Thinking

In his discussion of what thinking is in *How We Think,* John Dewey cites examples of mental activity which have often been associated with thinking. Stream of consciousness, imagining and believing, deal with thoughts and ideas, but are not representative of reflective thinking for Dewey, since reflective thinking is a process which is initiated by the presence of a particular problem and continues as a "consecutive ordering"[1] of ideas, each building on the last. Reflective thinking finds itself heading in the direction of a conclusion. It is not just a random free flow of ideas, but rather a cohesive connection, carefully deliberating and examining to reach a satisfactory end.

Two phases of reflective thought are outlined by Dewey, "(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity."[2] Difficulty in understanding thoughts, ideas, or situations opens the doorway to reflective thinking. Imagination and belief may have their place in reflective thought insofar as the imagination may offer suggestions of ideas that, according to Dewey, have not yet been realized, while a belief, if not blindly accepted but examined and reflected upon, may become a purpose for reflective thinking. When imagination is strictly entertainment and beliefs accepted unconditionally, no reflection takes place.

Dewey describes thinking as beginning in a "forked road situation" in which man examines and observes his information, considers his alternatives and carefully makes his decision about which road to take after much deliberation. Investigation and critical consideration of ideas form the basis of a good thinker for Dewey. Beliefs and ideas accepted with little disturbance offer no ground for reflective thought.

"The nature of the problem fixes the end of thought, and the end controls the process of thinking."[3] Once a difficulty has presented itself, a resolution must be sought and the need for a solution gives reflective thinking a purposeful direction. A plan for reaching a solution involves a patient perusal of all of the possible ideas or routes at one's disposal. Given data and suggestions offered from past experiences, help the reflective thinker to arrive at a carefully deliberated conclusion.

In Chapter Three of *Pixie, P*ixie is trying to fall off to sleep when she is suddenly confronted with two loose teeth. "I guess I was pushing my tongue against my teeth when suddenly I realized that two of my teeth were loose. In fact, they were so loose I could get the tip of my tongue between them and my gum. I jumped out of bed and ran across the hall." "Momma, momma," I yelled, "my teeth are all coming out!" 16/4-9. This episode is a perfect illustration of Dewey's notion that thinking begins with a difficulty. In this case, the difficulty is one that is physically felt. The feeling of loose teeth is enough to get anyone's thought processes going. Pixie's difficulty initiates a series of ideas about teeth. Pixie's father explains that a tooth gets pushed out by a new tooth that is growing underneath it. Pixie thinks about what he says, but does not fully accept his explanation. She considers the possibility that she will not get new teeth and pursues this idea with questioning. "Daddy, if I don't get new teeth, couldn't we just plant a few, like you plant a little tree?" 17/1. Pixie's question demonstrates that she is relying on her past experience of plants taking root, but does not have sufficient knowledge about the growth of teeth to make her solution workable.

Imagination adds to Pixie's reflective process when she says, "I tried to imagine myself looking into a mirror: nine years old and false teeth!" 16/19. This thought leads Pixie to question further about how teeth know when to fall out.

Later in the passage, Pixie becomes frustrated when her father makes the analogy between people's teeth and lizard's tails. Her frustration is the result of an earnest desire to have her questions answered. The entrance of the lizard story may spark Pixie's imagination, but for the moment it does not represent for her a "consecutive ordering" which will aid her in reaching a conclusion concerning the acquisition of new teeth.

Pixie has permitted the feeling of loose teeth to act as a difficulty which opens the way to reflective thought. Dewey would probably feel that Pixie has served him well in illustrating how the reflective thought process begins with a problem which leads to a resolution. The path to that resolution involves an investigative search of ideas and alternatives, coupled with a careful consideration of data and suggestions from previous experiences.

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Footnotes

1. John Dewey, *"How We Think,* (D. C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1933), p. 4.
2. Ibid, p. 12.
3. Ibid, p. 15.

Bibliography

Dewey, J. *How We Think.* Boston, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1933.

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