

## INTRODUCTION TO THINKING AT THE EDGE

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"Thinking At the Edge" (in German: "Wo Noch Worte Fehlen") stems from my course called "Theory Construction" which I taught for many years at the University of Chicago. Students came to it from many fields. The course consisted half of philosophy and logic, half of the difficult task of getting students to attend to what they implicitly knew but could not say and never considered trying to say. It took weeks to explain that the usual criteria were reversed in my course. Whereas everywhere else in the University only what was clear counted at all, here we cared only about what was as yet unclear. If it was clear I said "We don't need you for this; we have it in the library already." Our students were not used to the process we call "Focusing," spending time with some observation or impression which is directly and physically sensed, but unclear. All educated people "know" such things in their field of study. Sometimes one of these can feel deeply important, but people assume that it "makes no sense" and cannot be said or thought into.

"Oh," one student exclaimed when he grasped what I was looking for, "you mean something about which we have to do hemming and hawing." Yes, that was just what I meant. Another asked: "Do you mean that crawly thing?"

Of course I know that it is a very questionable project to think from what is unclear and only sensed. A rational person, and especially a philosopher, will immediately wonder: Why should such a sense be more than mere confusion? And if there were something valuable in it (say an organismic experiencing of something important in one's field) how would speech and thought come from it? And if it sometimes could, how would one know when one spoke from it, rather than only reading something in? Would one just believe whatever one said from such an unclarity, or would some statements be preferable to others?

These questions do not have single answers. They require entering a whole field of considerations. They require certain philosophical strategies about which I have written at length. Such an internally intricate sense can lead to a long series of statements with recognizable characteristics. They also affect the sense. The relation between statements and sensing cannot be identity, representation, or description. There are much more differentiated ways to deal with the evident difference between a statement and an implicitly intricate sense.

Here I would like to give an example: Suppose you are about to fly to another city in a small plane, and your experienced pilot says "I can't explain it. The weather people say all clear, but the look of it gives me some odd sense of doubt ..." In such a case you would not tell the pilot to ignore this just because it is not clear. Of course I stacked the example. An EXPERIENCED pilot's unclarity includes all the clear knowledge, so that what is unclear is something more. We need not be certain that this "sense" is in fact due to the weather; it is enough that this is likely. You stay safely at home, but if the weather does become dangerous,

the whole society would certainly want the pilot to articulate just what was picked up in the unclear sense. And so it is also with any person who is experienced in any field. But such a sense will seem to be beyond words.

We are all imbued with the classical Western model according to which what is real is conceived of as filling space and time. We can hardly think in any other way. What we call "thinking" seems to require already-cut units which must be either cleanly identical or cleanly separate, which can be next to each other but cannot interpenetrate, let alone have some more complex pattern. If, for example, two things seem to be both two and one in some intricate way, rather than try to lay out such a pattern, thinking tends to stop right there. We consider the sense of such a thing as if it were a private trouble. Something must be wrong with us because "it doesn't make sense." And yet we go on carrying this stubborn sense which does not fit in with what is usually said in our field. It is probably a genuine observation which does not fit the typical model.

The typical model inheres in our language and is regularly the reason why new insights seem not to make sense. In class I used Heidegger, McKeon and my own philosophy to present a holistic model and a functional process model, but the capacity for breaking out of the typical model could not be imparted in this way. Philosophers know that the recognition does not prevent us from falling into the old model. Many philosophers currently say that it will take 300 years for the assumptions that inhere in our language to change. To a philosopher it seems unlikely that people can think beyond the pervasive assumptions.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein showed that language far exceeds the conceptual patterns that inhere in it. He demonstrated convincingly that what words can say is quite beyond the control of any concept, pre-existing rule, or theory of language. He could give some twenty or more examples of new meanings that the same word could acquire in different uses. Building on this, we developed a new use of language that can be shown to most anyone who senses something that cannot yet be said. The new use of language is the key to this seemingly impossible venture.

First it must be recognized that no established word or phrase will say what could not be said. The person can stop trying to "translate" it into regular language. At a further step it turns out that many words can say it after all, IN A CERTAIN WAY. A certain kind of sentence can use a word beyond its usual meaning, so that it speaks from the felt sense. A different word can do this too, but it will pull out something different from the felt sense. With some further developments, what was one single fuzzy sense will have engendered six or seven terms with a new patterning. When the terms which contain this new patterning are also placed into simple logical relations, a great many new sentences (some surprising and powerful) can be derived from them. Expanding this can constitute a theory.

In interaction with a felt sense, doing this is much less arbitrary than might seem. But "less arbitrary" does not mean representational truth. The various relations between sensing and speaking have not been well studied until now, because only representation was looked for.

They can now be studied. (See especially [Crossing and Dipping: Some Terms for Approaching the Interface Between Natural Understanding and Logical Formation.](#))

For TAE we require a familiarity with focusing, which takes care of the most difficult part of my course. The participants in our first TAE were experienced focusing people. Nevertheless I expected it to fail, and I certainly experienced that it did fail. Some people did not even get as far as using the logic, and most created no theory. But there was great satisfaction and even excitement. A great thing seemed to have happened, so I was grateful that I was saved any embarrassment. For some reason they did not feel cheated.

Later I understood. During the year people reported that they found themselves able to speak from what they could not say before, and that they were now talking about it all the time. And some of them also explained their excitement. These individuals had discovered that **THEY COULD THINK!**

Now after four American and three German TAEs, I am very aware of the deep political significance of all this. People, even most intellectuals, believe that they cannot think! They are trained to find what fits the public discourse. They remain numb about what arises from themselves in response to the world. People are silenced!

Now we recognize that, along with focusing, TAE is a practice for people generally. They do not all need to build a theory. Yes, as in ancient times, philosophy now comes with practices. One need not necessarily grasp all of the philosophy from which they come.

I need to make clear that with TAE we are not saying that thinking or any other serious human activity can be reduced to standard steps of a fixed method. When people said they discovered that they could think, they certainly did not mean these little steps of which I couldn't keep track exactly myself at first. The steps help break what I might call the "public language barrier" so that the source of one's own thinking can be found. After that nobody needs steps. Precise steps are for precise teaching so that what is new can be shown and found. Then it soon becomes utterly various.

Steps 4 and 5 of TAE reveal a more-than-logical creativity inherent in the nature of language, which has remained largely unrecognized. Language is not a deadly trap. Philosophers of many sorts seem to hold that something living becomes limited and lifeless by being said. This might be true when one uses only common phrases, but in the case of fresh phrasing it is quite false. Language is always implicit in human experiencing. Far from reducing and limiting what one implicitly lived and wanted to say, a fresh statement is physically a further development of what one sensed and meant to say. And, to write down and read back what was said engenders still more steps of further living. What one physically senses in one's situation is not some fixed, already determined entity, but a further implying which expands and develops in response to what one has said. Rather than "falling into" the said, we find that the said opens ways of living still further. (See "How Philosophy Cannot Appeal to Experience, and How It Can," and my Reply to Nicholson, both in *Language Beyond Postmodernism.*)

Some current philosophers altogether deny that the individual can think anything that does not first come from the culture, from the group, from interaction. Currently this view is justified as a reaction to previous philosophy which treated the individual as the universal source. But both views are simplifications. Culture is not an imposition upon a blank. Culture and individuality constitute a cluster that is more complex.

From the start I had the students in my class meet in listening partnerships during the week. They divided two hours, taking turns purely listening. "Just listen. Only say when you don't follow" I instructed them. "If your partner is working on a paper, don't tell about how YOU would write the paper..." They always laughed. Nobody is ever willing to keep us company where we are stuck with our unfinished paper, so that we can think our way through. But in a focusing partnership we do just that. We attend entirely just to one person at a time. This mutually sustaining pattern was always a main reason why students praised the course.

TAE and the construction of concepts and theories has a SOCIAL purpose. We build our inter-human world further. It is not true that merely developing as individuals will somehow change the patterns in which we must live. We need to build new social patterns and new patterns of thought and science. This will be a mutual product no single person can create. On the other hand, if we try to do this just in dialogue, we lose what can only come through the individual, and we fall back into the already-shared patterns. Nobody else lives the world from your angle. No other organism can sense exactly "the more" that you sense. In TAE for the first three days, one is constantly warned to "protect" one's as yet inchoate sense. We interrupt anyone who says "mine is like yours," or "yours made me think of ...." or any sentence that begins with "We ..." WE may have uttered the very same sentence, but the intricacy that is implicit for you turns out to be utterly different from mine. These two intricacies are much more significant than what would come from this spot, if we articulate it together. There is an interplay which happens too soon and stops the articulation of what is so fuzzy and hard to enter. Because we are inherently interactional creatures, our implicit intricacy opens more deeply when we are speaking to another person who wants to hear us. But if that person adds anything in, our contact with the inward sense is lost or narrowed. In TAE we provide the needed interaction without any imposition, by taking turns in what we call a "focusing partnership." In half the time I respond ONLY to you. I write down what you say and read it back to you when you want it. Then in the other half of the time you do ONLY this for me.

Once the individual's sense of something has become articulated and differentiated enough, then what happens is something we call "crossing." Other people's insights enrich ours by becoming implicit in our own terms. If one has and keeps one's own terms, one can cross them with others. Keeping one's own terms means keeping their intricate precision. Crossing enriches their implicit intricacy and power. At that point collaborative interaction can create a new social product right here in the room. This is of course the intent of the current emphasis on "dialogue" and "joint action," but we need not lose the individuals if we first articulate the individual sense.

When many theories cross, they need not constitute one consistent logical system. Crossing makes the other theory implicit in the felt sense under our logically connected terms. Through that felt sense we can reach the other theory and then employ its connected terms. One might liken the implicit intricacy to the highways which connect the cities and their internal traffic arteries and side streets. Each theory opens a location in the public world and in philosophy and science. It also enables the implicit intricacy to be found in that location. A TAE theory relates to many other locations not only through its felt sense but also through logical connections to other things.

Logical analysis is being widely rejected even in Analytic Philosophy today, but to give up on it is a great mistake. It is true that logical analysis depends on premises it cannot examine. Logic is helpless to determine its own starting position. But TAE shows that powerful logical inferences can be instituted at significant junctures that are first arrived at by focusing. The possibilities of logical analysis are greatly enhanced, when we can give logical analysis an articulated starting location.

Pure logical inference is retained in TAE, but we ALSO find a certain odd "logic" in articulating a felt sense. We find, for example, that a small detail which would usually be subsumed UNDER wider categories, can instead overarch them and build its more intricate patterning into them. Another example: We find that when more requirements are imposed, degrees of freedom are not lessened; more requirements open more possibilities. There is a certain odd "logic" of experiential explication. (See [Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning](#), IV.)

When terms articulate a felt sense and also acquire logical connections, this duality enables us to move in two ways from any statement: Logic generates powerful inferences which could be found in no other way. And, by pursuing implicit implications, one can arrive where logic would never lead. The statements can go wrong in many ways, but the felt sense which a TAE theory attempts to articulate is at least something possible, since it happened.

However we may think about it, what we do in focusing is possible, since we do it. But to conceive of a world in which focusing is possible requires thinking of the body as part of A SINGLE PROCESS which also encompasses language and situations. (See [Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situation](#).) We have developed new concepts for physics and biology, which can connect to the usual concepts and data (as we must be able to do), but are modeled on living and symbolizing. With such concepts one can think about how some physical and living bodies can be human bodies. (See [A Process Model](#) and [Focusing and Philosophy](#))

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