

'THE MASTER OF CREATIVE THINKING'  
INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY



TEXTBOOK  
OF WISDOM

Shortcuts to Becoming Wiser  
Than Your Years

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Edward de Bono** is the leading authority in the field of creative thinking and originator of the term ‘lateral thinking’ and the Six Thinking Hats. Highly regarded internationally, his instruction has been sought by governments, schools and leading corporations around the world.

De Bono’s thinking methods provide practical, creative tools to make it possible for anyone – not just people considered ‘arty’ – to be creative on demand. These are based on an understanding of the logic of the brain’s self-organizing information system, which forms asymmetric patterns. This is why creative thinking can be seen as a formal and deliberate skill and not a mysterious talent. De Bono’s system of lateral thinking is so powerful that the use of just one of his methods produced 21,000 ideas in a single afternoon at a workshop with a steel company.

In the Middle Ages the influence of the Church gave rise to good thinking for finding the truth, which in turn served us well in science. Edward de Bono believes this is ‘ebne’ (excellent but not enough). Culturally, we have never developed thinking for creating value but it is now time we treated it much more seriously. As part of this initiative Edward de Bono has taught thinking directly in schools and his methods are in use in thousands of schools worldwide.

Research has shown improvement in all subjects, increased employment and much-reduced criminal behaviour.

Edward de Bono holds an MD (Malta), MA (Oxford), DPhil (Oxford), PhD (Cambridge) and Ddes (RMIT). He has had faculty appointments at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London and Harvard, and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He has written 83 books, translated into 42 languages, in the field of creativity and thinking, including the global bestsellers *Six Thinking Hats* and *Lateral Thinking*.

## EDITORS NOTE

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Edward de Bono is the leading authority in the field of creative thinking and the publishers are delighted to be bringing this thought-provoking work back into print.

The author was writing in a different political and social era, and many of the examples he cites offer a snapshot of this time. However, though there have been considerable changes – politically, socially and economically – over the last thirty years or so, this important book explores key issues which still require attention, even in today’s fast-paced world, and many parallels can be drawn with life today. The fundamental principles and themes in this book will encourage us to change the way we think; as the author himself says, ‘In a rapidly changing world we are finding that our thinking is inadequate to meet the demands put on it’.

Edward de Bono’s teaching is as valid today as when this book was first published, and will resonate with readers for many years to come.

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

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The sections are numbered for ease of reference.

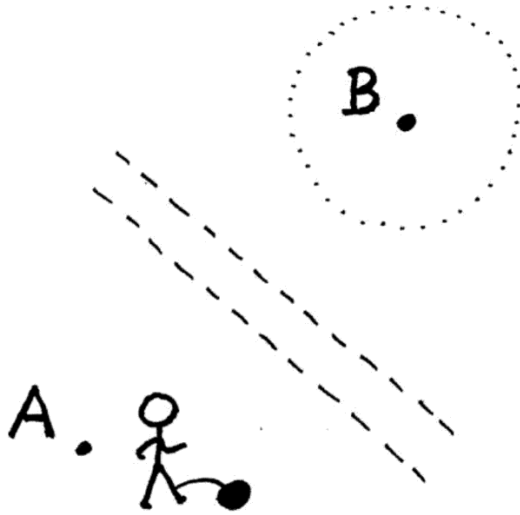
The 'gap' between each section is indicated by a line. If the gap is large the line is longer.

# # 1

There is a person at point A. For some reason you want to prevent that person from moving to B. What might you do?

1. You might give no information about B, so that the person is not even aware that B exists.
2. You might give misleading information, so that the person is looking in the wrong direction for B.
3. You might make sure that there is no road between A and B. So there is a 'gap' or the absence of any path.
4. You might build a wall between A and B.
5. You might dig a ditch between A and B. The ditch does not have to be very wide.
6. You might build a wall (or ditch) around B.
7. You might fix a heavy ball and chain to the person's ankle. This would restrict movement in all directions – including moving to B.

You can probably think of a lot more ways of preventing that person getting to B.



You want to make it as difficult as possible for the person at A to get to B.

## # 2

By far the most effective way of preventing that person getting to B is to provide an easy and attractive path to C.

In all the other ways the person has B firmly in mind and is seeking ways to get there – except where there is no information at all about B. The person might be seeking ways to climb walls, cross ditches and remove the ball and chain.

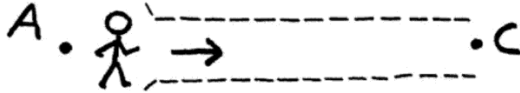
With the easy and attractive path to C, the person forgets all about B and no longer notices B or the desire to get there.

It is because the mind works this way that ‘wisdom’ is so important. We do not always want to take the easy and obvious path that our minds and our feelings set out in front of us.

It is the same with ‘creativity’. We do not always want to take the easy and obvious traditional path.



B.



By making it very easy and attractive for the person at A to get to C you make it impossible to get to B.

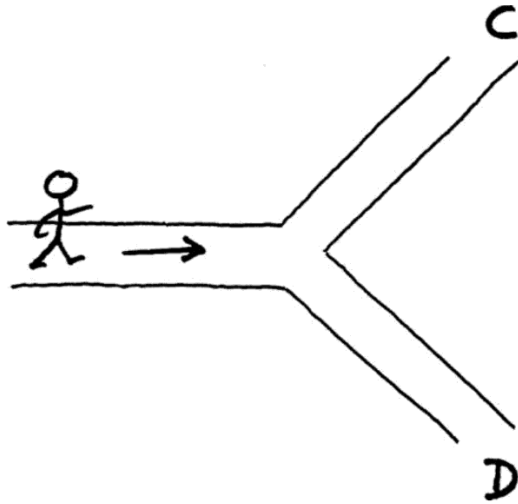
### # 3

Two days ago someone told me that he had come back from an international meeting in Japan. At that meeting there had been an admiral who was very definite, decisive and dogmatic.

Imagine someone walking along the road in the countryside. That person comes to a fork in the road. The person may know the road, may read the road signs, may consult a map, may choose the fork going in the general direction of choice or may choose randomly. What is clear is that the walker has to choose fork C or D. The walker cannot pursue both roads at the same time.

It is possible that the background experience of the dogmatic admiral was the same. You cannot steer a ship in two different directions at the same time. So in steering a ship there is a need to be definite and to make decisions. I have no evidence at all that admirals, in general, are more dogmatic than other people. I am merely putting this forward as an illustrative possibility.

All this is very reasonable. You cannot walk along two roads at the same time and you cannot steer a ship in two different directions at the same time.



The walker along the road must choose between C and D. It is not possible to walk along both branches at the same time.

## # 4

An investment manager has to consider where to invest the funds that he or she manages. There is no point in putting all the funds into government securities or putting all the funds into the stock market or using all the funds as venture capital.

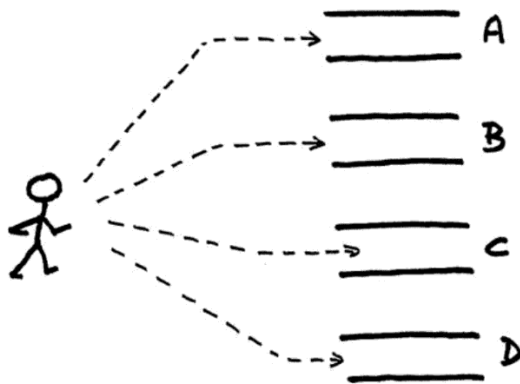
So the wise investment manager creates a portfolio. Some funds go into government securities. Some funds go into the stock market with blue-chip companies. Some funds are invested in the high-tech sector. Some funds are used for high-risk venture capital. All these things are done at the same time.

Contrast the investment manager with the admiral and the walker. The investment manager can do several different things, in parallel, at the same time. The walker and the admiral could not.

Which is the correct metaphor to keep in our heads to guide our choices, decisions and actions? The answer, of course, is both. It does not have to be one or the other.

Both metaphors have their place. We would not be very wise if we only kept one metaphor in our mind so that all decisions had to be 'one thing' or 'the other'. Nor would it be wise to assume that we could always do all things without making a decision.

It is wisdom which fills your minds with both 'possibilities'. Wisdom is much concerned with the richness of 'possibility'. It is wisdom which helps you decide the metaphor that is most relevant in any particular circumstance. In many cultures you cannot marry more than one person at a time. But there is no reason why you should not pursue different and parallel strategies in marketing. All your eggs do not have to be in one basket all the time.



In the portfolio model you can invest in A, B, C and D all at the same time. Contrast this with the 'road model'.

# INTRODUCTION

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## # 5

How dare anyone write a ‘textbook’ of wisdom?

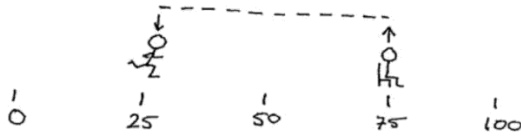
Surely wisdom is a matter of getting older and ‘wiser’? A good claret acquires a mellowness and maturity with age. You cannot accelerate the ageing process in wine. With time, the surface of a new building acquires the patina of age. You cannot fake that artificially.

As you get older you know more. You have experienced more. You have learned more things. You have made more mistakes. You have had more time to talk to other people and to learn from their experiences. More things have happened in your lifetime, both to you and to the world around. You have had longer to reflect on all these things. All this takes time. Perhaps ‘wisdom’ is simply a generous way of saying that there are some advantages to being old when there seem to be only disadvantages in most areas.

We begin to doubt this simple equating of wisdom with age (and a long white beard) when we find that some older people are not wise at all and some younger people are ‘wise beyond their years’.

Do you have to wait until you get old before you can become wise? Surely there are some general principles, guidelines and even ‘thinking tools’ that could help us to be wiser? We do not have to learn everything through personal

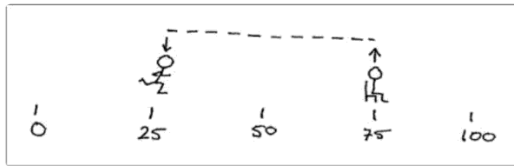
experience. We can also seek to benefit from the experience of others. That is what education is supposed to be about.



You do not have to have lived a long time to benefit from the experience of those who have.

Obviously, I do believe that there are enough useful things that can be learned about wisdom to fill a very short ‘textbook’ of wisdom. These are not all new things. They do not have to be. Engineers use wheels all the time. But the wheel was invented a long time ago.

Will reading this book make the reader wiser? It could. I hope it will. But reading a cookery book does not turn you into an instant gourmet chef. You need to show interest in what you are reading and also you need to practise. Then you might become a good cook. Some talent is also useful.



## # 6

Wisdom is not at all the same as cleverness. I have known many people who are very clever indeed within their own fields (even winning Nobel prizes) but not especially ‘wise’ outside their own fields of study. Cleverness is like a lens with a very sharp focus. Wisdom is more like a wide-angle lens.

In the same way, wisdom is not a function of intelligence. Many people whose education has been simple are much wiser than those who have learned a lot from books. The explanation is that ‘living’ may teach more about wisdom than traditional books (apart from this one).

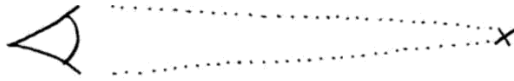
Wisdom is more about perspective than about detail. Cleverness is about how we get information and how we use information. Wisdom is about how the information fits into the world around and our own values.

Cleverness is like knowing, technically, how to cook a superb meal. Wisdom is like designing a meal to fit the available ingredients and also to fit what we feel like eating at this moment.

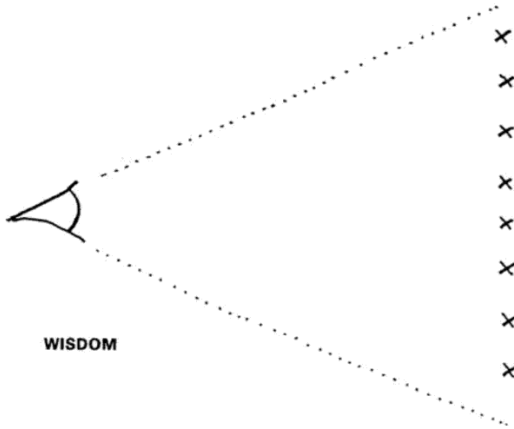
Cleverness is like having a library full of books. Wisdom is knowing which book to read at this moment.

Wisdom is the art with which perception crafts experience to serve our values.

A potter crafts the clay to create a pot that both serves a practical function and also pleases us aesthetically. This goes beyond mere technical skill, as Socrates would have appreciated, with his distinction between ‘technique’ and ‘virtue’.



**CLEVERNESS**



**WISDOM**

Cleverness is a narrow focus even if it is very sharp. Wisdom is a wide-angle focus which takes in much more.

## # 7

I have often said, and written, that humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the human brain. In information terms, reason is a relatively cheap commodity obtained by running any sorting system backwards.

Humour is significant for two reasons. The first reason is that humour indicates a special type of information system in the brain. Humour tells us, in broad terms, how the brain works. Humour indicates a self-organizing information system. This is not unlike the way rainfall on a landscape organizes itself into streams and rivers and valleys. In a similar way, information organizes itself into patterns.

There are the main patterns. Then there might be side patterns. Activity flows along the main pattern and the other patterns are suppressed. So the flow goes from A to B.

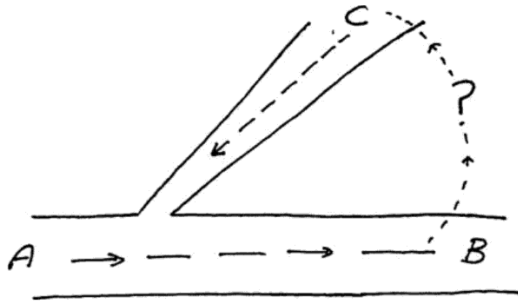
You cannot go from A to C. But you can easily go from C to A. Creativity involves ‘somehow’ getting to C and then, suddenly, seeing the path to A. The tools of lateral thinking help you move ‘laterally’ from the main track to C. Provocation is of great help. (I shall explain later – see page 00.)

In humour the situation or the teller of the story leads you along the main track and then, suddenly, takes you to C. Once there you see the ‘connection’ and, possibly, laugh.

The second reason that humour is so important is that humour takes place in ‘perception’. Outside technical matters, perception is the most important part of thinking. Traditional education may not have given you this impression. Most of the faults of thinking are faults of perception.

Wisdom takes place in the ‘perception’ area. Wisdom is about broader perception, deeper perception, richer perception, etc. If you have a good sense of humour you have the potential to be wise.





There is the main track set up by our sequence of experience. We go along this. We cannot get access to the side track. But if, somehow, we jump or move laterally to the side track then in hindsight it makes sense. The route from A to C is roundabout but from C to A is direct. This is the basis of both humour and creativity. Creative ideas are usually logical and even obvious in hindsight.

## # 8

The format of this book is a little bit unusual. There are no subheadings and sub-subheadings. There are notes and paragraphs. Sometimes the jump between one paragraph and another may be large.

There is no need to read the book from cover to cover. You can dip into the book and read a paragraph at a time. You can go back and read parts again. The intention is that the overlay of the different points and examples will gradually form a coherent picture. This is more like the way we learn from life itself. Things are not laid out neatly in boxes. We come across the same things from different angles. We taste the same fruit on different occasions. Gradually we build up our understanding of the world around us. This is the way I run my seminars. Sometimes participants feel insecure without a detailed road map. They

need to know exactly where they are going next. They need to know where they have just been. I tell them that it will unfold as we go along. There is a plan. It is not a matter of rambling or drifting. As the driver of the ‘coach’, I have the plan and the road map. Relax and enjoy the scenery.

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## **# 9**

Some of the matters in this book may have been touched upon in previous books of mine. There are fundamentals of mathematics which do not change or go in and out of fashion. There are a limited number of musical notes and it is through combinations of these basic notes that music is composed.

Since so much of my work is in the field of thinking, perception and creativity, it is hardly surprising that these are the basic elements of ‘wisdom’. In a sense, I have always been writing about wisdom indirectly. I am now writing about wisdom directly.

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## **# 10**

This is not a ‘textbook’ on how to run your life, even though a reader may at times interpret it in that way. It is intended to be a textbook of ‘wisdom’. If you set out to become a little wiser it is possible that you may run your life in a better way. If you put better fuel in your car you may get a better performance.

This book is not intended to give you ready-made answers to problems, difficulties and confusions. The book is about ‘wisdom’ which may help you find a way out, if there is one, or help you to adjust if there is not.

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## # 11

Those who are ready to be outraged that anyone should have the cheek to write a book about wisdom will be even more outraged to learn that this book was written in four mornings between 16 August and 20 August 1995 at Palazzo Marnisi in Malta. It was too hot to write in the afternoons.

Why should I reveal this fact? The effect is likely to be negative. When philosophers spend their whole lives writing a book about wisdom, how dare someone set out to write a book about wisdom in four days? That people should be outraged has never much worried me. Some people like to be outraged. It makes them feel significant.

Writing a book in a short time allows a natural flow of the thoughts and material. If you painstakingly refine and re-refine every point you may make fewer mistakes and reveal deeper intricacies – but the book is likely to be much less readable.

I much prefer the reader to take the different points that I put forward and to reflect upon them and to elaborate upon them in his or her mind. In that way the different points can be enriched. There is not much point in disagreeing with me unless you have an alternative point of view which you prefer. If the book stimulates you to form this point of view, I accept that it may be better than mine, worse than mine or a reasonable alternative to my point of view.

I try to avoid terms like ‘must’ and ‘cannot’, ‘never’ and ‘always’ but am not ‘always’ successful in doing so. Such terms invite nitpicking disagreement where someone will point out some very special set of circumstances where something does not apply – even if it does apply in 99 per

cent of cases. Socrates was in the habit of doing just this. For my purposes, terms like 'by and large' or 'usually' are practical and useful.

The emphasis has to be on 'usefulness'. That is exactly why it is called a 'textbook' of wisdom.

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## # 12

‘What is the definition of “wisdom”?’

‘Wisdom is that quality which “wise” people show.’

‘What is the definition of “wise people”?’

‘People who show “wisdom”.’

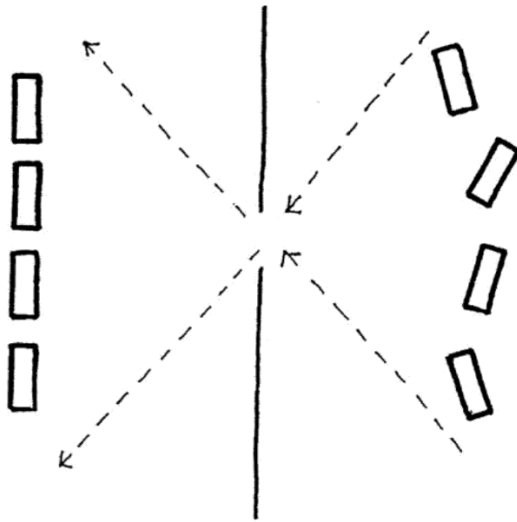
That may seem a rather stupid exchange, but it is not. Definitions have their place in law, philosophy, science, medicine and various other specific areas. When you go to the supermarket to buy ‘low-fat’ food you would really like to know exactly what is meant by ‘low-fat’.

In many other areas definitions have no practical value and are really a game with words. The definition of wisdom is always likely to appear unsatisfactory.

‘How do you perceive wisdom?’

‘I see older people who do not jump to conclusions. They take a broader view. They give very practical answers. They take a balanced view. They are not so dogmatic. They are more tolerant. They look deeper into things. They can generate and consider alternatives. They look at things differently and from many angles.’

This is a complex perception made up of a bundle of different images, qualities, behaviours, etc. Perception brings a bundle of things together. When the word ‘wisdom’ is used we trigger that bundle which comes into mind both consciously and subconsciously.



Perception is how the mind organizes the information that is coming in from the world outside.

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## # 13

A person born with thick corneal opacities cannot see. When, later in life, an operation gives sight to that person, the person still cannot see. Everything is a blur of light, colours and disorganized shapes. The person has to learn to 'organize' this information in the brain. That is what perception is all about.

Perception is not only what is physically in front of our eyes (or other senses) but what the brain does with this information. How is the information structured? What information from the past is brought up to integrate with the present information?

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## # 14

We live in the world we 'see'. But the world we see is not the physical world around us but the 'perceived' world in our minds. The physical world may be exactly the same but different people will see different things.

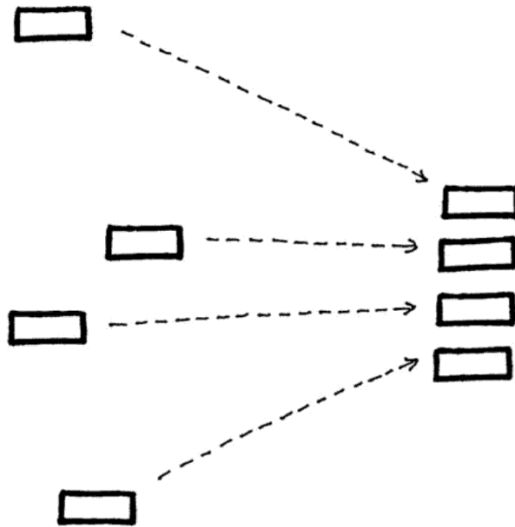
A holiday is half gone. Or, half the holiday is still to come.

A glass is half empty. Or, the glass is half full.

The mistake is a disaster. Or, the mistake teaches a useful lesson.

A plate of chicken is placed on the table before a person. How does that person perceive the food?

1. A vegetarian does not want to eat the chicken but is timid about asking for something else.
2. A hungry person looks with delight and anticipation at the food.
3. A person who is trying to lose weight wonders how many calories there are in the chicken and remembers the fat is mainly in the skin.
4. A person who has a stomach upset is nauseated by the smell of the food.
5. A person who has just read about an outbreak of salmonella infection is suspicious and cautious. Would it be risky to eat the chicken?



Perception provides the ingredients  
for processing, as in mathematics,  
logic, etc.

For each person the physical appearance of the chicken is exactly the same as would be shown if each person took a photograph from the same angle. But the mind does not take photographs. The mind brings in information, experience, frames, present contexts, feelings and emotions. All these get organized by perception to give us ‘the way we look at the situation’.

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## # 15

We can caricature the three intellectual ages of humanity as follows:

*0 to 5 years is the age of ‘Why?’.*

Children are continuously asking ‘why’, not so much to seek explanations but just to get more information and to



link up their small pieces of perceived world into a bigger perception.

*5 to 12 years is the age of 'Why not?'*

Here youngsters have a great deal of intellectual energy and enterprise. They are probing for information. They can play with ideas. They are free to be creative and to try out new possibilities.

*12 to 75+ years is the age of 'Because'.*

We are now so tethered by considerations that the world has to be the way it is because any change is not acceptable or is too disturbing.

Over time our individual perceptions settle down to give us our personal view of the world. That is how we see the world. That is the world in which we live and act. That world may be full of inadequacies, prejudices, stereotypes and confusions. That is the only world we have.

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## **# 16**

Most of the faults of thinking are faults of perception. Faults of logic outside of special 'teaser puzzles' are actually quite rare. You can usually tie someone up in logical knots with a carefully prepared conundrum, but in ordinary life people are quite logical. For a very long time now I have been pointing out that perception is the key part of thinking. David Perkins of Harvard Graduate School of Education told me that his research showed that most of the faults in thinking are faults of perception: seeing only part

of the situation, bringing along an inadequate frame and using emotional selection of information, etc.

Many of the deficiencies in behaviour could also be seen as faults of perception (at least in part): arrogance, selfishness, despair, overreaction and dependence, etc.

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## # 17

A man is offered a job in another town. The pay and prospects are much better. There are good schools for the children. Whenever he raises the subject his wife gets very distressed and upset. He is telling his friend about this. The friend suggests that it is a matter of ‘emotional blackmail’. Suddenly the man has the ‘possibility’ of looking at the situation differently. It does not mean that this is indeed a case of emotional blackmail, or that emotional blackmail even exists. But a new possible perception has been offered.

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## # 18

As languages get more developed they acquire a great flexibility of expression. This means that an arrangement of existing words can be used to describe almost anything. As this ‘descriptive’ capacity of language grows, so there is less need for ‘perception’ words which only describe one particular thing. Why have lots of ‘perception’ words when an arrangement of ordinary words can describe anything?

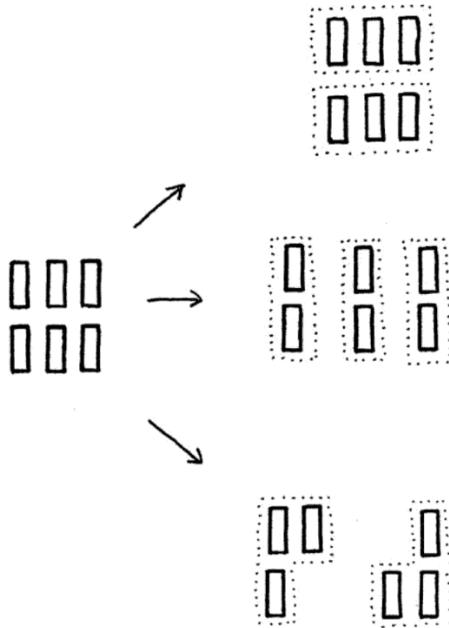
The Inuit in Canada (or at least some groups) are said to have 20 words between ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ – perhaps because at one time they were all huddled closely together in an igloo for months on end. There is said to be one word

for: 'I like you very much but I would not want to go seal hunting with you.'

It would be nice to have a word which by itself indicated all the following: 'It is not your fault and I still like you very much but right now I am feeling very edgy and you are indeed irritating me.'

We could also have a 'perception' word for: 'I know you have to say the things you are saying. I do not believe them and you do not believe them. You do not even believe that I believe them. We both know it is a routine which has to be performed.'

The Japanese seem much better at subtle 'perception' words which embrace special situations.

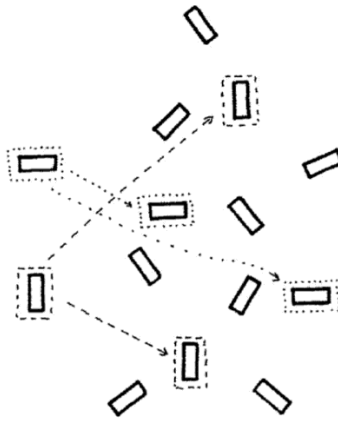


We can look at exactly the same thing and yet divide it up in many different ways. Perception decides how we structure the world around us.

*image*

*not*

*available*



We can deliberately direct attention so that we pick out what we want. There are attention-directing thinking tools.

Wisdom can build up a repertoire of concepts which are not obvious and not available to everyone. Concepts of ‘value’ are extremely important. You may worry if another restaurant opens too close to you. Then you console yourself with the thought that if the street becomes a ‘restaurant area’ you may end up getting more business than before.

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## # 21

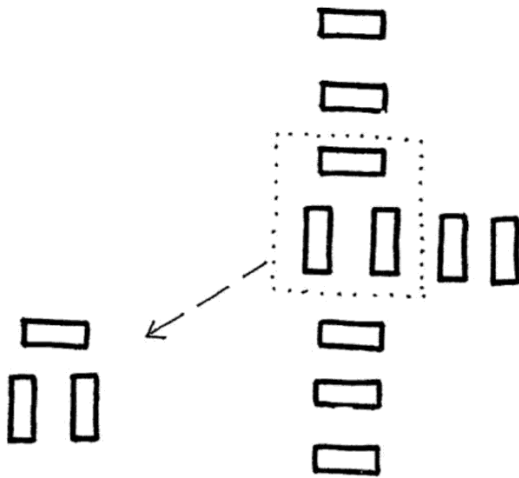
How good is perception? Is human perception adequate for our needs? The unfortunate answer is that human perception is becoming increasingly inadequate for our needs. When we are dealing with complex interactive systems human perception simply cannot cope. The outcome of such situations is often counter-intuitive and we cannot guess or get a feel for it. For such situations we may

need such techniques as the ‘flowscape technique’ of water logic (see *Water Logic*, Penguin 1994) or interactive models on computers. We shall need wisdom to set up such models so that they include all the relevant factors. We also need to be wise enough to know the limitations of human perception.

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## # 22

Age can provide richer experience, but not necessarily so. Professor John Edwards is fond of saying that a teacher with 20 years’ experience may indeed have 20 years’ experience or may have 20 times a one-year experience. If you always look at things in the same way then more experience only provides more books on the same shelf.



One of the major faults of perception is picking out just one part of the situation and ignoring the rest.

Age permits you to have more experience but only if you permit yourself to be open to new experiences. If you never

change your mind, why have one? Have a sign on your desk which says: 'Same thinking as yesterday, last year or 10 years ago.'

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## # 23

You are in a plane that is coming in to land at Heathrow airport in London. The plane passes over several car parks. You say to yourself: 'I am going to notice all the cars coloured red.' You look at the car park and all the cars coloured red jump out at you. Red is a fairly common colour. So you choose 'bright blue'. This colour is much more rare and your eye scans over the cars. Suddenly a bright blue car jumps out of the mass.

There are two important points about this simple experiment. The first point is that you are giving instructions to your own brain. The second is that you are 'sensitizing' the brain to certain types of input.

A suspicious wife notices that when her husband comes home late in the evening his tie is a different length from when he left in the morning. Her suspicious mind immediately jumps to the conclusion that he is having an affair. The emotion of jealousy has sensitized perception in the same way as the attention-directing instruction. In fact the husband has just played a game of squash.

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## # 24

Why is 'thinking' important? Because without thinking we can only act in the following ways:

- Act purely on instinct like insects.

- Repeat the usual routines.
- Do what someone else decides and orders.
- Follow the emotion of the moment.

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## # 25

Part of thinking consists of giving ourselves ‘attention-directing’ instructions. Just as we could direct our brain to ‘pick out bright blue cars’, so we can also direct our brain to look in different directions. The attention-directing tools of the CoRT programme (for schools) or the DATT programme (for business) do exactly this. The first lesson in the CoRT programme is called the ‘PMI’ and it is an attention-directing instruction which asks the thinker to look first at the ‘Plus’ points, then at the ‘Minus’ points and finally at the ‘Interesting’ points.

In Korea, where I had been chairing a meeting of Nobel prize winners from around the world, I was asked to teach ‘thinking’ at the local primary school. It had to be done through an interpreter. I drew a figure with a third arm emerging from the chest. I then asked the students to do a PMI. Some of the results were as follows:

Plus points:

- spare arm in case of injury
- you could hold on to the ladder and use both hands for the tools
- you could hold someone and punch them with both fists.

Minus points:

- you could not sleep on your face



There are all sorts of super-patterns:

- 'I shall do what God wants me to do.'
- 'I must do what is right.'

Sometimes a politician gets such a strong sense of style that the politician no longer considers the situation in itself but uses the following super-pattern: 'What would Mrs Thatcher do in this situation?' And then she does just that.

Someone once told me a story of how he was trapped in a car park late at night. Then he said to himself: 'What would Edward de Bono do in this situation?' Apparently that helped him find a way out through the car park entrance rather than the exit.

It has always been the aim of religion, of education and of family upbringing to suggest such super-patterns to guide perception and thence behaviour.

In the absence of such formal super-patterns there is a tendency to fall back on the most available super-pattern: What is everyone else doing? What is the gang doing? What is the peer group view of this?

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## # 28

Once it has been thought, a thought cannot be unthought. Once a perceptual possibility has been suggested it cannot be cancelled. You can let that pattern atrophy. You can have that pattern lead to a negative. You can try to put it alongside another pattern.

An overweight man has a plate of food in front of him. He tries various super-patterns:

- he is dieting