The Stop: The Practice of Reanimating the Universe Within and Without

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ONE

There are moments when the world that I look out at seems drained of illumination and colouration. It appears dull and flat, lacking vitality and significance. In such moments, I doubt if I could care too much about anything. Indifference and apathy overcome me. Not surprisingly, when this happens, I do not feel the most alive myself. The two are likely interconnected; the inner and the outer mirror each other. How the world appears to me and how I feel within seem inseparable.

This matter of perception has very serious import. When we do not see the world as alive, vital, significant in its own right and endowed with its own subjectivity, we think nothing of doing whatever we want to do to the world. We destroy it for our own convenience, amusement and profit. The world that has no life and subjectivity of its own, at our disposal, is disposable. It exists only for us, as our objects, resources, tools, and raw materials. Hence, it only has instrumental value and no intrinsic worth. The degradation and destruction of the world at an unprecedented scale that we witness today are essentially linked to the instrumentalist way we perceive the world. Hence, it is our self-responsibility to take care of our perception so that the world appears to ourselves as fully animated, vital, illuminated, and sacred. Resacralization of our perception is the most urgent ethical call today. Each of us must respond to this call and undertake a transformation of our perceptions. Such is our ethical obligation at the foundational
level of our psyche.

If I make this problem of instrumentalist perception sound like a contemporary malaise unknown to our ancestors, I owe you a clarification. The call for working with our perceptions is an ancient one, known to Socrates and other Axial thinkers and spiritual leaders. Socrates berated his Athenian citizens for neglecting the “care of the soul” which aimed at perceptions of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, and for being obsessed with the pursuit of fame and wealth, that is, instrumentalist ways of life.

Similarly, the Daoist and Buddhist traditions include various meditational practices that aim at establishing in ourselves a state of being from which flows vital and animated perceptions of the world. The degeneration of perception from the animated to the indifferent must have begun long ago, at the cross-section of the fading oral culture and the inception of literate culture. Speculation aside, one thing is certain: the problem we are addressing is not merely a modernist affair.

Nonetheless, the urgency of the problem is particular to our time as our civilization has entrenched itself almost completely in instrumentalism, making the intrinsic, animated perception of the world appear an outdated, primitive remnant of mythic culture. “Who has a use” we ask, “for such a quixotic thing as animated perception?” I say it is not a matter of use; it is a matter of life…and death. The whole world becomes violable and disposable when we can no longer see it as alive and sacred. Herein lies our challenge to education. Can we educate ourselves and our young to perceive the world as animated and sacred?

TWO

Not all percepts are of one and the same kind. Percepts are predicated upon the perceiver’s state of being or quality of consciousness. This is easy enough to experientially ascertain. Recalling your experience, compare how the world around you appeared to you when you were very angry to when you were full of tender pathos. Like a dye that impregnates fabric, the dye of consciousness—how one feels and thinks of the world moment by moment—stains one’s percepts. Our concern here is with a devitalized perception of the world, that is, the world appearing as no more than a collection of “things,” “stuff,” a backdrop, like painted scenery on a stage, lacking vitality and subjectivity of its own. Such a world is experienced as inanimate and indifferent. Instrumentalist perceptions and treatment are only a logical response to the world perceived that way. What produces such perceptions? What is responsible for such qualities of perception?

In his work, The Stop, Appelbaum takes a close phenomenological look at how perception ordinarily operates. Among other things, what he realizes is that ordinary perception is “blind” and devitalized. The reasons for this phenomenon have to do with the activity of the conceptual mind itself. This is how Appelbaum describes the conceptual, the discursive mind, which he calls “rational automatism”:

The attention is repeatedly, ceaselessly, and unknowingly given over to an onrushing stream of associative thought. Habits, dreams, assurances, secret fears, cherished beliefs, and hopeless infatuations—together with their objects—are therein perpetually revalidated. At no time is notice taken of a gap between two thoughts. The smooth rational function annihilates the pause by which real and unreal come under question. An endless automatic movement of thought obscures the stop.

It is easy enough to verify the above phenomenon’s existence by introspection. Rare indeed would be a person who does not naturally experience the above onrushing of mental content. But, we may ask, “How does rational automatism generate devitalized percepts?”

Perception requires attention, and attention requires one to work with one’s psychic energy with special care. How the psychic energy is secured, conserved, channeled, and consumed depends on the different ways we attend to the encountered world. Rational automatism seems
to do two related things in the economy of psychic energy. It continually drains off psychic energy, even if only minutely in each moment. It is like having a slowly leaking tap. If water pressure is likened to one’s psychic energy level, the slow leakage in the form of the workings of rational automatism lowers the pressure level, that is, the vitality level. Rational automatism is thus dissipative. But more seriously, rational automatism seems to prevent the securing of the source of vitality itself which is the Ground of our Being. Beingness itself is the ultimate source of our vitality. If the perception that takes place is not securely and optimally connected to this source, because of the obstructions created by rational automatism, then such perception becomes devitalized.

Again, I invite the reader to undertake a self-experiment in order to validate the observation and theory proposed here. Look at something, say the landscape outside your window; as you find yourself worrying about something, like your unstable finances, your troubling relationship, an uncertain scholarship or grant prospect, and so on, note how the landscape appears to you in terms of your felt quality of vitality. If your discursive preoccupation is great, then, not only what you see may appear abstract, distant, and unanimated, you may not even register visually what is in front of you! Whatever your eyes are seeing might as well be invisible and non-existent at this moment. This happens all the time, even if not so drastically as I suggest above. In our daily operations, we may perceptually process a lot of objects in the world while our mind is quite preoccupied with mental “stuff.” We may notice them enough to avoid collisions with doors, enough to attach names to the objects in the world we encounter, and enough to identify the objects’ import to us. But in all this mental processing, we may not have really connected to the reality of the objects—the “suchness” of things, as Buddhists term it—we perceptually encounter. In order to connect to the reality of things and beings we encounter, we have to meet them on the Ground of Being as one being encountering another being. This is the most foundational ontic encounter, a being-to-being encounter. Notice, that for this encounter to happen, one has to be connected to, and established in, the Ground of Being. One has to be in touch with Being. But, as I theorized above, this connection is obstructed by rational automatism. The Ground of Being is covered up, out of sight, out of touch. The more we are caught up in the discursive “stuff,” the greater is the risk of losing our grounding in the source of vitality. The hyperactivity of rational automatism cuts us off from the source of vitality.

At this point, I would like to return to Appelbaum and see how his conceptualization might help me better articulate my understanding of the source of vitality which I have been calling the Ground of Being. For Appelbaum, this source of vitality lies in the body itself, but here, we must understand rightly what is meant by the body. The body we speak of here is not the highly objectified, imagistic body that our consumeristic culture is obsessed with. Rather, it is the breathing, sensing, feeling body which directly participates in the materiality of the world. “Flesh” might be a better word to communicate my meaning.

The notion I want to get at is the body as the matrix of animation, as the carnal container, however ephemeral, of life. It is in this vein that Appelbaum speaks of the body’s “organic,
archaic level of experience” (p. 21). I cannot think of a better example of this “organic, archaic level of experience” than our breathing. Most of the time, of course, we let breathing happen without much awareness on our part. But when we do bring breathing into our sustained awareness (or vice versa), we may indeed sense this deep, primordial, organic vitality in the experience of breathing.

We may ask, however, what the connection is between experiencing one’s vitality and experiencing the world as a vital, alive place. The connection is that the former is a pre-condition for the latter. In a way, this should be no surprise. After all, we perceive and sense the world through our bodies. If our internal sense of our body is not vital, then the world experienced by our body will not be vital. Thus there is a sense of correspondence between the internal environment of the self and the external environment of the world. Improvement in the former will result in improvement for the latter. To help ourselves to see the world as imbued with aliveness, we have to connect to the source of vitality.

The clear, unobstructed flow of “organic, archaic energy” from the Ground of Being is not easy to get hold of, let alone sustain. The flow is easily diverted, dissipated, obstructed. By what? By our conceptualizing mind that constantly spews up discursive thought constructs that act like the litter on the Ground of Being. With enough litter, the ground is not visible or touchable. It is covered up. Likewise for the Ground of Being. What this suggests is that we need to discipline the conceptualizing mind so that it will not cover up the Ground of Being with mind “stuff.” This suggestion is good in theory but terribly difficult in practice.

Everywhere we turn, for 24 uninterrupted hours each day, mental “stuff” materializes in print, sound, and images, and accosts and assaults us. Nowadays, people are so addicted to the media culture that they just cannot have enough information and communication. At the flick of a switch and a button, people can flood themselves with an interminable torrent of discursive “stuff.” If we ask why people are so addicted to the discursive, the answer seems to be analogous to the case of people who are addicted to junk food. Junk food does nothing to nourish the body. Hence, ironically, cellular starvation occurs while the person becomes overweight. Analogously, discursive stuffs are low in vital energy, and unless they can be suffused with the “organic, archaic” energy from the Ground of Being, they do not nourish our being. We become ontically starved while glutted by discursive stuffs. But in our ignorance, instead of ending the addiction and seeking out the real source of vitality, we try to consume more and more of the discursive.

This is not to say that the discursive has no merit for us and that we should eliminate it. Our discursive mind is a gift, a precious capacity that human beings are endowed with. It is a tool that can help us do certain things very well. It enables us to figure out the world through conceptualization and calculation. We should keep it and use it, but we must be extremely cautious about its misuse, overuse, and abuse. In our present civilizational mode of life, especially in the paradigm of western culture, discursivity is out of balance. Hyperdiscursivity is drowning us all.

Indulgence in the discursive is energy draining, dissipative. This sort of dissipation is different from the physical exhaustion that results from physical labour. One feels listless, discontent, apathetic, indifferent—low in vitality. Like a slowly leaking pipe with numerous hairline cracks and holes, our hyper-engagement in the discursive drains us of psychic energy. Ending this leak is a necessary first step, if we want to recover the source of our own vitality. Here is how Appelbaum explains the process of ending it:

The stop stops percipient energy from animating the conceptual frame. Energy that no longer magnetizes ideas and concepts remains in its organic habitat. Such energy, by virtue of the stop, no longer escapes the fleshy folds of the body. Instead, it energizes a network of relations constituting the organism, thereby resensitizing the milieu and awakening a responsiveness uniquely nonmental. “Body” ceases to be an idea within the frame of ideas, implying other ideas such as “extension” and “motion.” It becomes instead a container of an unknown identity through which more currents of sensation, themselves percipient and mindful of a reality to which the organism belongs. One’s body becomes available to an attentiveness of an entirely different
All disciplining involves stopping what is out of control, putting it into balance by recovering a proper context and directing the flow between the context (the Ground of Being in our case) and the focus (the discursivity). Disciplining the discursive involves arresting the incessant dissipative flow of mental stuffs and thereby disclosing the Ground of Being underneath. It then involves connecting the discursive back to the Ground of Being and thereby nourishing the discursive from the source.

Does this metaphorical talk make sense? What does all this mean experientially? Here is an experiment: close or half-close your eyes, anchor your attention on deep, slow breaths, while allowing one’s thoughts to come and go, without being attached to either their presence or absence. Eventually, as you are not fueling them with your interest in either following up on or eradicating them, they will fade more or less. Here, emptying your consciousness of all discursive stuffs would be a nearly impossible goal. Besides, our real goal is to get in touch with the Ground of Being. As long as one can get in touch with it, having some thoughts here and there will not cause problems.

As we can see here, the body plays a major role, in fact, the essential, indispensable role, in the recovery of the vital energy. When we arrest the ceaseless and automatic going-on of the discursive, thereby stopping the dissipation or leakage of the organic energy through this discursive, the “intellectual categories,” naturally there is more organic energy available to the awareness itself. The awareness grows more subtle, sensitive, receptive, and proprioceptive. Perception that occurs in this manner Appelbaum calls *percipience*, and he explains it as the “vibratory energy from the presence of the world—and, more than the world, the cosmos.”

We forget, in the midst of all the consumeristic ideas and images about our body, that the reality of our body is its participation in the Ground of Being—the source of vitality. Thus the body is our way of getting in touch with the Being. But as Appelbaum reminds us, if we continue to think of the body in terms of its extension and motion, and relate to it in this way, it cannot be the vehicle of liberation from the hyperdiscursivity.

We have to leave behind that way of thinking and experiencing. We have to learn to pay attention to the moment by moment arising of the sensations, for the sensations are the language of vitality. Here is Appelbaum again: “The body exists as a vitality or vital force through sensation, its vocabulary.” Speaking of the practice of stopping the discursive, Appelbaum says: “The stop is a vehicle for reengendering the body…it opens up to a secret text whose language becomes legible once the stop is cultivated. The secret of the text is its nearness to things, its lack of distance, its inseparability, its love of the world.” The love of the world is a gift that comes to one who practices the stop. To me, this love of the world is what is at the heart of becoming a moral being and leading a moral life.
In conclusion, then, I would like to propose a pedagogical call for re-animating our perception. Specifically, this is a call for doing our perception differently, namely, disclosing and reclaiming our source of vitality by way of the practice of the “stop.”

This is no small call, I understand, given the overwhelming tendency in our pedagogical practice to always draw students’ attention away from their sensing, feeling self—the sentient, percipient self—to abstract words and images which they are to process cognitively. The usual understanding of studying as information processing and students as information processors is anathema to my proposal that we animate our perception through the practice of the “stop.”


[6] I am still in the process of figuring out and working with this notion of psychic energy involved in attentional work. Appelbaum’s work has been an insightful source, but I am seeking other resources, both scientific and spiritual, to deepen and validate my understanding. By “psychic energy,” I mean basically just the felt vitality in the way we experience the world. For example, when I look at the bright blue sky, I feel greatly energized and am filled with a deep sense of vitality. Whether there is more to this notion than this is something to figure out by and by.
We would run into the question of empirical validity with this claim about the connection between feeling alive oneself and perceiving the world to be animate. As a claim, can it be empirically verified and justified? Although I have not myself done any empirical research to find out whether people do in fact enact this connection, from personal observations and hearing from others, I am strongly inclined to believe that such connection exists.

op. cit., 78.

Ibid., 83.

We owe to Descartes a stupendous philosophical articulation of this mechanistic view of the matter and body. It laid the foundation for modern materialism from the 17th century and onward. When I walk by fitness centers and see inside people putting their bodies through body-building exercises, I think of Descartes and his legacy of thinking of the body as a machine made of flesh.

It is instructive to note that the same emphasis on the importance of noticing the moment-by-moment arising of sensations is made in Mahasatipatthana Sutta, the best-known sutta on Buddha’s discourse on Mindfulness training. According to the Sutta, this awareness is necessary in order to understand how the contact is made between the self and the world. This Sutta is found in two scriptures: Majjhima Nikaya and Digha Nikaya.

op. cit., 78.

Ibid., 79

About the Author

Heesoon Bai obtained a Honours B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Alberta in 1979 and a Doctorate in Philosophy of Education from the University of British Columbia in 1996. In the long interval between these two degrees, she was intensely involved in educating her two children, the experience of which eventually led her to join the sub-discipline called the Philosophy of Education. In joining the field of Education, she hoped to render Philosophy as a tool and resource for the cultivation of individuals capable of enacting freedom grounded in personal knowledge and ethics. "Such freedom is what we call autonomy, and its fostering is what modern education, despite all its ills and contradictions, is fundamentally committed to.”

Currently, her research focuses on moral perception and attention, which she is attempting to centralize in the field of moral education and environmental education. "Moral education and environmental education are still dominated by the positivistic and behavioristic paradigm that tries to fix individuals by means of targeting their behaviour. But individuals are the expressions, although admittedly diverse, of the society and culture, and behaviour is an expression of how we see and relate to the world.”