, we can only conceive of it—still speaking for now hypothetically—as intervening in reality, as influencing reality. And this leads inevitably to the following conclusion. When as human beings we make a mistake in our thinking, then it is nothing worse than a mistake, a logical mistake. And when we realize that we have made a mistake, we can correct it. By doing this we will have accomplished something for our self-education and grown wiser.

But now take the case of divine thinking. When divine thinking thinks correctly, something happens. And when it thinks falsely, then something is destroyed, is annihilated. So that if we had divine thinking, then with every false concept we should call forth a destructive process, first of all in our soul, then in our life organization, and finally in our physical body. If we had active divine thinking, if our thinking had something to do with reality, then a false concept would stimulate inside us a drying up process, a hardening process, in some part of our body. We would need to make as few mistakes as possible. Through mistakes our body would dry up and fall to pieces. We actually only maintain ourselves in real existence through the fact that our thinking does not work into reality. Thus we can make mistake after mistake in our thinking. If later we correct these mistakes, we have thereby educated ourselves and grown wiser, and our mistakes have not had horrible effects.

<sup>1</sup> The excerpts up to this point are from the lecture on Dec. 27, 1911; the excerpts that follow are from the lecture on the following day (Dec. 28, 1911).

As we strengthen ourselves more and more with the moral force of such a thought, we learn to surrender. We are then in a position not to turn to thinking when we meet and experience the outer world at critical moments of life.

That sounds strange, I know, and seems quite impossible. And nonetheless, although it is impossible in absolute terms, we can make strides. Constituted as we are as human beings, we cannot on every occasion suspend judgment on the things of the world. We have to judge, we have to act in practical life, and in so doing we are not necessarily penetrating the depths of reality. But we should educate ourselves to exercise caution in accepting the truthfulness of our judgments. We should continually look over our own shoulder and remind ourselves that where we apply our keenest intellect, we tread on very uncertain ground and are perpetually susceptible to error.

What we have to do is to cultivate an attitude of mind that says: "Obviously I have to live my life, and this means I must form judgments. I will, therefore, employ my power of judgment in so far as the practice of life makes this necessary. But I will not use it for the recognition of truth. For that I look carefully over my shoulder and consider with some degree of doubt every judgment that I make."

But how are we to arrive at any thought about truth, if not by forming judgments? We indicated yesterday the right attitude of mind: we should let the things speak. In developing a receptive bearing to the things of the world, we let them tell their secrets. A great deal of error would be avoided if we would do this. We have a wonderful example in Goethe. When he wants to investigate truth he does not allow himself to judge, but tries to let the things themselves express their own secrets.

Imagine there are two people, one who judges and the other who lets the things tell their own secrets. If we take the perspective of the one who judges, we see a wolf and describe it. We then find that there are other animals that look like this wolf, and arrive at the general concept "wolf." And then we go on to form the following judgment: since in reality there are many individual wolves, the general concept of "wolf" that I make in my mind—the wolf as such—does not exist.

Only individual wolves exist in the world. The general concept or idea of wolf is nothing real. There you have a striking example of someone who merely judges.

And how about the other person who lets reality speak for itself? How, in this disposition, will we think about the invisible quality of wolf that is in every single wolf and that also characterizes all wolves alike? We will say, let me consider a lamb and compare it with a wolf. I am not going to formulate any judgment on the matter, I am simply going to let the facts speak. And now, imagine that we have the opportunity to see with our own eyes how a wolf eats up a lamb. Then we would say to ourselves, the substance that was previously running around as lamb is now inside the wolf and has been absorbed into the wolf. It's remarkable that precisely

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this perception of the facts shows us how real the nature of the wolf is. By following what happens we could be led to the judgment that if a wolf only had lambs to eat, then over time it would consist solely of the material of many lambs. But the wolf never becomes a lamb. The wolf always remains a wolf. That shows quite unmistakably, if we judge the matter rightly, that the material from the lamb is not governed by some unreal concept "wolf." When we let ourselves be taught by the external world of facts, we see—beyond what we have before us as the material substance of the wolf—that the wolf exists as something eminently real, and this highly real wolf

is something we cannot see. That the wolf does not become a lamb, even if it eats nothing but lambs, is due to what transcends the material in the wolf.

It is difficult to draw a sharp line between judging and letting ourselves be taught by reality. When, however, we grasp the difference, and when we employ judgment only for the ends of practical life and have the attitude of allowing ourselves to be taught by the things of the world, then we gradually arrive at the meaning of "surrender." Surrender is a state of mind in which we do not seek to investigate truth out of ourselves. In surrender, we look for truth to come from the revelation that flows out of the things. And we can wait until we are mature enough to receive the revelation. In judging we want to have truth at every step of the way. In surrender we do not work to force entry into truth. Rather, we work to educate ourselves, and then calmly wait until we attain to that stage of maturity at which truth

flows to us as revelations from the things of the world and merges with us. To work with patience, knowing that patience will bring us further and further in wise self-education — that is the mood of surrender.

And now we can consider the fruits of this surrender. What do we attain when we have gone forward with our thinking from wonder to reverence, then to feeling ourselves in wisdom-filled harmony with reality, and finally to the disposition of surrender? We come at last to this. We can observe plants in all their greenness and in the changing colors of their blossoms. Or we contemplate the blueness of sky and the stars with their golden brilliance. We don't form judgments, but let the things themselves reveal to us what they are. If we have really succeeded in learning to surrender, all things in the sense world become different. The sense world changes and becomes something entirely new. And it is important that we should encounter this newness if we want to gain knowledge of the nature of the sense world.

Imagine that we have developed this feeling, this attitude of surrender, in a rather high degree, and look out over the fresh bright green of a meadow. No individual colors stand out and the whole presents a general appearance of fresh green. If we have really brought the attitude of surrender to a high degree of development, we will feel at the sight of the meadow within us a kind of balance. It is a balance that is quick with life, like a quiet, harmonious, and even flow of water. We cannot help but conjure up this picture before our soul.

Every taste and every smell will call up in us a feeling of inner movement and activity. There is no color and no tone that does not speak to us. Everything says something, and says it in such a way that we feel compelled to give answer with inner movement and activity. We don't answer with a judgment, but with active inner movement. In short, a time comes when the whole world of the senses reveals itself as something we cannot describe with any other word than will.

Everything in the world of the senses is will, strong and powerful currents of will. This is what we need to grasp. When we are able in any high degree to surrender, we discover everywhere in the world of the senses will-at-work. Hence when we have developed even in small measure the ability to surrender, it is hard for us, for example, when we encounter a person wearing some audacious new fashionable color. We cannot help experiencing inner movement and activity in response to what approaches us from outside. We are sensitive to the will in everything. We feel united with the whole

world through this will. The world of the senses becomes like a sea of infinitely differentiated will. And this means that while previously we only felt the world as something spread out around us, it now takes on a certain thickness or depth. We begin to look beyond the surface of things, we begin to hear beyond the surface of things—and what we see and hear is flowing will.