



## Senses and Meaning, Quality and Education: Some Notes on a Workshop

Helmut Danner

*University of Munich*

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At the summer festival of my daughter's elementary school, the children were involved in a play activity called *sensory test*. Guided by another person, children were to walk blindfolded from table to table and guess the identity of things by their smell, sound, taste, or texture. On every table about six objects had been placed such as peas, jam, potatoes, a piece of fur, and so forth. I acted as one of the guides. What an amusing and interesting experience! How eager were the school children, who had forgotten all about regular school work. How the children differed from each other! Some were shy, others confident, when holding the hand of an unknown person guiding them. Some were determined, others hesitant, when guessing things by their smell or sound. Within 15 minutes, I learned so much about each little person, and I wondered why they were (without seeing) trusting me or not; why there were such differences in their sensory judgments.

I kept musing about these questions, and my encounter with those children motivated me to do something similar with my education students. I had given a lecture on phenomenology and wanted to explore this in a more practical way. I was aware of the taken-for-grantedness of the role of the sense organs in my usual academic teaching. Thus I offered a seminar on "The Meaning of the Senses in Education." A group of engaged and interested students participated; they developed much eagerness, too, and even asked for more time in our seminar. There, we practiced our sense perceptions and reflected on our sensory experiences in order to increase, in this way, our discernment and perceptive awareness. The aim of this exercise was to consider more carefully the importance of the senses for educational processes. Therefore, we alternated practical *experiments* with discussions on related literature.

### Enjoying Sensory Perception

One of the first experiments we conducted in the seminar was the sensory test from the elementary school described above. We discovered that we had to limit the range of topics and ideas in a realistic way. Once the sensory imagination is activated, it starts to overflow.

A first simple fact which we learned by really smelling, listening, touching, and tasting was that the senses need time, stillness, and concentration in order to attune themselves. It is so easy just to look at or to think of applesauce and to imagine its taste. However, closing your eyes and getting a spoonful of applesauce into the mouth is an experience. First, it is wet and sweet, then it develops its typical lightly sour taste; you recognize and enjoy it because you like it, and finally, you swallow; the taste lingers for a while. This experience is more than a short intellectual episode; it is an experienced presence of life—simple, nothing special, but a presence. For a small group, the experiment was more intense than for a larger one. The former were characteristically calmer and more relaxed. In any case, our fixed time schedule, planned intellectually and in advance, was totally inadequate to our real need of time for exploring sensory experiences.

And, as we became aware of that need of time, we (re)discovered that watching and looking at something takes time, too; that quickly taking a picture with a camera is quite different from drawing the same thing slowly by hand. In the first case you can only register it; in the second you actually see it. On that occasion we recognized that we can learn from one sense for the sake of another. What may be obvious in tasting may be hidden in seeing.

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This led us to two further perceptions. First, it was fun and enlightening to compare two or more senses. For example, we compared looking at a painting with listening to music. What varieties of relations, time, space, and realities! Music is movement by and in itself; when looking at a picture, I have to move at least my eyes. Music is something in time, it has a beginning, a duration, and an end. It passes; it is shaped time. A picture inhabits space before my looking at it, and it remains there afterwards. It is visible shaped space. While a picture allows a total impression in one movement, by one view, I have to listen to a piece of music from its beginning to its end to get a total impression. And I need my memory. Music exists in a succession. A picture exists as a whole in every movement. What I hear fills the total room or at least a certain volume of space. There it is present and surrounds me. It is even a physical sensation when it is very loud. I can turn away from what I see. This I can touch. What I hear is ungraspable, and so forth.

Second, we discovered that every sense has its peculiar structure and "modality" (Plessner, 1980). Each in its own way discloses, modifies, and constitutes the world for us. The look is very fast. In an instant, it has covered many things, even very distant ones. The hearing depends on the things coming to it by sounding and making a noise. Things which smell, or which I can smell, penetrate me: I absorb them. Tasting takes time. And I can taste only one or a few

things at the same time. In touching, the object and I are very closely connected. What a rich variety of worlds is offered to us by our senses!

### Meaning in Senses

I had encouraged the students to invent arrangements by which we could experience our senses. Another of the early experiments was to stimulate certain parts of the tongue with sweet, sour, salty, and bitter liquids. We had to decide what we tasted (sweet, sour, etc.). However, the original intention was to demonstrate the meaningfulness of the context of our sensations. Thus that experiment provided just the opposite of what I had intended, and as it was, it proved to be a good demonstration of what we should try to avoid as the usual scientific approach—especially in education. The students had done what they had learned at school, at university, and from science: separating, analyzing, omitting meaning, and asking for functional relations.

Even in that experiment, we could discover statements which transcended the physiological dimension of tasting. That is, the participants would primarily say, “That is sugared water,” and not, “That tastes sweet.” Or, “That tastes like lemon,” and not, “That is sour.” They would say, “That’s awful, I don’t know what it is!” In other words, they tasted something, a substance, and not merely a property. So we discovered that we do not perceive mere sensory stimulations—salty or sour components, sound or light waves—but real things belonging to life. And even when we do not recognize the perceived object, we demand to know what it is. Sensory perception connects us with real matter and the matter with us.

In this context, it was striking for us to become aware of a simple fact: When carefully touching an object, for example, the surface of a plastic table, and when describing this sensation, we would say, “It feels cold and smooth, it’s unpleasant.” Or when touching a woolen cloth: “It feels so smooth, warm, and agreeable.” Sensory feeling and emotional feeling are very close or even the same!

In one experiment we took a little step beyond passive feeling and started to shape. A student had brought clay for eight people and asked us to close our eyes, to feel the material, and to form whatever we wanted. Those without clay were to observe. Holding a lump of clay in my hands, I started to knead and followed the interplay between clay and fingers, mainly my thumbs. These pressed deeper and deeper, and the idea of a bowl was the result of this game. The outcome was, consequently, shaping a bowl.

What happens in a sensation is meaning, sense. Sensation does not only have a meaning; meaning or sense does not enter from beyond a sensation, just as an emotion does not come as something external to

sensory feeling. A child feels comfortable when holding a smooth puppet on his or her face. Touching and emotion are identical there. Is this a psychological event? Where would the soul be then? In the child? In the puppet? Between them? Or, is this an existential occurrence between world and person? Or should we say: Is sense the occurrence of the encounter of world and human being—without any *between*?

Sense (as meaning) is neither in a possession which I had to bring into the world, nor is sense something which I had to discover in the world, or something beyond world and myself.

Albert Camus (1962; 1979) speaks of our suffering from a certain expectation of meaning; we expect of the world and of our life to reveal meaning. It is a metaphysical meaning which should come *from beyond* into the world, into my life, into a situation. But this does not occur; the metaphysical meaning withholds; there is *no meaning* in life. Camus calls this discrepancy “absurd.” But Camus also describes the meaning which occurs directly and unexpectedly by means of the senses within the world and the sensual experiences of the sea, the desert, the sun, and also the (very often unusual) encounters with others. Camus exposes the metaphysical meaning as absurd and helps us to discover sensory meaning.

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Music may serve as an illustration. Being influenced by 19th-century romanticism, we expect music to contain all kinds of meaning. Music ought to express feelings, to illustrate a landscape, an action, and so forth. There is no doubt that music can be used for such purposes. But, first of all, music is something in itself; it has an inner meaningful structure realized by sensual experience. Plessner (1980) has impressively shown this.

Some observations made us aware that sense, which is invoked by the senses, is nothing absolute. It has its historic and biographic background as the senses have too. For example, one student said, “When smelling onions, I imagine my mother in the kitchen.” Smelling is imbedded in an atmosphere. It even creates this atmosphere. The question whether you like a certain scent or not will depend on your biography. Why did somebody say that to hear running water reminds him of refreshment and comfort? Why was a silk shawl something agreeable for Christine while Petra did not like it on her skin?

Finally, what significance does our molding the clay possess? Three women formed a human body, one of them a pig. Another woman shaped a head with a face. All three men molded a bowl. In other words, the women made something alive; the men made an object. Certainly, this result has no generalizable value. But is it pure accident? When I talked about that seminar session at home, my 11-year-old daughter said spontaneously, without already knowing the results, “I would have made a pig.”

## Quality Comes from Senses and Meaning

Three of us prepared some occasions for smelling. We sought different things which should be smelled blindfolded and found a lot of nice aromas: a rose, sweet and austere perfume, spices, and so forth. But should we not include some disagreeable odors? Which ones? This question made us see an interesting fact: It would have been insulting and therefore impossible to use objects smelling of persons, such as worn clothing; it would even have been obscene to let somebody smell blindfolded at the socks or underwear of others.

Why? The disgust in such a case seems to have its basic existential meaning in three facts: First, we smell someone or something, not only an odor. We perceive a meaningful matter within a meaningful context. Second, when we smell, we inhale the other thing or the other person, so to speak we are penetrated by it, him, or her. There is no more distance. And third, there are a variety of unconscious or rational affections, evaluations, and judgments associated with a special sensual perception. It is never a mere physiological or psychological sensation, but our whole being and relations to other persons or things are involved.

A natural tendency which occurred in our experiments was to assure the blindfolded partners of their safety. They needed to trust the guiding persons: "This is a clean spoon I give you now." "Be careful, this does not smell good."

By and by, we discovered that each of our senses has a peculiar social quality. This became obvious, especially with olfaction. For example, a different social quality has feeling. Feeling another person signifies closeness; but in contrast to smelling, I can usually stop the contact. Feeling another person means to feel him or her, not only a separate part of his or her body—some skin, flesh, and bones. Holding your hand means, "I hold you, for example, to support you, to caress you, to hold you off." What does it mean, in contrast, to see another person? This may occur from a great distance and from different places. Coming closer to you, I have time to be prepared for your presence. Even being very close to you I can keep a distance; I can watch you and remain aloof. However, we know the converse is true, also. Looking at you, looking into your eyes, I may disclose my personality to you. As well, seeing you from very far may represent you in totality for me, and so I am very close to you in spite of our spatial distance. Again, the facts of sense and quality which are implicated in our sensual perception become obvious.

Sensory perception means a qualitative structuring of our world. This seems to be a human characteristic. As far as we are able to use, cultivate our senses, and to follow their qualitative structuring, we may gain something which could be called a *human measure*. For

example, things of daily use have a peculiar quality according to our sensual and corporeal dispositions. Thus a fountain pen must be suitable for my hand. It must have a certain length and a certain weight, it should write easily, and so forth. The quality of a room in which we live refers to the size of our bodies, the ability of our ears and eyes to perceive. A huge bank building is inappropriate to live in.

The examples are self-evident and there seems no need to speak about them. However, Western civilization has created technological means to disregard, to pass over, and even to omit the participation of our senses and their qualitative structuring of our world. We move with great speed and over large distances which we cannot grasp with our senses. By means of television, for example, we bombard our eyes with a flood of artificial pictures without really seeing them. With computers, we organize a reality which is faster and more complex than we are able to perceive with all our senses. Chernobyl demonstrates that we destroy our natural environment in a way which remains totally beyond our senses: atomic radiation and its destruction of nature (and of ourselves) in a way that we can neither see, nor smell, nor hear, nor feel, nor taste. It is just present or perhaps and hopefully not. By that, we not only loose our sensory relation to our daily natural environment, but also we begin to distrust what we colloquially call nature which has been a sort of a refuge until now. Chernobyl and what it stands for announces an existential crisis, not only a physical one.

### **Sensory Foundation of Education**

In the context of Western civilization, it seems to be appropriate to lament the disappearance of the senses and to point to a simple life based on sensory experience. However, no solution seems to be simple, and our senses seem no simple matter. First, it is a simplification to speak only of a single sense organ. All senses are variously related to one another. Therefore, we have to consider our sensuality, which means that we are existentially founded on our senses and bodies. Second, sensory experience implicates a historic-cultural and biographic component. It is an expression of a meaningful context. Sense is given by and in our sensual being to the world. Third, as far as we usually try to do something well, and, therefore discern between good and bad, we intend quality. There seems to be an inner connection of quality, sense, and senses. The latter have a social, aesthetic, and functional dimension. That is why the senses implicate a measure of social, aesthetic, and functional quality. On the other hand, quality points to a sensual foundation.

Although there is a relation among senses, meaning, and quality, the human measure which may derive from that is not an absolute one.

The reason is that the qualitative and meaningful context of the senses is not given like an objective fact, but results from the encounter between human being and world. Nevertheless, this human measure may give a hint to where, as a source, we have to return again and again: to the experience of our sensory reality.

Without any doubt, it is an educational task to let children use their senses. At least, an educator should not hinder them in doing so. But, after a look into a classroom or even a playroom, we know for sure that today it is necessary to motivate children deliberately in exploring and trusting their own senses, in leaving alone the senseless computer games or the sense-killing television set. It is useless to preach sense and values or to demand responsibility as long as children and adults have never experienced which matters have sense and value or what might need their responsibility.

We may have forgotten that this educational insight was crucial for Pestalozzi (1935). In his writing "About the meaning of hearing with respect to human education by sound and language," Pestalozzi points to the very truth, that every education has to start with lived experience, with sensory encounters between child and world. And only then the educator should (for Pestalozzi, this is first of all the mother) use words and thus mediate world and child. This mediation does not mean intellectualization or mere symbolic verbalization; it means a showing of, a pointing to, an elucidation of the matters in the child's daily world. Thus the educational significance of language is emphasized by Pestalozzi.

At present, there are some educators who know about the sensory context in which education should occur. Certainly Ton Beekman belongs to them. He points to the fact that it is not only the educator who should lead the child to sensory experience, but that it is very often the reverse, the child showing simple but essential experiences to the adult. Children know a lot about what to teach us. So to respect the personality of a child means to learn from his or her sensory experience; to be open for sensory experience means to understand a child (see Beekman, 1984; 1985).

One of the issues of our seminar was to recognize a context as follows: Education ought to begin with, and to remain, related to our sensory and corporeal constitution and to gain its measures from there. More emphasis on sensory awareness in education means a need for sensitive teachers. To find and to educate such teachers requires a teacher training which is aware of senses, meaning, and quality. Such teacher training needs college teachers who are educated in that meaning, too. To be a professor does not automatically mean to be educated (*gebildet*), professors too must learn, must discover their senses.

## Atmosphere for Learning

This condensed report, in an attempt to discover the necessary education for professors and students, gives only a few suggestions. It does not pretend to be complete in any way nor to provide new scientific or phenomenological insights. But it was a new experience for all participants. On the one hand, our practical experiments and perceptions were confirmed by learned literature and, on the other hand, our understanding of theoretical texts was prepared by sensory experience. We did not learn the insights, we experienced them. Hence, at least theory of education has to rediscover its essential, that is, sensory foundations.

For this purpose, the human sciences should have adequate environments. The university department at which the seminar in question took place was fortunate; it could move into new buildings. There, the architects had created a library which is an outstanding example of a contribution to sensory learning and teaching. It is situated in the center of the building, and I think this is its correct place. Books, as far as they mean reflection on experiences and stimulation for new experiences, must remain a central part of study. To enter that library, to find a book, to sit down, and to read is just a sensual joy there: Sunlight comes through a huge funnel-shaped glass roof. There is space to breathe in an open hall, like a courtyard, extending over four floors. Around the roof-bearing pillar in the middle and around the balconies of the floors, at first, your eyes would discover more green and blooming plants than books.

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