



Where Thoughts Come From ***(part 1)***

Knowing your thoughts origins tell you who you are

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*“The sea drowns them out with its wide sounds, cleanses me with its noise,
and imposes a rhythm upon everything in me that is bewildered and confused.”*

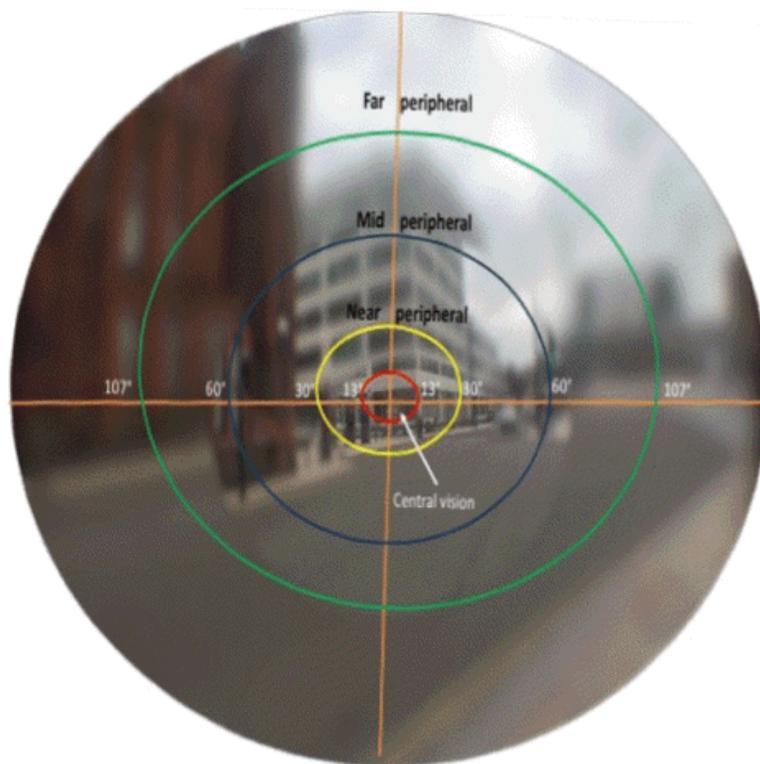
— **Rainier Maria Rilke**

This series on the origin of thoughts is my attempt at presenting a constructive answer. I’m not sure why I don’t find other people answering this question or why other approaches to understanding thought don’t provide the opportunity to ask the question. The topic is large and I’ve been working on it for a long time. This series could become fairly long but I expect I will wrap it up when it gets too complicated. It does get complicated and that can be a good thing, but in this series I want to focus on the basic ideas.

The Question

We're built not to ask, not to care, and not to see where our thoughts come from. Because we don't see where thoughts come from, we have the illusion they come from nowhere. They seem to be spontaneous, and that leads us to believe they are our own. We have the similar illusion that our identity has come from nowhere, which we interpret to mean that it has come out of ourselves, that we have spontaneously arisen. The origin of our thoughts and our sense of self are two parts of the user illusion.

We are built to act with a sense of autonomy. If we have the sense of being governed by a long chain of rules, situations, obligations, and consequences, then we'd have great trouble responding to situations. We need to see things simply in order to act within a context we understand and in accordance with the rhythms we perceive. Our minds need to start with a simple game.



Analogy with Vision

Our circle of acuity is small, a circle of 1 degree diameter, the size of your thumbnail held at arm's length. Our visual awareness is built from moving this circle over areas of interest in order to create a map of what we see.

Outside of this circle our vision is peripheral and our acuity is poor. We scan our environment by moving our circle of acuity but never create anything more than a small amount of detail. Our eyes see

the world through a fogged glass and our circle of acuity traces lines of detail like a finger clears tracks of transparency through the condensation.

We create a map of peripheral vision automatically built from our fuzzy, unresolved peripheral vision. This low resolution peripheral map is criss-crossed with lines of acuity created by our small circle of focused vision. Our brain interpolates details in these peripheral areas so that our visual map is consistent with our general blur in conjunction with the thin lines of focused vision.

Our actual visual map of whatever is in front of us is uneven and irregular. It's a kind of tangled weaving of past details, out of date to varying degrees, and largely empty of detail. Yet we are hardly aware of this map's structure or any of the creative effort we've put into creating it.

We think we see everything and we persist in this belief in spite of being unable to describe more than a tiny set of details. We think we see, but, in fact, we perceive very little and presume most of what we see.

Try these simple experiments. Right after you navigate through a familiar environment, your kitchen or bedroom, spend a moment to reflect on what you saw. What you remember you saw is a combination of a small amount of what you did see and a large amount of what you assumed from familiar peripheral details.

Now walk through an unfamiliar and detailed environment, such as through a wooded path or a busy street. Some place where you have not had the benefit of stopping and examining everything around you. When you reflect, you'll realize that the only details you saw were those that helped you navigate.

You may not remember seeing anything at all beyond what was in front of you. If you do remember any detail, then you'll probably have a fairly static memory of it, like a snapshot or a cameo. You may think that you only remember a few things but, in fact, these are probably the only things you bothered to identify. The rest of your surroundings, the vast majority of it, you saw only vaguely and didn't think about at all.

What you're aware of in vision are the elements that impress upon your mind. You are not aware of the indistinct elements you actually saw and from which you inferred the identity and triangulated the position of the objects you recognized. You only remember that you saw these objects, in spite of the fact that you hardly saw them at all. You saw parts of what you think are objects and filled most of you thought using memories and imagination.

Threshold Theory

I assert this basically models how you think. You're only aware of the thoughts that you recognize, which you've assembled from smaller bits of thought that are too small, brief, or elemental to be memorable. You are not aware of having had these smaller thoughts as they don't correspond to images, words, or ideas. Your thoughts are woven from a loose tangle of what I call "oughts."

In analogy with the cells at the back of our retina, these oughts are triggered by small acts of conception. These would be memories, associations, impressions, reflections, and perceptions none of which make it to consciousness but which we are subliminally aware. In the same way that our visual cortex recognizes patterns in our visual field, various parts of our consciousness recognize patterns in our “cognitive field,” except that the cognitive field is not planar, it has many dimensions. In either case, it’s not until we have found a pattern that we consciously recognize a thought.

This is my threshold theory. Our minds are full of “oughts,” a sort of churning mass of impressions and associations that change with new information and as a result of themselves. We throttle down what we take in so as to avoid being overwhelmed, and we throttle down how we react to what we take in so as to be able to maintain focus and build thoughts of some coherence and duration.

The breadth of this coherence, the amount of associations it includes, and the duration of our attention are determined by the rhythms of our brain. Some people’s attention is short and focused while others is broad and enduring.

Not only could a person have other combinations of awareness, such as short in duration but broad in scope, but our breadth of awareness differs by subject. Some people are good with numbers, others are good with words, others are good with images, and still others have a refined body awareness.

Each of us has particular content-related skills. Positive and negative life experience have made us more interested, attentive, perceptive, and responsive to certain areas of interest. On the positive side, we have built our identity on certain preconceptions of ourselves, such as being smart, funny, insightful, or attractive. We are particularly attentive to events around us that relate to these aspects of ourselves. We pay start to attention to things before we know exactly why or what we’re paying attention to, we simply perceive events that might be relevant to us and this attracts our attention. We are responding to the evocation of “oughts” that are not yet fully thoughts. Our subconscious awareness leads us through our environment before our conscious awareness knows what we’re looking at.

Bigger thoughts come from smaller thoughts. Not really smaller in size, but less thought-like. We have to take our external awareness somewhat off-line in order to apply our minds to the construction of larger thoughts from smaller thoughts. While we’re thinking we become less situationally aware.

Smaller thoughts come from our indiscernible oughts. These small thoughts emerge subliminally but they do require some investment. We can’t be putting together all possible ideas at once, we do exert a level of subliminal focus. We do this by letting our minds range over relevant associations while we await the assembly of an idea.

You may have had the experience of trying to remember a word or a name, and while you’re trying to grasp that memory your mind is ranging over associations that are similar to it, such as images of a face or locations where something took place. These diversions in our attention help us get our bearing in the retrieval of memory and the assembly of thoughts.



Oughts

Thoughts are made of oughts that are not quite whole thoughts, they are aspects of memories and ideas, not even whole words but only aspects of a noun or verb or something that's not even linguistic, like part of a feeling, an inkling.

Imagine these oughts populate our mind like a dense garden of wind chimes, and when ideas or perceptions strike us, some of these chimes ring. We don't hear them clearly, as our minds put a damper on their background noise, but we become aware of the sound and our attention is drawn toward these particular sounds.

Some of these oughts connect to each other through reason, that is to say we think there are cause and effect relationships between them. Others are related to memories or sensations in our body, things that have been wired into us through experience. When these connections are sufficiently "hard wired" we don't have to think at all as the thoughts arise spontaneously. This is the case with muscle memory, such as learning to play a musical instrument, or it can hijack our thoughts involuntarily, such as the incessant musical jingle that starts to annoy us.

In the next installment on this topic I'll present more details of how this model works, and how it explains both normal and abnormal thought processes.

