

Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

**Three Lectures on Fairy Tales, Practical
Thinking, and Categories
3 of 18 Lectures from GA#108, 2 Lectures in
Berlin and 1 in Carlsruhe in 1908**

by

Rudolf Steiner

Published by SteinerBooks in 2007
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007
Chapter: Spiritual Science



**Three Lectures
on Fairy Tales, Practical
Thinking, and Categories**

by

Rudolf Steiner

Fairy Tales

One of the big unanswered questions remaining from my childhood was: "What do fairy tales mean?" I grew up in the middle of the last century during a time when my parents read fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm to us and even allowed us to read the fairy tales on our own. I recall some vivid although brief glimpses of elves and fairies for a time during my childhood, but those images resided in some intermediate state of consciousness, close to dreaming. With those memories of fairy folk, fairy tales seemed very real to me, and at times scary. I trembled with Jack as the castle shook whenever the giant bellowed, "Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum!" But to this day, no one had ever explained satisfactorily to me the meaning of fairy tales with their giants and little people. Were they real? Where did they live? and Why did we make them up if they are not real? No one, that is, until Rudolf Steiner. If some of these questions have tweaked your curiosity over the decades since you were under five years old, read along with me and I'll share with you what I've learned about fairy tales from Rudolf Steiner.

There was a time when all human beings had a native clairvoyance which one might today call an "intermediate state of consciousness". Since we go through all the stages of human development and consciousness as we mature, we possess that native clairvoyance as a baby and later a child. But by the age of three or so, that capability of spiritual sight wanes as part of our natural growth, and we are left with only dreamy images such as mine of elves and fairy folk. The existence of those "long ago memories" of our early childhood account for the curious change which comes over us when we hear the words, "Once upon a time . . ." or "Long ago and far away . . ." as a fairy tale begins. We are transported to our early childhood again where magic was as real as elves and fairies and giants. And when the fairy tale ends with, "And they lived happily ever after." we imagine that the people and beings who inhabited the fairy tale are yet alive today.

[page 7] The first thing we must do in order to understand the meaning of genuine fairy tales and myths is to stop regarding them as fantasy derived from folk imagination; they are never that. The starting point of all true tales lies in time immemorial, in the time when those who had not yet attained intellectual powers possessed a more or less remarkable clairvoyance, the remains of the primeval clairvoyance. People who had preserved this lived in a condition between sleeping and waking where they actually experienced the spiritual world in many different forms. This was not like one of our dreams today, which have for most people (but not for everyone) a somewhat chaotic nature. In those ancient times, people with the old clairvoyance had such regular

experiences that everyone's were the same or very similar.

If you have small children and have avoided reading fairy tales to them because you thought they were silly stories made up out of whole cloth, because they might scare your children, because you couldn't answer their questions about the stories, you are cheating them from learning about what it is to be a human being. You are shielding them from the great mysteries of life which are preserved in fairy tales specifically to help us understand these mysteries as we mature. Take away fairy tales from your children and they will likely grow up into fine, rational adults living in a desolate world which contains no magic, no mysteries, just one bland thing after another. How much better to answer those questions from your children after reading them a fairy tale, "It's a mystery." Mystery will fructify their lives. Absent mystery they will lead lives of "quiet desperation" unsure of why life holds no meaning for them and wondering, "Why bother to stay alive?" They will learn about the surfaces of life and wonder, in the words of the Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

Giants as we know from fairy tales are big, strong, and basically stupid. They rely on their brute strength to get everything they want. They are usually male. When we encounter an old woman in a fairy tale, she usually has special powers and we call her a wise woman. These two archetypes, the giant and the wise woman, represent our two aspects of soul, the sentient soul and the intellectual soul. Since every human today has the sentient soul, intellectual soul, and consciousness soul in them, fairy tales of giants and wise women will activate those aspects of the soul. Giants represent the sentient aspect of our soul, and wise women represent the intellectual aspect of our soul, so both of these archetypes live within each of us whether we are consciously aware of them, up until now.

What is our soul? It is what is in us that registers our unique experiences in the world. I cannot see what you see, I cannot feel what you feel, etc. Even though we may look at the same object, our experience of seeing it is unique to each of us. I cannot, for example, see the color you see when we are both looking at the color red ([1](#)), even if we are not color-blind. Similarly, feelings, tastes, smells, i. e., all of our sensory perceptions register inside of us as unique experiences which we cannot share directly. We say that we *share the same experience* — a way of talking that we have evolved for convenience sake — but when we say we share an experience of seeing, hearing, or feeling, the words we use obscure more than they reveal about our mutual experience. Why? Because our individual experience resides in our soul and remains forever private and inaccessible to others. Others can only see what happens in our soul by seeing the external manifestations of what lives in our soul. The tone of your voice may reveal the internal feeling of your soul, the expression on your face likewise, but I can never experience directly what is in your soul, and neither can you experience directly what lives in my soul.

To understand the complexity of our soul, we need to examine its three aspects or members: the sentient, the intellectual, and the consciousness member. Understanding these aspects will help us to understand immediately why in fairy tales the giants are stupid and the old women are wise.

[page 8] We have, to begin with, three members of the soul: sentient soul, intellectual soul, and consciousness soul. As the eye and the ear each have a different relationship to the surrounding world, so has each of these three members of the human soul its quite distinct relationship to its surrounding world. We become aware, in this intermediate state, of one or another part of our soul, which is directed to its surroundings. If the sentient soul especially is directed to its spiritual surroundings, we will see all those beings that are intimately connected with the ordinary forces of nature. People do not themselves see the active forces of nature, but they do see what lives in that activity: wind, weather and other natural phenomena. The beings that express themselves within it are perceived through the sentient soul. When that soul is especially active, it is exactly as if we were still living at the time when neither the intellectual soul nor the consciousness soul had yet been developed; we are transported back and see our surroundings as we did in ancient times, just as when we did not know how to use our

intellectual and consciousness souls.

In ancient times humans lived in only the sentient soul and possessed great powers to tear up trees and do the other great feats that giants are portrayed to do in fairy tales. When we allow ourselves to be taken up by a fairy tale, it seems plausible because we actually re-enter that intermediate state of consciousness we experienced as a very young child which corresponds to a time when humans had only a physical body, an etheric body, an astral body, and a sentient soul. We do not call children stupid, and because they are so small, we do not recognize their similarity to the giants of fairy tales. But if you listen to how children talk about the giants in fairy tales you read to them, you'll notice how well the children understand the actions of those giants.

[page 9] In such an intermediate state of consciousness, we see giants as real figures, representing a quite definite kind of being, men possessed of gigantic strength. The giants are also stupid, because they belong to a time when people could not yet use an intellectual soul — they are strong and stupid.

Our intellectual soul developed as we grew up in childhood, and soon we began to see how dumb the giants were, and we looked forward to when the heroes in our tales stumbled upon a wise woman who helped them to do deeds which were ingeniously clever instead involving only brute strength. This stage of our growth marked the advent of the intellectual aspect of our soul.

[page 9] . . . the intellectual soul . . . can see that things were fashioned in accordance with a certain wisdom. Through strength, through the giant in man, everything was formed and brought about; through what is in our intellectual soul when we are alive to it, we see beings around us who bring wisdom into everything, who regulate everything wisely. While the giants are generally seen in male form, we see the images of the intellectual soul as constructive female beings who bring wisdom into the activity of the world. These are the "wise women" of the tales, working behind everything that is formed and themselves forming everything. In these figures we see ourselves over and over again as we once were when we had acquired an intellectual soul but not yet a consciousness soul. Because we see ourselves intimately connected with such wise rulers at the back of things, we often feel when we enter an intermediate state of consciousness: "The wise female beings I see there are really related to me." Therefore the idea of "sisters" often arises when these female beings appear.

The intermediate state of consciousness referred to earlier is akin to our night-time consciousness, of which we are usually unaware, except as it sometimes flows over to day-time consciousness in dreams. Things are reversed between day and night consciousness and fleeting impressions from the day-time may appear as frozen stiff figures in night-time consciousness. This juxtaposition of stiff versus moving aspects is often portrayed in fairy tales where some person is enchanted and lies in suspended animation, such as Sleeping Beauty, until she is awakened by the Prince's kiss. By this means fairy tales reveal to us the difference between the day-time sentient soul aspects of reality and the night-time intellectual soul aspects of reality.

[page 10] Things during the day appear to us as though they were bewitched, with their real nature held prisoner within them. Wherever a plant or being appears bewitched, it has happened like this: we see the substance of a wise being behind the physical appearance and we remember, "Yes, by day that is only a plant; it is separated from my intellectual soul so that I cannot really reach it during the day." When we feel this estrangement between the objects by day and what is behind them, for example the perception of the lily in the daytime and the form behind it related to our own intellectual soul, we will perceive that our intellectual soul has a strong kind of longing to unite with what is behind the object or the lily; it would be a "marriage", a union of the night-form with the day-form.

This union of the night-form and the day-form is often referred to as a mystical marriage or *heiros-gamos* which represents the merger of the male and female aspects of our souls.

Dwarfs and other tiny people in fairy tales are simply spiritual beings we humans have outdistanced as the consciousness aspect of our soul grew. When we look at these beings through the intermediate state of consciousness, they appear in size to us according to their inner nature, that is, small.

The advent of our consciousness soul allowed us, in effect, to achieve through cleverness what previously we could achieve only through brute force.

[page 11] If a person is especially shrewd in life and not only dry and prosaic but able to conceive the relationship of life to spiritual reality, particularly in such states in which human beings can still know something of spiritual reality, the following may happen. If he is a somewhat thoughtful person, he will observe that certain people with shrewdness are able in all sorts of clever ways to overcome the crude forces that otherwise dominate people's lives. He will then tell himself: "What actually happens in life is that rough strength is overcome by cleverness; for this we can thank the powers behind us, to whom we are related, for they have allowed a force to become conscious in us that overcomes rough strength with cleverness, the rough strength that we ourselves possessed when we were at the stage of the giants."

That force in us which becomes conscious is known as the consciousness soul whose age we entered about six centuries ago and whose benefits to human evolution have become stronger and clearer with each passing century. And if we attempt to explain how we accomplished something remarkable through the aegis of our consciousness soul, whose forces reach us from the spiritual world, we find ourselves using words like this: "What I have seen and related happened once upon a time, and is still happening behind the world of sense in the spiritual world, where there are different conditions of life." (Page 12) In other words, we use the language of fairy tales. Steiner explains how a genuine fairy tale begins:

[page 12] "Once upon a time it happened — where then was it? Where indeed was it not?" That is the correct beginning of a fairy tale, and every fairy tale must end with, "I once saw this, and if what happened in the spiritual world did not perish, if it is not dead, it must still be alive today." That is just the way every fairy tale should be related. If you always begin and end this way, you will create the right sort of sensitivity to what you are telling.

Here is a short fairy tale I would like to tell you, which illustrates the form of the genuine fairy tale as described by Rudolf Steiner:

Once upon a time it happened — where then was it? Where indeed was it not? There was a man who was alone in a new town, with a new job, and knew very few people. He was working very hard, had dated a few women, but loved none of them. He wanted nothing less than a wife who would be faithful and loyal to him, but he didn't know how to go about finding such a woman.

One day a genie visited him and said, "I will help you. I will grant one wish for anything you want." The man decided that he would wish to fall in love three times before Spring. This seemed more impossible to him and more difficult to achieve than finding a loyal wife, which also seemed impossible to him. One August afternoon he wrote his wish down on a piece of paper with other goals, put it in the bottom of a drawer in his room, and forgot about the piece of paper.

About three weeks later he was invited to a picnic in the city park and met a woman there. He dated her and was soon smitten by her beauty and charm. He was in love. They dated for a month or two, but began to separate. Then one evening he was at a friend's office and met another woman whom he began dating and soon he was in love

again. He had forgotten about the piece of paper with his goal on it completely, so busy was he with his new love. But soon that love grew cold. At a Christmas party, he danced with a beautiful redhead and soon they were dating regularly and he was in love again. Again, he never thought about that piece of paper with his goals on it tucked away in his drawer.

One night he was invited to a friend's house where some people had gathered and he met another woman. He had heard about this woman and had wanted to meet her, but things kept happening to keep him away from her. At last, he was introduced to her. They hugged each other as was the custom of the group of friends. It was a warm hug, a yielding hug, a hug, which it seemed to him, he had been waiting his entire lifetime for. He wanted to date this woman, to know her better. A week later, he called her for a date, and she told him, "No, I have plans with some girl friends of mine. But I'll give you a rain check."

"No," he said, "I want a sunshine check." She laughed and they began seeing each other. It was Springtime. Soon they were living together and enjoying each other's company so much that they decided that a piece of paper to recognize their union would be appropriate. They got married.

Only then did he find that piece of paper with his goals from that August day written on them. He recalled how his super-impossible goal had come true: He had fallen in love and out of love three times by the Spring. And after that was over he had achieved his impossible goal of meeting the woman who would become his faithful and loyal companion and wife for the rest of his life.

He lived together with her in great happiness, and they were abundantly blessed with children and children's children for many generations. They lived for a long, long time. No one knows how long, but if they have not died, they must still be alive today.

This man had his deeper forces awakened in him by the mysterious genie who gave him his wish for his heart's desire. But first he had to endure three difficult tasks. This is the structure of a fairy tale.

[page 14] When some external happening like searching for a bride is pictured in such tales, it usually takes place not in an ordinary way but in circumstances where someone comes into contact with a sort of soul-shepherd, who will awaken the deeper forces within him, as the hermit did for the king. He is led thereby to the forces that make everything in the physical world appear unreal for a time; he needs this if it is going to be possible for him to discern the truth. And so we see that while outer conditions seem to be the source, other states of consciousness are present, calling forth genuine vision.

Often in fairy tales, some human, animal, or plant is enchanted, and they appear frozen as Snow White or completely changed in appearance as in the Frog Prince tale. What is the meaning of these spells?

[page 14, 15] Every fairy tale can be explained in this way, but the explanation should come forth out of the spiritual reality that lies in back of the whole world of fairy tales. Everything that occurs in a tale, including all the small details, can gradually be found and interpreted. For example, the mysterious connection between the active forces of perception and the hidden forces of ordinary life can become visible when we begin to look at it more inwardly. This is beautifully symbolized in the touch of the little golden bird on the lily. Delicate, significant spiritual forces are indeed latent in the lily, but they only appear when they have been aroused by the golden bird.

The established belief that everything around us is bewitched spiritual truth and that we attain the truth when we break the spell, is the basis of the realm of the fairy tale.

Fairy tales often have in them humans and other beings who have remained in the stage of the rough forces. Giants, ogres, and dragons are examples of beings of great evil forces which must be overcome in fairy tales. They play a large role in the modern fairy tales of Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling. These

grotesque beings represent earlier stages in our human development which we had to grow out of in time. Therein lies the unconscious attraction we have to tales involving such beings: it strikes a chord in us from our own distant past back in the aeons of time. Once upon a time has in effect come again when we get involved with such tales.

[page 15] Wherever something evil appears and has to be overcome, something that has remained stationary on the astral plane, it always appears as a "dragon" or something similar; this is none other than the grotesque form, transformed in the spiritual world, of what human beings had to change and cast forth from themselves. We must be aware that this corresponds to an absolutely certain fact.

How is it possible that we could have cast such forms from us? It existed at a time when we humans still had astral experiences. We create fairy tales by carrying those gigantic and popular astral beings into our physical world so that we might create for ourselves a [tale to tremble by](#) once again.

[page 23] Fairy tales stand in relation to the great popular myths of the gods in the following manner: The myths can be understood when we realize the huge comprehensive circumstances of the cosmos underlying them, and fairy tales can be understood when we realize that the different happenings and pictures are nothing but the repetition of astral events. In far remote times everyone had astral experiences. They became fewer and fewer. One person told them to another, the other took them up, and so the fairy tales were carried from place to place. They appeared in the most varied languages, and we can note the similarity of the fairy tale treasures the whole world over, when we unveil the astral events that serve as their basis.

Children love fairy tales because they still have an active memory of astral events, that is, until they grow older and become inwardly entangled with the physical plane, and, by the time they are adults, lose all connection with the underlying spiritual reality of fairy tales. But, amazingly, they become parents with their own children, to whom they must read fairy tales, and thus they have a chance once more to kindle their own childhood memories of the astral events which live in fairy tales.

[page 24] Nowadays, however, we can very seldom find anyone who can relate things from a genuine source, and it will be said of fairy tale experiences: "They happened once upon a time, and if they did not perish, these fairy tale experiences are still alive."

Practical Thinking

The full title of this lecture is "Practical Training in Thought." Anyone who studies the great innovators throughout history will be surprised to find that most inventions were created by men who had no practical training in the field to which their invention belongs. For many the field only came into existence after the invention itself. Nicola Tesla could not take a course in Electrical Engineering as we understand it today because the field teaches about alternating current equipment which did not exist before Tesla created both the alternating current motor and the generator in one grand burst of his genius. AC motors and generators were impractical at the time he invented them and were considered to be so dangerous that Thomas Edison, a very practical man who wanted his direct current equipment used exclusively, convinced authorities to design the electric chair to prove how dangerous Tesla's invention was.

Ignatz Semmelweis was a country doctor and not an expert in antiseptics. Again, it was a field which didn't exist until he came to Vienna and proposed that a simple antiseptic solution, if used by doctors when going from dissecting a cadaver to delivering a baby, could save the lives of 200,000 women who were annually dying in the city hospitals of puerperal or childbed fever.⁽²⁾ He knew from his own practical experience in the country that women normally didn't die of childbed fever, and looked for what was different in the teaching hospitals of the big city. For his practical thinking, he was called crazy and

thrown into a mental hospital.

To call someone's ideas crazy is to call them impractical and unworkable. Professor Newcomb called the Wright Brothers invention of a heavier-than-air flying machine impractical and unworkable and continued to do so for weeks after they had flown their aeroplane at Kitty Hawk. There must be a curious inversion of the meaning of practical as understood by a majority of people, if such claims are accepted by the public when they are, only to be proved later, *completely wrong*. Tesla's AC is ubiquitous today, as is Semmelweis's antiseptic techniques, and as is the Wright Bros. aeroplane.

Steiner explains how what is called "practical thinking" by most people simply refers to continuing to do things the way they always were, *by the book*, and those deviate the least from the book are considered to be the most practical of all. On the other hand, those whose study the very practical science of the spirit, anthroposophy, are considered as very impractical, up until now. How can such an inversion of the true nature of things arise?

[page 27] This view can only arise among those who see things superficially, for in reality what we are concerned with here can guide us in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life. It is something that can be transformed at any moment into sensation and feeling, enabling us to meet life with assurance and to acquire a firm position in it.

Tesla acquired a firm footing in our lives with his AC power, Semmelweis with his antiseptic techniques, and the Wrights with their flying machines. Surely their way of thinking was more practical than that of those people who berated them, criticized their inventions, and called them impractical. What is considered practical by most people is epitomized by the statement, "We have always done things this way." But is that really practical thinking or only an excuse for blindly following the current [paradigm](#)?

[page 27] Many people who call themselves practical imagine that their actions are guided by the most practical principles. But if we inquire more closely, it is found that their so-called "practical thought" is often not thought at all but only the continuing pursuit of traditional opinions and habits. An entirely objective observation of the "practical" man's thought and an examination of what is usually termed "practical thinking" will reveal the fact that it generally contains little that can be called practical. What to them is known as practical thought or thinking consists in following the example of some authority whose ideas are accepted as a standard in the construction of some object. Anyone who thinks differently is considered impractical because this thought does not coincide with traditional ideas.

Is that what practical thinking means, rightly understood? One need only look at who created the great ground-breaking inventions of our modern age. These inventors were usually someone from outside the area of expertise with no thought that what they planned to do was impossible or impractical. Often they were told by colleagues and friends not to attempt their invention as it was pure folly. "If that could be done, someone would have already done it," and other such advice bombarded their ears, but these inventors persisted anyway. I worked closely with one such innovator, Doyle P. Henderson, who did the pioneering work in the science of doyletics. He was a designer of digital electronics for Berkeley Instruments, not a psychologist. But he got an idea in answer to an unanswered question he had been holding for some 30 years. He told his friends his insight that "all feelings and emotions are stored in us as children and recapitulated as adults." It was this insight on which the science of doyletics was founded. It will take as long or longer for Doyle's insight into the field of feelings and emotions to be accepted as it took for Gregor Mendel's pioneering work on smooth and wrinkled peas to be recognized as the basis for the science of genetics. True inventors use genuine practical thinking, not the counterfeit form most people accept, thinking which is not only *not practical thinking*, but *not thinking at all*. One hardly needs to think to follow established rules.

Nothing is more universal than the use of postage stamps. No one alive today can remember a time where

there was no easy way to mail letters. One would naturally suppose that some post office official would have come up with the invention of the postage stamp, and one would be wrong.

[page 27, 28] Whenever anything really practical has been invented, it has been done by a person without practical knowledge of that particular subject. Take, for instance, the modern postage stamp. It would be most natural to assume that it was invented by some practical post office official. It was not. At the beginning of the last century it was a complicated affair to mail a letter. In order to dispatch a letter one had to go to the nearest receiving office where various books had to be referred to and many other formalities complied with.

Along came an English school teacher, Rowland Hill, who saw the gross inefficiency in the then current system of postage which required the recipient to pay for the delivered mail, and pay according to the number of pages received, and how many blocks they were carried. One can scarcely imagine a more cumbersome system of postage today, and yet all postal officials followed their rules and regulations and required a large staff to collect from reluctant recipients. People hated the postal system and very few people used it.

Rowland wrote a [pamphlet](#) in 1837 outlining his plan for reform of the postage system. He suggested an adhesive postage stamp which the sender buys and affixes the stamp to the envelope to pay in advance for its delivery. The first stamp was a penny for a half-ounce of letter delivered any distance. Naturally this new system was called impractical. The objections raised by the official in charge of the mail show us that what passes for practical thinking is often the opposite of genuine practical thinking.

[page 28] The uniform rate of postage known today is hardly sixty years old, and our present postage stamp that makes this possible was not invented by a practical postal employee at all but by someone completely outside the post office. This was the Englishman, Rowland Hill.

After the uniform system of postage stamps had been devised, the English minister who then had charge of the mails declared in Parliament that one could not assume any simplification of the system would increase the volume of mail as the impractical Hill anticipated. Even if it did, the London post office would be entirely inadequate to handle the increased volume. It never occurred to this highly "practical" individual that the post office must be fitted to the amount of business, not the business to the size of the post office. Indeed, in the shortest possible time this idea, which an "impractical" man had to defend against a "practical" authority, became a fact. Today, stamps are used everywhere as a matter of course for sending letters.

Rightly understood what passes for practical thinking is what Steiner calls "merely reasoning in traditional ruts of thought." Take a matrix of dots, 3X3 across and try to draw four straight lines through all the dots without lifting your pencil from the page. Some people can do it and some people can't. The solution to the puzzle requires that one leave the confines of the box defined by the nine dots! To solve the puzzle, one must think *outside* the box. People who follow the rules of authority will find it difficult to think outside the box — they are accustomed to having the box defined for them by the rules. Genuine thinking involves thinking outside the box which is defined by the bones of one's skull, and if one does not, then one is restricted to the traditional ruts of thought confined in one's brain.

[page 30] True practice in thinking presupposes a right attitude and proper feeling for thinking. How can a right attitude toward thinking be attained? Anyone who believes that thought is merely an activity that takes place within his head or in his soul cannot have the right feeling for thought. Whoever harbors this idea will be constantly diverted by a false feeling from seeking right habits of thought and from making the necessary demands on his thinking. He who would acquire the right feeling for thought must say to himself, "If I can formulate thoughts about things, and learn to understand them

through thinking, then these things themselves must first have contained these thoughts. The things must have been built up according to these thoughts, and only because this is so can I in turn extract these thoughts from the things."

"How impractical!" I can hear some of you thinking that right now as you try to find some rule or authority which describes how one extracts thoughts from the things of the world. Instead of being taught that way, we are mostly taught how to extract thoughts by analogy, such as how the human organism is like a machine or how the human heart operates like a mechanical pump. But those who do that have forgotten that the maker of the heart was not a pump maker, and that the heart of a fetus has none of the structure of a pump, and yet it pulses regularly as the blood circulates. We show that we can replace, for a short time, the mature heart with a pump, but that process hides more about the reality of the heart than it reveals, rightly understood. One can only understand the heart rightly as a hydraulic ram designed to create a vortex in the chambers of the heart to mix the blood and oxygen together. The so-called pumping action of the heart is the result of the circulation, not the cause of it. One can only extract this information from the inside of the heart because the heart was created by the spiritual activity of spiritual beings who left the information of its creation as an open secret for those who would look within the heart to find it.

[page 30, 31] It can be imagined that this world outside and around us may be regarded in the same way as a watch. The comparison between the human organism and a watch is often used, but those who make it frequently forget the most important point. They forget the watchmaker. The fact must be kept clearly in mind that the wheels have not united and fitted themselves together of their own accord and thus made the watch "go," but that first there was the watchmaker who put the different parts of the watch together. The watchmaker must never be forgotten. Through thoughts the watch has come into existence. The thoughts have flowed, as it were, into the watch, into the thing.

The works and phenomena of nature must be viewed in a similar way. In the works of man it is easy to picture this to ourselves, but with the works of nature it is not so easily done. Yet these, too, are the result of spiritual activities and behind them are spiritual beings. Thus, when a man thinks about things he only re-thinks what is already in them. The belief that the world has been created by thought and is still ceaselessly being created in this manner is the belief that can alone fructify the actual inner practice of thought.

The so-called practical man when confronted with a problem, looks into books by authorities to find out how to solve a problem which has already been solved, and then applies that technique. This type of man only attempts practical things by which he means that if the answer has not already been found by someone else and reported, then there is no answer and therefore it is not a practical thing to do. Those practical thoughts about how to do something can only be drawn from a practical book in which they exist. Genuine or original thoughts, too, can only be drawn from a world in which they already exist, Steiner tells us, and they exist in the spiritual world. As such they can be drawn out by *Men of genius*, which is an expression we use to identify human beings who are able to come up with an original thought. It is as though they had been visited by a genie, a being of the spiritual, who placed the thought in their head, as the man in the fairy tale I told you above.

[page 32] Considering the real practice of thought, it must be realized that thoughts can only be drawn from a world in which they already exist. Just as water can only be taken from a glass that actually contains water, so thoughts can only be extracted from things within which these thoughts are concealed. The world is built by thought, and only for this reason can thought be extracted from it. Were it otherwise, practical thought could not arise. When a person feels the full truth of these words, it will be easy for him to dispense with abstract thought. If he can confidently believe that thoughts are concealed behind the things around him, and that the actual facts of life take their course in obedience to thought if he feels this, he will easily be converted to a practical habit of thinking based on truth and reality.

The process of receiving information is treated as if it were some object placed in an envelope or email and sent to us. Information theory can even break any information into the most physical object of all, a binary digit — the state of a silicon switch — in a computer. I worked with a woman, Mary Evans, who spent many years blue-skying at Bell Laboratories. One project was to figure out how fast information could be transmitted from the nearest planet in our solar system using the most powerful transmitter known at the time (1940s). Their answer was *one bit a day*. We laughed at the idea of the person who had the job of going down to work every day to receive that one bit! But information is a reification of the process of in-forming, and in-forming requires a human being to form themselves imaginatively in the object of their interest and allow thoughts to arrive spontaneously. The best description I have found in literature of someone who could do this process was Father Brown, the priest and detective in Gilbert Keith Chesterton's stories(3) .

In the "Twelve Fishermen" story in [The Innocence of Father Brown](#), the detective priest apprehends the perpetrator of a heinous crime that had been committed right in the sight of unsuspecting observers. While the crime was afoot Father Brown was seated at a table in an isolated darkened room out of sight of the crime. How did he know a crime had been committed? How did he deduce who the criminal was? All he could hear was the footsteps in an adjacent hallway. The answer is that he had developed a way of in-forming himself into the people who created the footsteps in the hallway. By that process he allowed thoughts and meanings to flow into him until it became clear to him that a crime had been committed and how to apprehend the criminal before anyone else in the entire building knew of the crime. That is true information in the sense that Steiner means the word. We inform ourselves by *in-forming* ourselves as though we were inside the things themselves.

[page 37] To practice these principles is the important point. Time must be taken to observe things as though we were inside the things themselves with our thinking. We should submerge ourselves in the things and enter into their inner thought activity. If this is done, we gradually become aware of the fact that we are growing together with things. We no longer feel that they are outside us and we are here inside our shell thinking about them. Instead we come to feel as if our own thinking occurred within the things themselves. When a man has succeeded to a high degree in doing this, many things will become clear to him.

To a genuine thinker, the most important thing one can have is a secret or mystery to solve. Great thinkers and writers have written about this in many ways:

The highest happiness of man is to have probed what is knowable and quietly to revere what is unknowable. — Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

**We dance around in a ring and suppose.
But the secret sits in the middle and knows. — Robert Frost**

To hold a secret or a mystery is in effect to hold an unanswered question. A practical man in 1890, asked if it's possible for a heavier-than-air machine to fly, would have said, no, and went on to thinking about what he considered to be practical things, like learning Morse Code to be a telegraph operator. That was practical back then. But two bicycle mechanics, Wilbur and Orville Wright, when they first heard that question being asked, did not answer No, but instead held that question as an unanswered question. They began to inform themselves into things which could fly, like pigeons and eagles. They held onto that unanswered question, until by dint of their own thinking and construction efforts, they were able to prove to the world in 1903 that the answer was Yes when they flew their own invention, the aeroplane. They refused to come to an immediate conclusion, which is what we must do if we would wish to discover for ourselves the power of an unanswered question(4). Holding an unanswered question requires patience; one does not know in advance how long it will take to receive an answer.

[page 41] There is still something else that is of particular importance. In thinking about some matters we feel it necessary to come to a conclusion. We consider how this or that should be done and then make up our minds in a certain way. This inclination, although natural, does not lead to practical thinking. All overly hasty thinking does not advance us but sets us back. Patience in these things is absolutely essential.

In practice, the seasoned holder of an unanswered question does not rest when only "an" answer is received, but will say, "Okay, that's one answer, now let me wait for another answer." In fact, it can be thought that when one has only one answer one is stuck, when one has two answers, one has a dilemma, and that it is only when one has at least three answers that one can choose among possibilities. Steiner advises on page 42, "It then becomes possible to imagine how the matter might be handled in two ways, and to decide to stop thinking about it for awhile." That is a wise decision, and it is often the only way to find that important synthesis of the two ideas which reaches the ultimate practicality that one is seeking. One can sleep on it, but that is not enough, one must continue to hold the unanswered question and let one's inner self work on it while one is busy with other things. This is an inversion of the usual advice, "He who hesitates is lost" because it shows that "He who hurries will be lost" in the realm of creative thinking.

[page 43] To sleep over it is not enough, however. It is necessary to consider two or, better still, several possibilities that will continue to work within us when our ego is not consciously occupied with them. Later on, when we return again to the matter in question, it will be found that certain thought forces have been stirred up within us in this manner, and that as a result our thinking has become more factual and practical.

Someone once told me that the majority of people seem to spend their entire life perfecting their faults. One of faults that these people perfect is their habit of thinking. That leads to them making statements not out of their reasoning, but rather out of their habitual mode of thinking. What Steiner spoke a hundred years ago is still true today from my personal observation.

[page 45] For anyone capable of thinking correctly a large part of modern literature (especially that of the sciences) becomes a source of unpleasant experience. The distorted and misguided thinking expressed in it can cause even physical pain in a man who has to work his way through it. It should be understood, however, that this is not said with any intent to slight the wealth of observation and discovery that has been accumulated by modern natural science and its objective methods of research.

Not much in the way of original thought can come from someone whose statements come not from reasoning, but the thinking habits behind their reasons. Steiner said once elsewhere, "Discussion begins when knowledge ends." So much of the discussion today comes from people who have lost connection with the knowledge available to one who knows how to in-form oneself deeply into the objects of one's work. Only through such in-formation can one be convinced of something to the level that one would honestly call it knowledge.

[page 46] Today it can generally be said that people are not prompted by reasons when making statements but rather by the thinking habits behind these reasons. They have acquired habits of thought that influence all their feelings and sensations, and when reasons are put forth, they are simply the mask of the habitual thinking that screens these feelings and sensations. Not only is the wish often the father of the thought, but it can also be said that all our feelings and mental habits are the parents of our thoughts. He who knows life knows how difficult it is to convince another person by means of logical reasoning. What really decides and convinces lies much deeper in the human soul.

Categories

This third lecture deals with the Theory of Categories, a subject that is as important as it is difficult to understand. To grasp what a category is, one must learn to distinguish perception, representation, and concept. Perception is what our senses report to us. Representation is what happens inside of us when we perceive the sensible world that is outside of us. Concept is what we create wholly within our thoughts independent of the world. When we make concepts of concepts we enter into Hegel's world of categories, so that a category can be thought of as a meta-concept.

If we are in the middle of the sea, with no land visible, we can look in any direction at the horizon and have the experience of being in the middle of a huge circle. From our perception of the world around us on the sea we receive a representation of the circle. *Perception* is what comes into us from the sensible world and *representation* is what remains in us from the perception.

If, instead, we construct in our thoughts a picture of all the points which are equidistant from a point within them, then we have formed the concept of the circle. That concept lives solely in our thoughts but can agree with the perceptible world around us.

[page 51] What one has constructed as circles coincides with the circle that is given to him in the perception, through journeying out on the ocean. In this way in all true conceptual thinking we relate ourselves to the reality. The concept is decidedly not gained through observation — that is a conception which is very wide-spread today — the concept is plainly something wherein a man takes no account of the external reality. Now through this we established the place of the network of concepts in regard to the external sensible reality.

This is a process which each person can do: relate one's perceptions of the sensible world to one's representations and to one's concepts. What about one who is able to perceive the supersensible or spiritual world wherein concepts themselves lie? Steiner was such a person and here is what he reports:

[page 51, 52] Now we must ask: how is it with the position of the network of concepts in regard to supersensible reality? When he, who through the methods of clairvoyance discloses the supersensible reality, now approaches this reality with his concepts, he will thus find the network of concepts coincides just as much with the supersensible world. From the other side the supersensible reality throws its rays as it were on the network of concepts, as on the one side does the sensible reality.

Thus we find that concepts form, as it were, the boundary between sensible and the supersensible reality. Imagine Plato's Cave for a moment. Suppose supersensible reality is walking across the opening of the cave and casting shadows on the back wall of the cave which is all we can perceive, chained as we are to the cave with our sight limited to the back wall. What we see are the concepts in the shadows on the wall. The shadows are nothing, but like the shadow of one's hand on a table, the shadow would not arise but for the existence of the hand itself.

[page 52] The concepts arise in exactly the same way, through the fact that behind our thinking soul there stands the supersensible reality.

The concepts also are really only an obliteration of the supersensible reality, and because they resemble the spiritual world, as the shadow-pictures do the prototypes, for this reason the human being can form an inkling of the supersensible worlds. . . . In the conceptual shadow-pictures you have the supersensible reality just as little as in the shadow-picture of the hand you have the hand itself. Accordingly we have recognized here that the concepts are the boundary between the two realities, but originate from the supersensible reality.

Are concepts merely abstractions, like mathematical concepts? Do we not take our perceptions of regularity in the world and form abstractions from them and call these abstractions concepts? How can this not be so?

[page 53] The majority of people have only arrived at pure concepts in mathematics. Most men, of course, believe that concepts arrive through abstractions. Naturally that is not at all the origin of concepts. Even thinking men are in general quite unclear as to this. When I tried to make clear the self-constructiveness of the concept in [The Philosophy of Freedom](#) I had the opportunity of experiencing something very curious. You find elucidated there, in adverse connection with Herbert Spencer, that to start from outer experience is a thoroughly unsatisfactory mode of forming the concept(5).

Steiner proves in his landmark book, [The Philosophy of Freedom](#), an important proposition: if science uses thinking, then science *cannot* be strictly objective. The importance of this impossibility is glossed over when respected scientists present such theories as acid rain and global warming as if they were only presenting objective facts. There can be no objective facts in science because the selection of what is a fact, the interpretation of the data, and every aspect of the relevance of the data requires thinking and *thinking is always subjective* and derives from the experience, training, and life goals of the scientist.

In addition the concepts of such aspects of science cannot be derived from observation of data, they must be added to the data by the subjective judgments of the scientists.

[page 53] The concept cannot be gained from observation. That arises from the fact that the growing human being only slowly and gradually forms the concepts conforming to the objects which surround him. The concepts are added to the observation.

Thus, there is the possibility for a mass hysteria which scientists as human beings may experience. One Sunday in a large football stadium, several people in the stadium reported themselves as feeling sickly after drink a popular soda. As a precaution, an announcement was made over the public address system that people should stop drinking that soda. Within minutes hundreds of people reported themselves to the first aid station as being sick. Further investigation showed that the first several people had an ordinary stomach upset that was not related to the soda. Another public announcement was made and everyone felt better immediately. The mass hysteria disappeared as rapidly as it arose.

When acid rain was deemed a problem in the 1960s all kinds of onerous regulations were placed on the emissions of factories. Twenty years later it was found that the acidity in the rain was normal and in no way related to the emissions by industries. Today not a word is mentioned in the media about acid rain. And yet, the very existence of the urgency for correction of a non-problem indicates the kind of subjective thinking which can get added to data so scientists might get major funding to eliminate a problem which doesn't actually exist. Worse still, unnecessary regulations can add to cost of consumer goods. The hysteria of acid rain has waned and disappeared, but global warming is in the flourishing stage at the present time. And no one seems able to yell out in the public forum, "King Science has no clothes on!" and put a stop to the hysteria. One indication that it is hysteria can be found in Newsweek magazine which claimed a new Ice Age was imminent a short 30 years ago. How can we go from global ice age to global warming in only thirty years? Only by adding subjective judgments to the data.

How do we move from concepts into categories?

[page 55] Our soul must be in a condition in which it is able to gain the network of the concepts when it is not in the position to get it from perception. The methods, even when they are the scientific methods, which one employs to form representations about the world through outer experience, all these methods cannot aid us to construct the real network of concepts in the human soul. But there must be a method, which is independent of external experience as well as clairvoyant experience, for the human soul

ought in truth, as we presuppose, to be able to form concepts before it mounts up to the supersensible. Accordingly a man has to proceed from one concept to another then he remains within the network of the concepts itself. That that takes place in the soul, makes it requisite that we presuppose a method having nothing to do with external observation or with clairvoyant experience. This movement in pure concepts one now calls, in the sense of the great philosopher Hegel, the "dialectic method". That is the true dialectic method, where the human being lives only in concepts, and is as it were in a condition to cause one concept to germinate out of another. The man then lives in a sphere where he takes no account of the sensible world and of that which stands behind it, the supersensible world.

In the dialectic method of Hegel, one begins with a pure concept and divides it into two new concepts, the thesis and antithesis. In G. Spencer Brown's [Laws of Form](#), we find in his Reversed Form of the First Law that the Mark of the Form is replicated. If we take the Mark of the Form as a concept, we can see Hegel's process at work when one concept is shaped into two concepts in the Reversed First Law and two concepts are condensed back into one concept in the normal First Law(6).

[page 56] [Our soul is] mobile in the network of concepts. It begins to spin concept to concept in the sense of the dialectic method. It leads man from concept to concept. Granted that we have to begin somewhere, then we pass on from concept to concept. This must give as a result the sum of all concepts. They would constitute the sum of all concepts, which in the world-all are adapted below to the sense world and upwards to the supersensible world as well. In the widest sense of the word one terms all these self-mobile concepts, adapted to the two worlds, "the Categories". Whence it follows that at bottom the whole human network of concepts is composed of the categories alone. With the same justice one might say: all concepts are categories, as one might say: all categories are concepts. One has, in truth, habitually called the weightiest, the radical concepts, the nodal points of the concepts, Categories. These more important concepts, following Aristotle, are called categories. But in the strict sense one can use the words 'concept' and 'category' interchangeably, so that we are justified in calling the sum of our self-mobile, self-producing concepts 'theory of categories'. And Hegel's work — is really a system of categories.

In the last few pages of this lecture, Rudolf Steiner takes us into the world of Hegel by analyzing the Being and Not-Being, of Being and Nothingness. How Being and Nothingness can be condensed into Becoming, and so on. You are quickly into Hegel's theory of categories with concepts growing like a spreading vine from the root concept in all directions.

[page 61] In this way the concepts grow on all sides out of the primary stem-concept, out of Being. Thus there arises the transparent diamond-crystal world of concepts, with which only we should again approach the sense world. Then is exhibited how the sensible and supersensible world coincide with the concept-dialectic, and the human being comes to that concordance of the concepts with the reality, in which really rightful cognition consists.

Once upon a time a writer found three lectures and merged them into a book so that he could study them together and write a review. He liked fairy tales from his youth and wished to understand them better. By reading the first lecture about Fairy Tales, he learned enough to write a fairy tale or two himself. Some might even think that the first fairy tale was autobiographical, but no one could know for sure merely from reading the fairy tale.

Then he studied the second lecture and discovered that he already knew about practical training in thought. He had already learned the power of the unanswered question, the process of in-forming oneself

into situations as a way of understanding them directly, and how innovators and inventors use genuine practical thinking in their work, something which brings them great disdain for decades and longer in many cases.

Then he tackled the toughest lecture of all, The Theory of Categories. It was a Herculean task, equivalent to cleaning out all of the Augean Stables of manure in one day. By diverting the two rivers of Logic and Imagination, he could at the end of the day see the sparkling world of categories arising out of humble concepts.

When he had cleaned out the last stable, he mounted one of the steeds and rode off towards home, and where he lived happily ever after with his wife of thirty years, and so far as we know they are living still.

~^~

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. This aspect of reality is vividly portrayed by Nicholas Humphrey in his recent book, [The Color Red](#).

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~  
**Footnote 2.** The events of Semmelweis's life is vividly portrayed in this book, [The Cry and the Covenant](#).

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

~~~~~  
Footnote 3. Read [The Innocence of Father Brown](#) by Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 3.](#)

~~~~~  
**Footnote 4.** What is the power of an unanswered question? is one of my primary rules. See: <http://www.doyletics.com/mrules.htm#mrn25> .

[Return to text directly before Footnote 4.](#)

~~~~~  
Footnote 5. Excerpt from [Philosophy of Freedom](#): If one demands of a "strictly objective science" that it should take its content from observation alone, then one must at the same time demand that it should forego all thinking. For thinking, by its very nature, goes beyond what is observed.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 5.](#)

~~~~~  
**Footnote 6.** One will need to study G. Spencer Brown's [Laws of Form](#) for this paragraph to make sense. My review at <http://www.doyletics.com/arj/lofmart.htm> can be an immediate help to understanding.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 6.](#)

~~~~~  
To Obtain your own Copy of this Reviewed Book, Click on SteinerBooks Logo below:



Three Lectures
on Fairy Tales, Practical
Thinking, and Categories
by
Rudolf Steiner