



The Limitations of Thought and Knowledge

A Brief Summary David Bohm's Twenty-Five-Year Inquiry

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We are facing a breakdown of general social order and human values that threatens stability throughout the world. Existing knowledge cannot meet this challenge. Something much deeper is needed—a completely new approach. I suggest that the very means by which we try to solve our problems is the problem. The source of our problems lies within the structure of thought itself.

We don't really understand the nature of our thought process; we're not aware of how it works, how it's disrupting not only our society and individual lives but also the way the brain and nervous system operate—making us unhealthy or perhaps even damaging the system.

Rational, orderly, factual thought, such as in proper scientific inquiry, is valuable. But the kind of thought that is destructive is self-centered thought. At first glance, one might wonder why self-centered thought is so bad. If the self were truly there, then perhaps it would be correct to center thought on it. But if the self (including culture, and even the basic structure of thought) is a kind of illusion, or theater—then centering our thought on something illusory (an abstraction or image) that is assumed to have supreme importance will disrupt the whole process. It will not only make thought about yourself wrong, but it will also make thought about everything wrong, turning thought into a dangerous and destructive instrument.

There's an intrinsic tendency of self-deception built into this thought process because there's no intelligence in it. Thought is just a system of reflexes. We could take the example of Pavlov and his dog. The dog has a natural reflex. When it sees food, it salivates. If you ring a bell every time it sees food, it will then salivate when you ring the bell. Eventually it skips the stage of perceiving the food so you'll get a conditioned reflex. I say thought works like a conditioned reflex. The major point is, intelligence is not intellect. The rules of formal logic are not the same as intelligence. Intelligence which has crystallized is no longer intelligence.

Therefore, the principal problem of the human species is the incoherence of thought and its activity. The main sign of incoherence is that you do not get the results you intend. Contradiction, confusion, and conflict are particular cases. There are many examples of incoherence: We want peace and get war. We want a livable Earth and produce all sorts of activities that harm or destroy the environment. People didn't want war in the Middle East, but they sent in vast amounts of arms, which made it possible. You can multiply examples of incoherence endlessly. Thought tends to produce incoherence the way we are using it, because we are not clear about what we're doing. Incoherence and self-deception are inherent in thought. Incoherence is counterproductive. It causes suffering.

Thought as Theater

The essential activity of science consists of thought, which arises in creative perception and is expressed through *play*. This gives rise to a process in which thought (and experience) unfolds into provisional knowledge, which then moves outward into action and returns as fresh perception and knowledge. This process leads to continuous adaptation of knowledge, which undergoes constant growth, transformation, and extension. Knowledge is therefore not something rigid and fixed that accumulates

indefinitely in a steady way, but is a continual process of change. Its growth is closer to an organism than a data bank. When serious contradictions in knowledge are encountered, it is necessary to return to creative perception and free play, which act to transform knowledge. When creativity is made subservient to external goals, which are implied by seeking rewards, the whole activity begins to degenerate. *Knowledge, apart from this cycle of activity, has no meaning (In fact, it becomes increasingly dangerous).*

Creative play is an essential element in forming new hypotheses and ideas. Indeed, thought which tries to avoid play is in fact playing false with itself.

The falseness that can creep into the play of thought is shown in the etymology of the words *illusion*, *delusion*, and *collusion*, all of which have as their Latin root *ludere*, "to play." Illusion implies playing false with perception; delusion, playing false with thought; and collusion, playing false together in order to support each other's illusion and delusions.

Within the act of creative play, fresh perceptions occur which enable a person to propose a new idea that can be put forward for exploration. As the implications of their idea are unfolded, they are composed or put together with other familiar ideas.

Eventually the person supposes that these ideas are correct; in other words, he or she makes an assumption or hypothesis and then acts according to the notion that this is the way things actually are. The movement from propose to compose and suppose enables everyday actions to be carried out with little or no conscious thought.

This is appropriate only as long as the mind remains sensitive to the possibility that, in new contexts, evidence may arise that shows that these ideas are wrong or confused. If this happens, scientists [parents, or educators, caregivers, coaches] have to be ready to drop the ideas in question and go back to the *free play of thought (as theater)*, out of which may emerge new ideas.

But, people tend to push assumptions too far. There's a tendency to become absolute, to say something covers everything. A good theory carries things far, but still doesn't cover the whole. The whole cannot be grasped in thought.

Reality is Relative

Essence, or underlying reality, cannot be grasped in thought because thought can only grasp appearances. Depending on our context, we experience different views of reality.

In the West we have radically changed our view of reality over the past thousand years. Two or three thousand years ago, it may have been closer to original human beings, small band hunter gathers. The general views of reality are constantly changing, and they will change again. A century from now people may call our present views of reality naive.

Clarity and Intelligence

Nothing can replace clarity. If people are unclear, incoherent, and confused, then whatever you say won't work. That has been the situation in the human race. People have been very unclear. So, the first priority is clarity. To be clear you must be constantly sensitive to incoherence.

But there is some sense of the whole (intelligence and insight) that cannot be put in words, and we have to move from that. Intelligence is the key—even to ethics. Without intelligence, there can be no real ethics.

If we could suspend opinions—not defend or suppress them, but hold them in front of ourselves and others—then everyone's opinions would be on the same footing. Mine, yours, and so on (including fundamental assumptions about our self-image, others, and culture). An opinion is basically not important; it's only an assumption. Why should we defend it? Why should we identify with it? If we all look at our opinions together then we will have a common content of consciousness. At present, everybody defends their opinion—often against evidence that it may be wrong. That's incoherent, which is counterproductive.

On Dialogue

Culture is shared meaning, but it is now incoherent.

We're suggesting that if we could gather groups of 20 to 40 people and see if we can do this— share a common content of consciousness, not to establish a group, but to explore communication. This might be a germ that would spread. A group like this starts out as a microcosm of our society. You will encounter all the problems—people fighting over opinions, defending egos, and so on. You have to work through it. This takes knowledge and skill, ideally with a facilitator. People who try this arbitrarily may find it difficult. But I think you can get through it. It will take sustained work—sometimes as much as a year with regular practice, say once a week.

Why are they in dialogue? Because they see the significance of it. They see the value (that being clear and coherent comes first), and therefore they form the purpose. It's not about imposing a purpose. If people see the significance and value, they will stick with it. Anyone who wants to do something difficult must go through difficulties and persist. We must establish a change of consciousness at the base, which will filter upward—not downward.

Each person may have their opinion. In dialogue we simply share our opinions. There's no pressure to hold a common opinion. We're not trying to do anything. This is crucial—it's an empty space. You're not under pressure. You're free. You don't try to hold on to your identity or get rid of it. That's a side issue. We are simply trying to communicate with clarity. When the time comes to act, these principles will be working, as with the North American Indians. We are creating an empty space for the sake of exploring communication, because that has really broken down.

We must have an attitude of moving toward coherence. But if we defend incoherence, that will be very destructive. People generally do find themselves defending their incoherence. The notion of dialogue is to reveal our collective incoherence. That's why it can be an unpleasant process—but you've got to stick to it. Coherence will emerge.

A coherent mind in one person can do more than an incoherent mind. But a coherent mind among 20 or 30 people could do much more. It would burn a hole in our present social arrangements. It would expose the incoherence so glaringly that something (new, coherent and truly intelligent) might happen.

I've always had the fantasy of a dialogue among scientists. If we could establish that, and then go on to a dialogue among science, art, and spirituality—that would be even harder. But I think that kind of dialogue could greatly begin to change our culture.

On Insight

The key point is that everyone must be able to question with great energy and passion whatever is unclear. It's necessary to sustain this questioning despite any difficulties. This questioning is not an end in itself, and its purpose is not mainly to produce answers. Rather, it's essential to the whole movement of life, which can only be harmonious when ceaseless questioning frees the mind from the tendency to cling indefinitely to contradictory and confused knowledge. If you question in this way, there may arise the energy of insight, which is crucial for opening the mind to new directions. This is a tremendous challenge—not only because of our habit of wanting important ideas to be secure, but also because of very deep and subtle questions involving how the mind operates.

Currently, insight is not generally valued in society or education. Instead, there's a strong bias toward accumulating knowledge—far beyond the point where it makes sense—while the spirit of questioning, necessary for insight, is ignored and even discouraged if it disturbs strong beliefs.

There's also much discussion about the need to foster creativity. But when you look closely, what's actually being done is often *the development of imagination, which is not enough*. Imagination may be part of creativity, but without insight, neither imagination nor reason, nor anything else will be truly creative. We must recognize that insight itself has very high value. Then we'll have a different attitude toward knowledge, values, and education. Life as a whole will become a field in which there is no end to the possibility of fresh and original perceptions.

End

About: David Bohm was a visionary theoretical physicist and philosopher whose work reshaped how we think about quantum mechanics, consciousness, and the nature of reality. He held positions at prestigious institutions including Princeton University, University of São Paulo, and Birkbeck College in London. He collaborated with Albert Einstein and had a long-standing intellectual partnership with J. Krishnamurti.



David believed that fragmentation—whether in thought, society, or science—was a root cause of many human problems. He proposed that reality is fundamentally interconnected, and that consciousness is part of a deeper, enfolded order of existence.

He developed the concept of **Bohm Dialogue**, a method of open communication aimed at exploring collective thought and fostering insight. This approach has influenced fields from education to organizational development.

- **Thought as a System:** Bohm argued that thought is not just a passive reflection of reality but an active system that shapes perception. He emphasized that thought often operates autonomously, as a reflex, creating problems it then tries to solve, leading to fragmentation and confusion.
- **Reflexive Nature of Thought:** He believed thought tends to defend itself and resist change, which can trap individuals in repetitive patterns unless they become aware of this reflexivity.
- **Insight as Holistic Perception:** Bohm saw insight as a sudden, holistic understanding that transcends linear reasoning. He believed true intelligence arises when insight breaks through conditioned patterns of thought.
- **Intelligence Beyond Knowledge:** For Bohm, intelligence wasn't merely the accumulation of facts but the capacity to perceive connections and act with coherence. He linked intelligence to creativity and the ability to perceive wholeness.
- **Implicate vs. Explicate Order:** Bohm proposed that reality has two levels: the explicate order (observable phenomena) and the implicate order (a deeper, enfolded reality). Consciousness, he suggested, operates within both realms, and insight arises when the implicate order unfolds into awareness.
- **Holomovement:** He introduced the concept of the holomovement—a dynamic, flowing whole from which all forms emerge. Consciousness, in this view, is not separate from the universe but a manifestation of this movement.

David's work remains influential in fields ranging from quantum physics to psychotherapy and organizational development. His vision of wholeness and his critique of fragmented thought continue to inspire those seeking deeper understanding of mind and reality.

Sources

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