

# The Practice of Awareness

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## *An Evaluation of the Animal Rationale: Current State and Evolution*

*by Aucke Douwes Isema*

The most noticeable characteristic of the *animal rationale* as it exists today is a general refusal to think. Thoughts are generally met with an automatic impulse to finish them as quickly as possible, doubts are dismissed as flaws or a waste of time, and questions are provided with immediate answers. The less time for thought, the more time for action. Action is valued over thought: if thought has a purpose, it is subservient to action. At times thought may be regarded as necessary, to determine the right course of action, but most of the time the course of action is predetermined in cultural context, in social structures and in specific enterprises within such structures. The role of thought is to understand the required course of action as quickly as possible and to address specific hindrances to the ventures that by general consensus constitute the goals of life. What remains of thought after this is a by-product, a random chatter, a faculty most used to worry over trivia that most individuals would shut off if they could.

The direct result of this limiting of thought is a limited consciousness, indeed as limited as possible. It restricts knowledge – as a product of thought – to solving practical problems. Thinking is considered to be done well if it is done quickly, ideally in an almost automatic problem-triggers-solution way. Ironically, this problem solving ability becomes more habitual as it becomes less conscious, and so it falls into trial-and-error, and even the persisting of mistakes. The more result-oriented this type of thinking becomes, the less efficient. A more serious problem with this paradigm of ‘thinking’ is that awareness of what constitutes the good life deteriorates, as no thought is employed to generate this knowledge. The, often mistaken, decisions that have led to existing consensus over the implied goals of life and the end-purposes of all action, are no longer evaluated. These decisions together determine an implicit concept of ‘good’ that directs all action. And, if this implicit concept of ‘good’ is questioned, this is seen as an attack on the machinery that strives to realize it – an act of non-compliance that, if inadequately articulated, will even be seen as an illness.

I don’t know of a time in history with a more hostile attitude towards development of a conscious life through the questioning of prevailing notions of purpose and meaning since Socrates drained the poisoned cup, as there is less resistance and regret towards that hostile attitude than there was towards the Inquisition. The prevailing bread-and-circuses mentality of the youth may be what saves the present-day Socrates from persecution: it is unlikely that he could spoil

today's youth with his aberrant quest for conscious being. But today such "passionate striving" for a "wisdom" of this kind is very rare, and it is actively being marginalized wherever it still exists. The practice of "philosophy" *de facto* has become an endless exegesis of texts that appear more hermetic and esoteric the longer this practice is continued – perhaps because any serious study and debate only seems to be undertaken after the demise of the author, when they are no longer available for comment.

However that may be, the practice of expanding consciousness, whether explicitly in an ethical context or not, and whether or not seen as a form of thought, is rarely found outside the likes of a Buddhist monastery. Interestingly, Buddhism has been a very popular way of balancing the frenzied exclusion of thought in everyday life, as Yoga is the current trend to this end. Not surprisingly, in the modern western world, these practices are all form and no content, the purpose being to counter-act the detrimental effects of continuously suppressing the mental presence, not to structurally develop a more conscious existence. For, after the daily session of spiritual exertion, the unremitting demands of pragmatic society have not lost their grip, and quickly render the efforts, however seriously undertaken, to mere recreation.

That is to say, the evolution of the *animal rationale* has taken a definite direction, and that direction is to transform rationality into something automatic, to resemble the operations of a computer more and more, as if the computer was the design for man's future evolutionary state, if not itself the life form to succeed the *animal rationale*. All the same, the elements of *choice* and *volition* that support this transformation are key to its very possibility, and to the possibility of an alternative course. To see this, check if the following statement applies to you:

"Through my actions and inactions I endorse the limiting of thought."

Do you ever dismiss a thought when you fear it would "over-complicate" things; feel a need to have an opinion; think something is "interesting" only to drop the matter; think that "getting too philosophical" won't "get you anywhere"; think that "this is just how things work"; feel a need to disrupt silence without cause; hate waiting; get bored? Then yes, you may consider the statement to apply to you. You actively endorse the limiting of thought.

The *animal rationale* has a tremendous power that he uses by default as he meets reality: *assent*. Given the conditions of his existence – that he is in some way *aware* – this faculty of reason is crucial to his survival: to settle for- and adjust to the reality that he perceives. Strictly speaking, this "acceptance" is inherent to the process of perceiving, as it adds to a filter of what may and may not be perceived, and how it is perceived. One could hardly say that it is a faculty to be controlled at will, if not for the possibility of *dissent*. Moreover, rather than to immediately

assent or dissent, *animal rationale* also has the ability to *suspend* his judgment – to investigate, contemplate, or simply wait to make up his mind as to the nature of what he perceives.

Herein lies the tremendous evolutionary advantage of man. Assent may be the default operation, it is not automatic. Reality may also be perceived as unsuitable, even objectionable, or simply worth further exploration – and so the way things are may *consciously* and *deliberately* be changed. The *animal rationale* can decide to do something about it when he sees that things are bad. For this he depends on two things: an ability to test if the default operation is appropriate, and an ability to override it. And as he may arrange a computer to override defaults under certain conditions, the *animal rationale* possesses the ability to do that of his own accord under any conditions.

But he rarely uses that ability nowadays. This may be because reality is generally fine as it is. Things are what they are and to perceive them is no more than to give them a forming ‘stamp of approval’, a reassuring acknowledgement of the known order of things, which may be done without any conscious effort. Or it may be that people nowadays are simply out of practice in their ability to test and override the default operation in perceiving reality. The fact is that people know to dissent immediately, as if automatically, when a discomfort, or a hindrance to a goal comes up, but outside of immediate response, the faculty is virtually out of commission. The ability to suspend judgment is generally even aggressively avoided, and only to be applied when compelling new information may be expected in the short term, for fear of the resulting feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, and inability to act. And so general consensus dictates that it is better to pass faulty judgment than not to pass judgment at all.

This is not coincidental with, but caused by the trend of limiting thought, apparent in the current evolution of the *animal rationale*. Because of the continuing marginalization of thought, the faculty to assent to- and dissent from reality is displaced from consciousness, as the conscious existence grows smaller and smaller. And because of that, people even grow unaware of a possibility to test if things are fine the way they perceive them, as such concepts as a “moral compass” become unfashionable, and are increasingly identified with compliance to some preexisting rule – programming, if you will. To in this way give in to the pressure to think faster and less is perhaps best compared with ticking off the license agreement of some software without reading it, a very common event nowadays. In doing so, even though you aren’t fully aware of the terms, you can’t say that you didn’t actively agree to them of your own accord, since you had every opportunity for careful consideration.

Now, when I say that the conscious existence grows “smaller”, what I mean is that awareness is only rarely practiced. To *be* aware means to *do* it. People often use

phrases such as “I am aware of that”, whereby they usually mean “I know that”, or “you may expect me to take that into account” – that they have access to some memory should it be triggered, so to speak. To call this “aware” is all very fine, but it is not what I mean here. What I *do* mean I shall try to make clear ostensively.

Although I said earlier that I consider Socrates a proponent of conscious being, far be it from me to claim that philosophy would be the only true practice to expand consciousness. Socrates may be the most famous champion of the scrutiny of knowledge, his particular *method* of scrutiny is what nominates him as a proponent of conscious being. Rather than proposing a method of testing knowledge according to predefined parameters, like the methods customary in empirical science, Socrates’ method placed great emphasis on the live and conscious presence, the personal stake, and the mental strain that is needed to undertake the quest for knowledge. This obviously qualifies knowledge differently. In empirical science, a particular proposition that ascribes particular qualities or regularities to particular things or events and that is favored by a particular method of testing may be called knowledge. Whereas the knowledge that Socrates was after pertains less to the qualities of things than to the *qualifying* of things, his method of investigating being very much in tune with that which he sought to investigate. This is what makes philosophy at least one of the ways to develop a conscious presence.

But there are many other ways, each of them qualifying the conscious presence in a different way. For instance, to focus the attention on some object, for an extended period of time, like you do in bird spotting or cloud watching. Through such an exercise, the conscious presence is qualified by its particular *bearing* – this conscious state may itself be called “focus”. Meditation is different, in that it establishes a conscious presence that does not necessarily have a *particular* bearing. Composing music qualifies the conscious presence as *tuned*. A game of chess is different still, in that, like in solving a mathematical equation, the attention is diverted from the realm of “real” objects – the chessboard, or the blackboard – to the realm of the purely ideal. Dreaming, daydreaming and fantasising are unique in that the realm of the real is transposed to the realm of the ideal, so to speak, as if to shuffle the cards of both realms together for a new game. All of these ways to establish a conscious presence are what I mean by “awareness”. Thus, to practice awareness is to develop a conscious presence, in whatever way. Some may favor the way of philosophy, some may favor meditation, but any other way may be worth practicing, to the same end.

Currently, most people do not purposefully and assiduously practice *any* way to establish a conscious presence. And if they are fortuitously struck by some form of awareness they are immediately distracted, as if some alerter system shifts their attention, triggered when the ‘operator’ is considered ‘idle’. At the risk of overextending the metaphor: just like we can override the default faculty of

judgment in perception, so do we have the ability to override this ‘alerter system’ that continuously shifts our attention, when we operate outside its parameters. And its parameters are *action*. The alerter system disallows any conscious activity that does not support a go-and-do ethics in a way that closely resembles acute stress response.

That it requires considerable strain to override seemingly automatic rational functions emphasizes the importance of deliberate effort to practice this ability. Both the thoughtless as-is acceptance of reality in perception and the cursory nature of attention – that is apparent in our general propensity to be distracted – are welcome faculties, as they contribute to quick recognition of- and alertness towards reality. But as the paradigm of rationality develops toward a model of automated input-output processing, as is evident in the current evolution of the *animal rationale*, these faculties are no longer at our disposition, as we lose the ability to make use of them facultatively. So, as we limit our room for thought, we limit our conscious presence, and thereby our freedom – freedom to choose to adapt to the way things are, or to change them.

I call these developments *evolution* because of their seeming design to adapt to the demands that an increasingly action-based and result-oriented ethics puts on us. Demands that are self-imposed, if only because they are actively embraced, even unwittingly, like a software license agreement. And so this adaptation is chosen, but with it the ability to choose it diminishes, as it limits the faculties that are needed to keep this a choice – that is, to preserve the ability to choose differently. And it is this ability that ultimately constitutes the evolutionary advantage of the *animal rationale*. On that account, I implore you to preserve these faculties, in whatever way you can, by actively establishing and expanding your conscious presence, through the practice of awareness. With that I wish you the best of luck, and might I add, the future of our species depends on it.

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