

A DISCOURSE ON THE MECHANISM OF THOUGHT³⁴

Though we are always thinking and although our brain never stops thinking, we do not know what thought is or how it expresses itself.

We suppose unconsciously that we think in words. People who speak many languages are often asked in which language they think.

We do not think in any language for the simple reason that we do not think in words, and words and gestures, although related to thought, do not constitute the essence of thought.

We use more words than gestures for it is more convenient and because words are more compliant to the shades of meaning and at the same time are more precise and richer. If, as it is supposed, people thought in words, deaf-mute people and animals would not be capable of thinking and yet they do think.

All existing things and phenomena that man has seen are impressed upon his spirit in the form of images before words had been invented to distinguish them. Man living at the dawn of the human era must surely have had recourse to gestures for expressing and communicating his thought. Later, after words had come into use the vocabulary of man slowly became fuller, but words have always followed the creation of an object or the discovery of an idea.

Thousands of years had to pass for the human brain to be able to contain the millions of images present in the brain of a man of medium intellect.

We use words to communicate our thoughts to others, spoken aloud in direct speech or mentally when speaking indirectly, that is, when we are preparing a conversation in our mind, or a speech or a conference, or when writing.

We use words mentally, at times pronouncing them, especially when thinking intensely. In this case words act like a brake slowing up the rush of our thoughts and thus helping us to grasp and finally to fulfil what concerns us.

Words serve as a brake for they are infinitely slower than the image and can help slow down the sequence of images, allowing our thoughts to analyse and fulfil them.

We must specify that this happens when we have to accomplish an intellectual effort and think intensely, although as regards to our daily, normal thoughts, our brain registers the sequence of images with ease.

Let us now look at the technique of our thinking. We shall begin by analysing the elements that stimulate our thought and the aspect this thought finally takes on in our brain. Let us suppose that thought is a reaction to the impressions received by our senses. Our eyes, ears, fingers, nose and tongue are the receivers of the impressions and transmit them to our brain, where they form a thought. This thought is expressed by precise and imprecise images. The images passing through our mind take on the form of visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory and gustatory images.

The visual image is the current form of human thought. Naturally we are speaking of the form of thought of normally healthy human beings.

People who are born blind use their tactile and auditory senses, which take on a far more concrete form in them than they do in us by the fact that their senses of feeling and hearing are much more developed than ours.

The blind get all their knowledge of the exterior world through their ears and fingers.

³⁴ G. de Chirico, *Discorso sul meccanismo del pensiero*, in "Documento", Rome May 1943, pp. 408-412; republished signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 209-213. Published in English here for the first time.

We presume that animals have the same technique of thought as human beings, which means that animals think by the same means of images; but with animals the form of image changes according to their physical particularities. Dogs must mostly think by means of olfactory images for their sense of smell is so extremely developed that it almost touches upon clairvoyance. The fact that a dog senses the return of its master while he is nowhere near close enough for the animal to actually see or hear him is remarkable and very mysterious.

As we have said, the appearance of images in our brain is caused by the impressions our senses receive and that these are divided in visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory impressions. But the visual predominates and even replaces these others in our brain.

We must note that the first characters known to science are of Egyptian origin. These consisted in drawings of the object the individual had to express in writing, meaning that it was not the word but the image existing in the mind that was traced on the papyrus or on other surfaces.

How did these visual images come into existence?

For images representing concrete objects the explanation is simple. An object's physical aspect is registered in our mind and the image begins to exist in our brain. This image is precise when it is that of a perfectly concrete and definite object and imprecise when the object is a conception, that is, not completely individualised and defined. We will take an example: the weather is bad, it is raining; in order to go out we must put on our raincoat.

The precise image of a raincoat passes through our mind. Whereas, if you do not have a raincoat and must buy one, an imprecise image passes through our mind of raincoats we have seen, for we do not know the aspect of our future raincoat. The images passing through our mind correspond to the general concept of a raincoat, which resemble in an imprecise manner a raincoat that has been registered in our mind.

Let us try to analyse the images existing in our spirit representing concepts, sentiments or metaphysical ideas.

Cerebral sight is far more developed than that of the eyes. Fantasy helps us to create images and visions that are sometimes strange and only limitedly resemble reality. These images are rather like those of a dream, their clarity and precision varies as dreams do.

We shall first analyse visions created by sentiments. The sentiments of grief and of joy are the strongest that we feel and give us the most striking visions.

Sadness is evoked in us by the absence of that which we desire. In our mind this sentiment is expressed by the vision of this absence. The stronger and more intense the image is, the greater our sadness, which can reach despair. Grey and black characterise the images of sadness. This explains the need men feel to use these colours in the expression of grief. Veils covering women and objects on days of mourning doubtlessly have their origin in visions of sadness applied to reality. The veil is part of the image of sadness; the veil actually separates us from the external world and in cases of great despair it is a black curtain that closes in front of us.

Happiness is the possession of what we desire. The vision produced by happiness represents the presence of what is desired.

This vision is very luminous and projects its light not only on the images in our brain but also on reality itself. Illuminated thus by happiness, everything seems beautiful to us and all becomes pleasing or, at least, bearable.

But sadness, being the antipode of happiness, makes everything insipid, tiresome and above all indifferent for us. The two sentiments, happiness and grief, being very strong dominate us entirely with their visions when we are happy or sad.

Let us now see how images produced by metaphysical ideas and conceptions take form in our brain.

These images are not purely the products of our fantasy and at the same time they cannot correspond to reality. In fact a physical image does not exist for abstract things. They probably depend on impressions we receive the very moment in which a concept or idea, formerly unknown to us, strikes us. For instance the vision of the idea of the infinite can be vaguely connected with an illustration in the Bible or in a schoolbook.

When a child comes into contact with an idea that is new to him, he instinctively tries to give it a visual image. The illustration in a book in which a child first reads the word indicating the idea of the infinite, and the sky or something else to which he then lifts his eyes, give origin to the image of an idea or concept, which formerly did not exist in his mind.

The image or representation in our mind of objects and things is undoubtedly the base and principal form of our thought. But as usually happens, a principal phenomenon is accompanied by secondary ones, thus even in our thought the images are accompanied by words, body movements and gestures. Besides, there are impressions, which although depending only indirectly from thought, very often not only dominate it but even guide it.

We know what words are, there is no use in explaining this. When they merge with our thoughts their origin always derives from the image that stimulated them.

Now I shall try to define impressions. Impressions received by our senses are transmitted to our brain only after our senses and our body are completely familiar with them. I will also say that impressions are of the greatest importance to us when transformed into sentiments (sentiments from the sensitive point of view, naturally), due to their durability over time. These become real and true images, real and true sentiments felt by our body. Very often these images or thoughts which we see with our body and which are naturally outside the field of cerebral representations are stronger than these and dominate them.

The moments in which we feel or think by means of our body are probably the only moments in which our brain does not think, for it is entirely taken up by listening to the thoughts of the body.