

Thinking in One Page

Many years ago I remember having an interesting conversation during a car journey, with a bunch of teachers. I asked the question: *“Is it possible to think without language?”* Teachers often wonder whether their students ‘think’ about the topics they are teaching, which implies that there are means by which some sort of process is going on in which knowledge is being assimilated. But what sort of process?

I know, both from practice and theory, that I mentally operate with **two** kinds of thinking. One is the **Phenomenon** of being alive. That is to say, **how** the world directly appears to me from my everyday experiences. Then there are the **factual** aspects of life that become apparent when I analyse how my experiences function in a reasoned practical sense. This is the **Existential** aspect of life. An example would be my relationship with objects in the world. These are Phenomenally solid and subject to persistence over time. But I ‘know’ from science that, in fact, these objects are composed of atoms, and that they contain a disproportionately large amount of empty space. Hence, solid objects are not ‘solid’ at all, in scientific terms. But that’s not how the world seems. I need never worry that I’ll somehow sink through the floor when I try to walk.

I assume that others have these same concepts as I do. It’s an **assumption**, and not absolutely provable. I have no way of knowing that others have the same sort of Phenomenal life as I do. However, I can say, with some certainty, that we experience a common Existential world view. Why? Because our factual lives are expressed in **language**. As you read this handout, you are assimilating a coded version of the argument on thinking that I am making. Perhaps this will not be precisely understood in the manner in which I intend. Meanings in language are part of the recipient of a message, not its transmitter. But I can say that all of us share a common linguistic history, as part of the social experiences that make up our world. Our **Form of Life**, as Wittgenstein called it. This Form of Life gives us shared languages which are always the subject of common public understanding. There are **no** ‘private’ languages, as Wittgenstein also argued. If this is so, **all** meanings and understandings within the Phenomenal world are gained from our interactions with each other. We literally **make** the world through our speech.

Is this interaction ‘thinking’? Surely thinking is something internal. Something unspoken. Something inaccessible to others. But every time I think, I find myself uttering thoughts silently through language that I have gained solely through external contact with other humans. For me at least, this means that I think through language. Language is the medium of thought. I cannot conceive of any thought that is not spontaneously and linguistically conceived. All else is emotion or unconscious reaction. These become thought when I label them as such. When I **talk** about emotion, what was previously vague and ill-defined becomes real. It becomes fixed, substantial, and understandable.

As such, our thinking **IS** language. It becomes thought **BECAUSE** we can express it. And our thoughts are thereby not as secret and inaccessible as we might have previously believed.