CHAPTER 5

SELF-KNOWLEDGE THROUGH INTERACTION WITH THE WORLD

In this chapter, I shall examine Hull’s reflections on the questions of knowledge and social relationships as they impact his selfhood. The diaries show why knowledge is fundamental to the day-to-day living of life, and how this fact necessitates reflection on one’s experiences, thereby producing self-knowledge. What impact does blindness have on Hull’s knowledge? How does his ability to gain knowledge in the blind condition affect his being-in-the-world? It is clear from his reflections that the ways in which he knows the world exercise a formative influence on his existence in and passage through it. To start with, I want to illustrate how the ways in which Hull knows the self are inextricably linked with the modes of being with others. We have already seen in some of the entries discussed in the previous chapter that he values “human relationships” highly. The extent of their significance for his selfhood becomes clear when he remarks decidedly in On Sight and Insight, “it is in the interaction with others that we know ourselves” (xiii). It is no surprise, then, that early in the diary he presents a reflection upon the change brought about by blindness in the nature of his relationships with sighted people in “Eye Contact 19 June 1983” (On Sight 13-4). Here he talks about the loss in his relationships with others of “playful details” such as smiles, “winking, sticking out your tongue, exchanging mocking glances, raising the eyebrows and so on,” which infuse interactions between people with a lightness of mood and a subtle character. What troubles him is “the inability to reply to all the fleeting nuances of the face, and especially the eyes.” “Blind people,” he adds, “also lose communication through general body language, since although they can speak using gestures they cannot receive the body language of other people” (On Sight 14). It
becomes evident from the tone of the entry that light-hearted conversations used to delight the diarist when he had sight. It is with the convivial nature of his personality as the background that the opening statement of the entry gains its significance: “The relationship between blind and sighted people can become rather serious” (On Sight 13). The reason for this change lies in the modes of communication that the two parties must adopt. Interactions need to take place either through words that “are often too abstract,” or through touch that “is often too concrete” (On Sight 14). He suggests that this constraint imposed on the blind leaves him impoverished.

The entry “Faces 21 June 1983” (Touching the Rock 18-20; On Sight 14-5), as its title suggests, deals with the topic of Hull’s knowledge pertaining to the looks of people whom he knows. He reflects on how one recognises other people. Furthermore, this has to do with his conviction that knowledge is always better than ignorance. This point arises when he dwells on his desire to know his wife as she gets older in their shared process of aging as man and wife (Touching the Rock 19; On Sight 15), and on the situation where a blind person lacks information “to form certain impressions” when he/she meets somebody new (Touching the Rock 21; On Sight 16). The entry that follows this one, “Does It Matter What People Look Like? 23 June 1983” (Touching the Rock 20-4; On Sight 15-9), continues reflecting on the themes raised in the first entry, and fleshes out the changes in Hull’s selfhood over three years – from his registration as a blind person in 1980 to the present (the time when he is recording these entries). In his “sighted days” (Touching the Rock 19; On Sight 15), he used to relate to others visually, relying on the appearance of their faces, as the sighted usually do (Touching the Rock 21; On Sight 16). However, now, as a recently-blinded person, the diarist distinguishes between two groups of acquaintances, friends, and family members: “The people I
knew before I lost my sight have faces but the people I have met since then do not have faces.” This statement concerns his perception of people. He remembers the ones he “knew before I lost my sight” as those whose faces he can recall and relate to. However, he cannot access the faces of the ones he has “met since then,” that is, after becoming blind. This state of affairs worries him: “I knew how I knew the first lot – by their faces. How could I ever feel that I really knew the second lot?” (Touching the Rock 18; On Sight 14). He is concerned about the means available to him of engaging with people in the blind condition, wherein he must learn (as time passes by) to cope with the absence of visual information. Talking about this issue in the context of making “a new acquaintance,” he observes that we constantly form “hypotheses about a new acquaintance” (On Sight 16) throughout the duration of our relationship with him/her. Since the blind person “has a lot less information to go on when forming these hypotheses . . . it takes [him/her] longer to get to know somebody” (On Sight 17). Due to not being able to form “first impressions” about the new acquaintance on the basis of visual information, the blind person needs to rely on “the voice, the touch of the hand and so on” (On Sight 16) to form an idea about the person he/she is meeting for the first time. For this reason, says Hull, he takes more time than a sighted person to “get to know somebody,” and adds, “perhaps I am not a very skilful blind person” (Touching the Rock 21; On Sight 17). This statement articulates a tentative conception of the self, and indicates his struggle to live optimally as a blind person who is able to respond well to people and situations.

Hull reports that vivid images began flashing in his mind “[a]bout a year after I was registered blind.” They “went on” flashing “for six or twelve months” almost as if he was hallucinating (On Sight 15). He recognises the sharp divide evident between
these images and the visible world. He records, “I would come back [out of the
‘absorbed’ state of mind in which he gazes ‘upon these images’] with a shock, realising
that there was nothing to indicate which of these images was closer to reality. There
was simply nothing there at all” (Touching the Rock 20; On Sight 16). The problem that
he faces (and he returns to this repeatedly in the diaries) is one of relating his mental
images of people to what they really look like, given the fact that he cannot verify the
truth of the images due to blindness. This epistemological uncertainty or gap is
articulated in terms of the unascertainable question of correspondence between these
memory-images in the mind and “reality.” This is clearly a question pertaining to
epistemology.

As is well known, Descartes, Berkeley, and Hume raised “sceptical challenges”
for philosophy. This may be understood as the problem where a “‘veil of perception’
[stands] between knowers and objects” (Kitcher 418). Scepticism, in early modern
philosophy, poses this question: How can we be certain, given that we perceive
qualities of objects and not the objects in themselves (Beiser 20), that the latter exist
independently of the perceiver? Grayling characterises the sceptical challenge thus:
“[O]ur possession of the best evidence for claims about the world is always consistent
with the falsity of those claims . . . so that we cannot regard ourselves as ever being
justified in making those claims” (2). This point, in Beiser’s words, “undermines our
common-sense beliefs in the reality of the external world, other minds, and even our

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1. It is not my aim here to present the interesting argument that Patricia Kitcher makes contra
many 20th-century philosophers, namely that the foregoing is not Kant’s central epistemological problem
(419). Briefly, his central claim is, as Kitcher puts it, “that the standards by which we distinguish truth
from illusion originate, in part, from our own subjective constitution, but that they are nonetheless
objective, because they are indispensable for any cognition at all.” Here, Kitcher uses the term
‘subjectives’ to indicate that which originates “in the subject’s faculties” (416). This thesis provides the
basis for articulating a dynamic notion of subjectivity, where the self’s faculties of thought and
imagination play a creative role in cognition.
own selves” (18). Thus, uncertainty about the independent existence of the world severs the subject from it, and I am concerned with the parallel this state of affairs offers to the major problem that Hull encounters ‘in blindness.’ The latter may be stated as follows: blindness pulls down a veil over his eyes, emphatically separating him from the visible world. Since he, when he was a sighted person, relied heavily upon sight to the almost complete exclusion of other sensory modalities, how can he know the world now as a blind person? He articulates this fear explicitly in the entry entitled “Blindness as an Archetype 23 February 1984” (On Sight 54): “In my own case, the feeling of being bricked up inside comes into conflict with the fear that there is no reality outside, and that one is trapped on the borderlands between the real and the unreal, where all is confusion and darkness. Perhaps part of the panic is the desire to get outside in order to reassure oneself that there is something there” (On Sight 54). These words forcefully convey Hull’s sense of being totally separated from the world, and of being “trapped” in “‘a formless void’” (In the Beginning 1), to quote from the description of the earth as can be read in the Book of Genesis.

To make it absolutely clear at once, I am not unaware of the asymmetric parallel that the two just-explained states of affairs form: the former is a metaphysical problem, while the latter amounts to a question of reorienting oneself in the world of phenomena. The relationship between the two may be described as metaphorical since, drawing from Hagberg, we may say that “A metaphor . . . cuts with a fine epistemological disregard across the distinction” (147), here, between different types of philosophical issues. I make this metaphorical connection in order to draw the reader’s attention to the radical nature of the challenge that Hull is faced with as he grapples with blindness. The uncertainty about one’s knowledge fostered by scepticism resembles the inability to
access the world through sight, and both therefore lend themselves to being described by the metaphor ‘darkness.’ I will, however, extend the above asymmetric parallel and make one more point with further conclusions flowing from it. The blind are considered to be without knowledge (ignorant) because they do not have sight, whereby one faculty of perception (namely sight) is linked directly to knowledge and equated with it. This results in (1) sight being accorded a predominant status in thinking about perception; (2) the other perceptual modalities being neglected in philosophical inquiry to the great loss of epistemology; and (3) the world of – or that created by – the blind not being understood with greater sensitivity.

This last point about the world of the blind may be elaborated in terms of the creation of “acquired worlds” from “a primary world” with the help of the explanation that Merleau-Ponty offers of how “the actual subject” comes to “have a world or be in the world, that is, sustain round about it a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited” (149). This interrelated “system of meanings” constitutes an acquired world. Here, the subject, in the course of living his/her life, fashions out of the primary world where he/she is, secondary (or acquired) worlds. Drawing on this thought, we may describe the world of the blind and that of the sighted as acquired worlds which confer upon the respective persons’ “experience its secondary meaning,” and which are “carved out of a primary world which is the basis of the primary meaning.” Merleau-

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2. This becomes clear when we examine metaphorical uses of the word ‘blind’ in its various forms in common statements such as “Don’t walk blindly into a trap,” “Don’t follow him/her blindly,” “The authorities turned a blind eye to . . .,” “He went on a blind date,” and so on. We may note that in the sentences quoted here, the word ‘blind’ connotes ignorance. Hull suggests that “the use of visual metaphors” that imply blindness in such expressions dealing with the lack of adequate knowledge expose the widely-held view that “an intimate connection [exists] between seeing and knowing” (Touching the Rock 29; On Sight 25). Also see Kuusisto’s Planet of the Blind (65) for his view on the matter.
Ponty defines the latter as the “one world [that] is . . . antepredicatively self-evident” (149) to the subject who makes for himself/herself the world that he/she inhabits as a human.

I mentioned above the necessity of reorienting oneself in relation to the world that Hull is faced with as a blind person. Both sections, “Faces” (which reflects on states of mind and changes that occur over three years), and “Does It Matter What People Look Like?” (which ranges over a period of two years, tracing the changes in his mode of existence), talk about how he has adapted\(^3\) to the blind condition. In the former entry, he says, “As time went by, the proportion of people with no faces increased” (*Touching the Rock* 18; *On Sight* 14). As his time as a blind person lengthens, he increasingly interacts with people on the basis not of their looks, but of speech and voice, sound, touch, and the situations they have been in. He confirms this conclusion when he states, “Increasingly, I am no longer even trying to imagine what people look like. My knowledge of you is based upon what we have been through together, not on what you look like. . . . I am beginning to lose the category [of what people look like] itself” (*Touching the Rock* 24; *On Sight* 19). This means that he is making a transition from a reliance on visual information to a state of mind and corporeal awareness where information gained through means other than sight becomes important. So he affirms an aesthetic of listening:

The crucial thing in any new acquaintance is the sound of the voice. I am continuing to learn more and more about the amazing power of the human voice to reveal the person. With the people I know very well, I find that all of the emotion which would normally be expressed in the

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3. This is for now: the same problems recur, as indicated earlier.
face is there in the voice. . . . My impressions based on the voice seem to be just as accurate as those of sighted people. . . . The capacity of the voice to reveal the self is truly amazing. Is the voice intelligent? Is it colourful? (Touching the Rock 23-4; On Sight 18)

We see here that Hull is acquiring a blind man’s abilities of getting to know people, and of recognising their moods, with the help of their voices. He is gradually shifting from a visual criterion of recognition to establishing the link between self and voice. However, much later in the diaries, he records experiences of not being able to recognise people by their voices (Touching the Rock 169-201; On Sight 148-174). As noted earlier, “the same problems and the same experiences [go] round and round” in his life, which he interprets “from many aspects.”

5.1. Knowing the Body, Knowing the Self

Let us now turn to a very important question for Hull as a blind person – the links he perceives among the face, body image, and knowledge of the self. In “Does It Matter What People Look Like?” he describes one of the results “of not knowing what people look like” as follows: “the face no longer has the central place for me which it has in normal human relationships” (Touching the Rock 22; On Sight 17) because he cannot recognise people or relate to them by means of what their faces look like. So people have come to be defined for him by their voices, not by their faces. The significance of the face now lies for him in the fact that it “is merely the place from which the voice comes” (Touching the Rock 22; On Sight 17). This state of affairs vividly brings out the change that blindness has effected in Hull’s being-in-the-world. It becomes clear that the kinds of information available to him, that is to say, the sorts of
perceptual information he can acquire and use, impact the existence of the self. As explained above, he must now interact with people on a completely new basis, that of voice and touch.

All this has a deeper meaning for the diarist. In the entry entitled “What Do I Look Like? 25 June 1983” (*Touching the Rock* 24-5; *On Sight* 19), he raises a concern about “the loss of the body image” (*Touching the Rock* 60; *On Sight* 52). He “discover[s] with a shock that [he] cannot remember [his face],” and muses, “to lose one’s own face poses a new problem,” namely that of self-knowledge. So he continues, “To what extent is loss of the image of the face connected with loss of the image of the self? Is this one of the reasons why I often feel I am a mere spirit, a ghost, a memory? Other people have become disembodied voices, speaking out of nowhere, going into nowhere. Am I not like this too, now that I have lost my body?” (*Touching the Rock* 25; *On Sight* 19). The theme of the reflective section is therefore visual awareness of one’s self, the visible body. He conveys a sense of despair in the following categorical statement about the theme: “[T]he horror of being faceless, of forgetting one’s own appearance, of having no face. The face is the mirror-image of the self” (*Touching the Rock* 55; *On Sight* 48). Thus he connects not knowing what his own face looks like, and not being able to remember his appearance, with losing “the image of the self,” that is, the visual appearance of the (corporeal) self, and construes himself as being merely a disembodied voice. So he says that he often feels as though he is “a mere spirit, a

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4. At this juncture, Hull starts “feeling [his face] with my own hands” in order “to regain the assurance that I have got a face” (*Touching the Rock* 55; *On Sight* 48). Tactile exploration of the face helps him anchor his self to a physical body. This desire to feel his face helps explain the speaker’s act of feeling “the contours of my face” in Borges’s poem “A Blind Man” (*Selected Poems* 357). In both writers, the face serves as the emblem of the self.

5. One wonders here why Hull does not talk about proprioception, a “nonvisual sixth sense” which Swan describes as “our ongoing, barely conscious awareness of the position, orientation, and
ghost, a memory.” This is similar to his perception of people as having “become disembodied voices, speaking out of nowhere, going into nowhere.” The foregoing quote points to a serious epistemological problem for Hull. Due to the loss of sight, he has the experience of being dissociated from other people and the world (as discussed above). Thus, it is not a coincidence that he talks about a “deterioration of the process of knowing” and “the death of the old self” in “recently blinded people” (On Sight 25). This means that the process of knowing exercises a direct impact on the self’s existence.

We now come to two entries separated by a year and a few days, which highlight a fresh point of view on the blind person’s selfhood in relation to the environment. For this reason, the entries constitute a pair, and I see them as representing a new way of knowing, which Hull comprehends by means of occurrences in the natural world. It is in this context that we must read his statement in Touching the Rock about the two persistent themes of the diaries: “[T]he changing perception of nature [and] the transformation in my understanding of what a person is” (x). The two themes are intimately connected, and “Rain 9 September 1983” (Touching the Rock 29-31; On Sight 26-8) brings this out very well. Towards the close of the section, the diarist states that while the rain falls, “I feel as if the world, which is veiled until I touch it, has suddenly disclosed itself to me. I feel that the rain . . . has granted a gift to me, the gift of the world” (Touching the Rock 31; On Sight 27). These words possess an urgent force due to Hull’s sense that when his environment produces only “various broken [or intermittent] sounds,” the world is veiled from (or made invisible to) him. With the loss of movement of our bodies and limbs in space.” He observes further, “[I]f Descartes had recognised it [proprioception], we might have been spared a lot of trouble about the mind/body split” (Swan 289). The thought of this perceptual modality has not occurred to Hull due to his preoccupation with the sight of himself.
of visual access to the world, and having to rely upon touch and audition in order to know, Hull feels isolated. This experience of being cut off from the external world (by the veil of blindness) is highlighted in his wish, “If only rain could fall inside a room, it would help me to understand where things are in that room, to give a sense of being in the room, instead of just sitting on a chair” (Touching the Rock 31; On Sight 27). So the rain allows him to comprehend “the contours of everything” through the varied sounds it generates when it comes into contact with objects and structures in the environment. The spontaneous “acoustic experience” (Touching the Rock 29, On Sight 26) of rain, therefore, brings him out of a state of self-absorption into immediate and continuous contact with the outside world. He emphasises the truth and power of this experience when he says, “I am no longer isolated, preoccupied with my thoughts, concentrating upon what I must do next. Instead of having to worry about where my body will be and what it will meet, I am presented with a totality, a world which speaks to me” (Touching the Rock 31; On Sight 27). So Hull contrasts a life ‘in blindness’ of dogged action and a mode of being where aesthetic appreciation is possible.

Let us briefly examine these two modes of existence available to Hull at this stage of his evolution and point of time as a blind person. The first is represented by the following statement (found in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph), which suggests that he often concentrates “upon what I must do next” (Touching the Rock 31; On Sight 27). In a later entry entitled “To Accept or Not to Accept 8 January 1984” (Touching the Rock 51-4; On Sight 45-7), he explains this further: “Each hour must have its particular skills, its various techniques, its little routines which enable something to be accomplished successfully. Otherwise, I will have a sense of pointless desolation” (Touching the Rock 52; On Sight 45). This careful timetabling of his life
constitutes a strategy he adopts to cope with the consequences of blindness. This strategy lays emphasis on planning, doing things, and accomplishing goals. It enables him to stave off the sense of being left helpless by blindness.

The aesthetic realisation that Hull achieves of his being-in-the-world may be gathered from the following excerpt:

When what there is to know is in itself varied, intricate and harmonious, then the knowledge of that reality shares the same characteristics. I am filled internally with a sense of variety, intricacy and harmony. The knowledge itself is beautiful, because the knowledge creates in me a mirror of what there is to know. As I listen to the rain, I am the image of the rain, and I am one with it. (Touching the Rock 31; On Sight 27-8)

This passage is remarkable for its presentation of a mode of knowing the self which is radically different from the visual comprehension of it, as treated through most of the entry “Does It Matter What People Look Like? 23 June 1983” and “What Do I Look Like? 25 June 1983.” In this auditory identification of self with the world (where the former mirrors the latter or resonates with it), Hull does not hanker after his visible face or body image, but recognises his oneness with the rain-filled world. Explaining phenomenology, and distinguishing his thought from Kant’s critical philosophy by relating them to each other, Merleau-Ponty writes, “What distinguishes intentionality from the Kantian relation to a possible object is that the unity of the world, before being posited by knowledge in a specific act of identification, is ‘lived’ as ready-made or already there” (xix). This point is illustrated when the diarist reports at the start of “Rain” that, on opening “the front door” and discovering that it was raining, He “stood for a few minutes, lost in the beauty of it” (Touching the Rock 29; On Sight 26). Thus
he lives (or is lost in the beauty of) “the unity of the world . . . as ready-made or already there” before he conceives his “knowledge of that reality” as creating “in me a mirror of what there is to know.” It is only when Hull compares\(^6\) his auditory experience of the falling rain with what “a sighted person feels when opening the curtains and seeing the world outside” (Touching the Rock 30; On Sight 27) that he articulates the following realisation. To put it in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “[I]n experiencing the beautiful . . . I am aware of a harmony between sensation and concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept.” This aesthetic dynamic reveals “the hidden art of the imagination . . . which forms the basis” (Merleau-Ponty xix) of subjectivity.

We see that blindness has altered Hull’s bodily relationship with the world. Concerning this epistemological question about self and world, Swan explains, “He [Hull] understands acutely the effect of no longer being able to visualize space or visualize himself in space, and he looks forward to moments when the wind is blowing or when it rains. In wind and rain, sound performs the role of light in shaping a three-dimensional space where usually there is no space” (291). Thus, in this early entry, Hull experiences the beauty of rain with the loss of sight as a constant presence. With this point in mind, it would be fruitful to compare “Rain” with “Rainfall and the Blind Body 21 September 1984” (Touching the Rock 131-34; On Sight 118-20). The former entry describes, using a few auditory metaphors, the beauty that the diarist finds in the sounds of “steadily falling rain” (Touching the Rock 29; On Sight 26), and reflects on what it reveals to him. However, at important points in the entry, the language used displays a reliance on visual figures of speech:

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6. We may describe the act of comparing as being an overtly conceptual exercise.
It throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things. . . . Over the whole thing, like light falling upon a landscape is the gentle background patter gathered up into one continuous murmur of rain. I think that this experience of opening the door on a rainy garden must be similar to that which a sighted person feels when opening the curtains and seeing the world outside. (emphasis added, Touching the Rock 29-30; On Sight 26-27)

While the visual imagery in the above passage can be interpreted as Hull’s attempt to explain his auditory experience to sighted people, it also carries the emotional force of loss. By contrast, the latter entry significantly harnesses sensory qualities of sound and touch, eschewing images:

There is a slow, steady drip, drip, drip, and a more rapid cascade, against the background of the pitter-patter of the individual drops on the window pane. These vary in speed as the rainstorm itself ebbs and flows, and some patterns of sounds overtake others, a bit like the music of Steve Reich. . . . There is the high-pitched drumming staccato as the drops fall on metal, the deeper, duller impact on brick or concrete, and I notice that the note being struck differs slightly even from one window pane to another. . . . On the window pane, it is very loud. The panes of glass vibrate on my forehead. The sounds diminish, layer upon layer, receding into the faint distance as the rain falls on nearby trees. I wonder how far away I can hear it falling. (emphasis added, Touching the Rock 132; On Sight 119)

In presenting a detailed, precise description of the intricate sound of the rain, this
passage makes it amply clear that the blind diarist has come to acquire a keener, even musical, appreciation of the auditory world since 9 September 1983, when the entry “Rain” was recorded. Standing at his study window, he gains a comprehensive picture of his surroundings through the various qualities of sounds as “it [the rainwater] swishes, gurgles, pelts along in a fury, comes and goes” (Touching the Rock 132; On Sight 119). While he deals with common themes – such as the blind body and perception – in both entries, “Rainfall and the Blind Body” goes further than the first one because in it, he “complicates the usual understanding of the way bodies are located in an environment, describing the relation as an intermingling of self and space evoked by sound and suggesting a special ecology of existence in a landscape” (Swan 292). So in the latter entry, Hull conceives the self in a distinctly different way from the visual mode of the body image.

As we have seen in Chapter 4 (152), in “To Accept or not to Accept,” Hull discusses the way in which the blind person can be enclosed within his/her self. He describes this state of being thus: “The span of attention, of knowledge, retracts so that one lives in a little world. . . . Only the area which can be touched with the body or tapped with the stick becomes a space in which one can live. The rest is unknown” (On Sight 47). He experiences life as being severely restricted by blindness and its modes of dealing with the world. Thus, the entry offers two ways of being-in-the-world: first, of being trapped in the “world [of] one’s own body, the introspective consciousness;” or secondly, of engaging in constant work, “to get on with some little piece of work which would keep my brain ticking over” (Touching the Rock 53; On Sight 46). Both these modes of living do not facilitate fruitfulness because they express a kind of despair.

Just over five months after recording “Rain,” Hull talks about the extremely
depressing non-availability of the body image in the entry “Fighting Depression 24 February 1984” (Touching the Rock 62-5; On Sight 54-6). In the following passage, he explains the impact that this has on his self-conception:

I feel as if I want to stop thinking, stop experiencing. The lack of a body image makes this worse: the fact that one can’t glance down and see the reassuring continuity of one’s own consciousness in the outlines of one’s own body. . . . There is no extension of awareness into space. So I am nothing but a pure consciousness, and if so, I could be anywhere. I am becoming ubiquitous; it no longer matters where I am. (Touching the Rock 64; On Sight 55)

Here Hull describes the dissolution of the self in states of depression, when the “lack of a body image” produces in him a sense of having “become nothing” (Touching the Rock 62; On Sight 54).

By contrast, in “Rainfall and the Blind Body,” he arrives at a new, creative understanding of the blind body, and questions his previous conception of the self:

Is it true that the blind live in their bodies rather than in the world? I am aware of my body just as I am aware of the rain. My body is similarly made up of many patterns, many different regularities and irregularities, extended in space from down there to up here. . . . Nothing corresponds visually to this realization. Instead of having an image of my body, as being in what we call the ‘human form’, I apprehend it now as these arrangements of sensitivities, a conscious space comparable to the patterns of the falling rain. . . . My body and the rain intermingle, and become one audio-tactile, three-dimensional universe, within which and
throughout the whole of which lies my awareness. (Touching the Rock 133; On Sight 119-20)

This passage unequivocally declares an expansive conception of self which embraces the world around the blind person. Whereas in “Fighting Depression” Hull links not having a body image with disintegration of the self, in this entry he conceives the state as opening a door onto a fresh way of understanding himself. This non-visual conception expands his consciousness much beyond the confines of his body, and transcends the body image as a representation of the self. His consciousness contains layered “arrangements of sensitivities, a conscious space comparable to the patterns of the falling rain.” This shows that, for the first time, the diarist does not crave for his body image. Thus, in Swan’s words, “A remarkable outcome of Hull’s reflection on his experience is the possibility of imagining the body in a manner unaffected by the visual” (291). Hull’s new selfhood may be symbolised by the comprehensive awareness of “one audio-tactile, three-dimensional universe.” Clearly, then, the entry is a meditation on the self and existence itself in relation to blindness. The series of questions that closes it are important. I list some of them here: “Where do thoughts come from? Upon what do they depend? Into how many worlds am I inserted? What is blindness?” (Touching the Rock 134; On Sight 120). The last question suggests, in light of the discussion presented in the whole entry and of the question preceding it, that blindness is only one aspect that may define a person’s selfhood. If he/she is inserted into “many worlds,” his/her existence is fed by many rich sources. A corollary of the foregoing conclusion is, in Swan’s words, that “Hull can be understood as exploring versions of perception and relatedness available to sighted experience but usually hidden under the dominance of the visual. It may be from this vantage that he begins to
think of blindness not as a lack or an absence but as a new existence, a gift” (292). Thus, by elucidating his experience of the “audio-tactile, three-dimensional universe,” the diarist undermines conventional ideas about bodily, perceptual, and cognitive normalcy.

Let us examine further the importance of knowledge for Hull’s selfhood, and for the task of building the world of blindness. In an early entry significantly called “Darkness Within 10 July 1983” (On Sight 19-21), the diarist says that ignorance generates a “sense of darkness” in his consciousness. He explains that such situations arise “when I become a little panicky through being asthmatic or losing my way,” when he does not know his children’s playful activities, or when he becomes anxious, and “when I am emotionally involved in ignorance” (On Sight 20). When he compares the current state of his self ‘in blindness’ with sighted others, and with his own sighted self in the past, he experiences deep anguish: “For me, consciousness is an experience of internal darkness, in that it is no longer illuminated by colour, shape and movement.” At this point, the senses of touch and hearing do not fulfil his desire for “the precision, complexity and detail of the actual world” (On Sight 20) in perception. The foregoing words suggest his (mis)understanding that sight alone can provide access to these qualities. The section “What Blindness Does to the Brain 4 August 1983” (On Sight 24-5) highlights the acuteness of the dilemma concerning knowledge. It dwells on how blindness impacts “the process of knowing” in “recently blinded people” (On Sight 25), and brings about a profound transformation in their personalities. The lack of visual information suffocates the brain, and negatively impacts selfhood. Such persons may be said to experience “the death of the old self” (On Sight 25). However, Hull does state, “When I am engaged in something which gives me a sense of intimate and accurate
knowledge, like taking part in a discussion on a subject that I know a lot about, reading an interesting book or making love, the sense of darkness diminishes” (*On Sight* 20). These activities create in him a sense of fulfilment. Further, when he knows “the content of the relationship” while interacting with loved people, and also knows his environment accurately (*On Sight* 21), he does not experience darkness. So knowledge is crucial for him to be at home with the self.

Now that the diarist is ‘in blindness,’ he is impelled to explore the tactile and auditory senses. However, he sets up a comparison between the two from the start. In “Touching 12 July 1983” (*On Sight* 21-2), he explains with examples why he considers that “Sounds are abstract, but touch puts body on things” (*On Sight* 21). While walking around a museum or cathedral, the oral descriptions that he receives from others help him to form a picture of the place, but it is only when he touches “a statue or a piece of machinery,” or explores “with my fingers some of the intricate carvings on the screen,” or when he runs “the palms of my hands over the roughness of the stone” that he regains “something very vivid” in experience. Thus, he describes the tactile sense as “earth[ing] the words” (*On Sight* 21). He feels that bodily contact with the world through touch affords him a more intimate knowledge.

By contrast, in “Acoustic Space 27April 1984” (*Touching the Rock* 80-4; *On Sight* 71-4), Hull recognises that audition makes possible a wide “range and depth of . . . contact points between myself and something created by sound,” while “[t]he tangible world sets up only as many points of reality as can be touched by my body” (*Touching the Rock* 81; *On Sight* 71). So the former modality allows him to become aware of the wide world, and the latter is useful to him as a means of exploring minute, delicate details characterising reality. The reference to “space” in the title is significant because,
as Hull explains in the section entitled “Nice Day? 5 June 1983” (Touching the Rock 16; On Sight 12-3), sounds moving through the space around him create the world for him: “[T]he sound of the wind in the trees . . . creates trees; one is surrounded by trees whereas before there was nothing” (Touching the Rock 16; On Sight 12). Expressed another way, he is “thinking of the way in which sound places one within a world” (Touching the Rock 81; On Sight 72). The words “the world of sound” (Touching the Rock 80; On Sight 71) come to acquire the two-fold meaning of acoustic phenomena, and the phenomenal world which is brought to the subject’s awareness by sounds, more particularly the phenomenon where objects are created for the blind subject by sounds emanating from his/her environment. Hull alludes to this idea when he refers to “something created by sound” (Touching the Rock 81; On Sight 71). The section also shows that the diarist is experiencing a change in his outlook on life ‘with blindness.’

However, the transient nature of sounds leads him to conclude that he is a passive receiver: “The creatures emitting the noise have to engage in some activity. . . . They must take the initiative in announcing their presence to me. For my part, I have no power to explore them” (Touching the Rock 83; On Sight 73). As is clear from the foregoing quote, the blind person who is ready to hear the world has to wait for the world to announce itself to him/her. He/she cannot “discover” creatures and objects “without their active co-operation” (Touching the Rock 83). This feature of sound explains Hull’s philosophical conclusion about his world: “When there is rest, everything else passes out of existence. To rest is not to be. To do is to be. Mine is not a world of being; it is a world of becoming” (Touching the Rock 82; On Sight 73).

7. Kuusisto writes in the essay “Harbor Songs” (Eavesdropping 3-6) how sounds created the world for him as a small blind boy: “I put such great faith in sound: sound was this tree and that grass; this man; this dimension of light and shade” (6). As these words vividly express it, for the boy the world is the sounds it produces. This means that he relies on sounds to reveal the world to him.
objects in the world do not produce sounds, they do not exist for him. So a gap is evident between existence and knowledge in the case of the blind person when there is no sound to tell him/her about the former. We may, therefore, say that Hull exists in the world in action.

Now we come to the phenomenon of echo location, which is, in Hull’s words, a “much-discussed blind experience” (Touching the Rock 25; On Sight 22). In “Facial Vision 14 July 1983” (Touching the Rock 25-8; On Sight 22-4), Hull records that after he became totally blind, he “gradually realised” that he “was developing some strange kind of perception” (Touching the Rock 26; On Sight 22), that is, echo location or facial vision. “This is the obtaining of information about the animal-environment system,” Thomas A. Stoffregen and John B. Pittenger explain, “from relations between a pulse, a perceiver-generated wavefront coming directly to the perceiver's ear from its source, and its echo, that same sound arriving at the ear after reflection from the object or surface” (182). In this perceptual modality, then, the blind person senses the presence of objects close to him/her through becoming aware of sounds being reflected off their surfaces (On Sight 23-4). “The sense of pressure” created by the echoes, Hull clarifies, “is upon the skin of the face, rather than upon or within the ears” (Touching the Rock 28; On Sight 24). This perceptual journey indicates the slow and sure changes taking place in the self that has been inserted into the blind condition. The shift from the past tense to the present tense employed by the diarist also indicates the temporal extension of the process covered in the section. The following passage illustrates this point because it incorporates the shift:

Not only have I become sensitive to thinner objects, but the range seems to have increased. When walking home, I used only to be able to detect
parked cars by making contact with my cane. These days I almost never make contact with a parked car unexpectedly. Nearly always, I realise that there is an obstacle in my path before my stick strikes against it. This is in spite of the fact that I am now using the very long cane.

(Touching the Rock 26; On Sight 22-3)

Besides his growing confidence in using echo location for mobility, it is also noteworthy that Hull carries the white cane which is very useful to the blind person “as an extension of his perception” (Touching the Rock 37; On Sight 33). The cane serves “as an instrument of sense perception, as a way of gathering information about the world” (Touching the Rock 38; On Sight 34) through the sense of touch.

In “Less Space, More Time 17 April 1984” (Touching the Rock 78-80; On Sight 69-71), Hull explores with examples of his own and other disabled persons’ lives, how a contraction in space and an expansion in time occurs for the disabled (Touching the Rock 79; On Sight 70). This experience may be understood with the help of the “notion of lived body,” as elucidated in phenomenology. Toombs explains that the lived body is the basis of the embodied subject’s existence in the world, and that its disruption throws light on “the meaning of disability”: “[M]y body as I live it represents my particular point of view on the world” (italics as in the source). It may therefore be said that I experience the lived body not as another object in the world of objects, but as the locus of my (the self’s) orientation in the world (Toombs 10) as well as “of my intentions.” This means that I exist in the world, organise it, and perform actions in it “through the medium of my body” (Toombs 11). So when the body is impaired, and the subject’s ways of performing actions are disrupted, his/her experience of space and time is transformed. Due to “loss of mobility” (Toombs 15), the space that the disabled person
can traverse shrinks (Toombs 15; Touching the Rock 79; On Sight 70). Conversely, since it takes much more time for such a person to perform actions than it would have without the disability, time expands for him/her (Toombs 19; Touching the Rock 79-80; On Sight 70-1). Accordingly, Hull clarifies, the sighted and the blind understand time differently. Daily tasks and activities also take on a different significance for each. He concludes, “It is because of the space-time co-ordinates within which the blind person lives that his or her life becomes gradually different from the lives of sighted people, particularly in a time of high technology” (Touching the Rock 80; On Sight 71). Hull’s fascinating analysis of why the lives of the blind are different from those of the sighted goes to the root of the matter in giving importance to space and time, which are fundamental categories in the fashioning of worlds.

Hull realises via Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought that blindness is significant not just because it makes it necessary for the subject to acquire a different kind of knowledge by means different from those employed by the sighted, but more because it creates a different mode of being in the world. It is noteworthy that he terms the work of blindness as “a disruption of the fundamental nature of being in the world” (On Sight 181) – a clear indication that for him as a person who became blind midway through life, perhaps sight will always remain richer and more fruitful than blindness. However in “Blindness as a Way of Being in the World 4 January 1986” (On Sight 180-81), he does talk about the blind person becoming “familiarized to his or her new body and new world” (On Sight 181), and about the role of the white cane in such a person’s mobility. In this offering of an alternative conception, it is clear that Hull is different from his earlier self, who used to give in to sadness.
5.2. Social Interaction and Self-Knowledge

Hull offers a sustained reflection throughout his diaries on his interactions with sighted friends, family members, and even with those who are blind or have other disabilities. Furthermore, as indicated in the opening paragraph of this chapter, he considers self-knowledge to arise from interactions with other people (On Sight xiii). Let us, then, briefly examine the dynamics of this activity as he carries it out in the blind condition. Concerning sexuality, the diarist expresses deep anxiety about sexual arousal since he no longer has visual access to how women look. We may recall here his conditioned reliance on a sighted colleague’s description of “[the] beauty or [the] plainness” of “a new female acquaintance” (Touching the Rock 23; On Sight 18) to reach a conclusion in his own mind about her worth. At this point in the diaries, then, he still displays a sighted man’s mode of sexual response. In the section “Face to Face 11 January 1984” (Touching the Rock 54-6; On Sight 47-8), discussing the significance of “the face-to-face position” in lovemaking among sighted people, he describes the change in the position taken in sexual intercourse by a couple in a film about primitive humans: “One of the most dramatic scenes was when a couple making love abandoned the position, which the film shows as being universal, in which the male partner is behind the female, for the face-to-face position. This is portrayed as the development of mere sexual intercourse into an act of communion between two persons” (Touching the Rock 55; On Sight 47). However, the face-to-face position loses its significance for the blind lover because he cannot turn his gaze upon his beloved while making love, and pay visual attention to her (as a heterosexual man). Hull wonders whether this changed circumstance diminishes the sexual power of blind persons:

How does blindness affect lovemaking? Must not blind lovers become
more primitive? Must they not regress, as it were, to the situation described in the film as being pre-personal? On the other hand, is it not possible that the blind person, dependent so heavily upon touch, smell and taste, might develop new gentleness and sensitivity in that situation which is tactile all over? (Touching the Rock 55; On Sight 47-8)

We thus see, along with Hull, how utilisation by the blind person of the power of “touch, smell and taste” can make him or her a more gentle and sensitive lover.

To this potent realisation of the power that the blind man possesses to please the loved woman, we may oppose Hull’s experiences of being infantilised. On one occasion, a stranger in the street hands him some sweets, and says that he was planning to give them to a child (Touching the Rock 104; On Sight 95). On another occasion, a good friend lies alert through the night, even in his sleep, to warn Hull about a bathroom overflow the moment he awoke, instead of waking him earlier to tell him about it. When asked, the friend tells the diarist that this experience is similar to looking after a child. A wheelchair-using friend tells Hull how people “tend to speak to him in a gentle, slow and compassionate sort of voice. It is a kindly, condescending voice, the way some people speak to children” (Touching the Rock 105; On Sight 96). These incidents show that non-disabled people view persons with disabilities as incomplete beings who really are ineffectual, and can never be as good as themselves. Related to this attitude is the practice of speaking about the disabled “in third person, to someone else” (Touching the Rock 112; On Sight 101) in their presence. The diarist recognises, however, that people do such things because they are not certain how to deal with disability (Touching the Rock 105-06; On Sight 96).
Hull reports further that the blind tend to be perceived by the sighted world as supernatural symbols. One night, as he is walking home from the university, a man stops him because a car has climbed onto the footpath. His brother has been driving, and is hurt. But this man explains to Hull that he himself is not hurt because he shows care towards the disabled: “This thing has never happened to me because I always look after people like you” (Touching the Rock 38; On Sight 34). So the blind man who walks into sight “around the corner” tapping his white cane instantly gets converted by the shaken man’s mind into “a sort of signal from heaven” (Touching the Rock 39; On Sight 35), which warns him to be kind towards the disabled.

Interactions between the blind and the sighted can result in misunderstandings as well. As the diarist records in the section entitled “Misunderstandings 26 November 1983” (On Sight 38-9), these “arise from sighted people’s difficulties in realising the problems of blind mobility” (On Sight 38), and consequently from the image of the blind person that they conceive in their minds. In the two examples that Hull presents, the sighted persons do not realise that the blind man has to walk along a route that is defined by objects he can feel in order to find the required gates. The former who work by using sight to access their environment fail to recognise the difference in the method that the non-sighted latter must use in mobility. Due to this misunderstanding, Hull reflects, the sighted end up thinking that the blind are ineffective and need help all the time. He also remarks that, if people would follow his instructions regarding his mobility, he would be “able to do this reasonably gracefully, with only a few swings of my cane” (On Sight 39). So the difficulties that the sighted have in understanding how blind persons move end up affecting Hull’s own behaviour. To the question as to why the blind should even get affected by what sighted persons think of them, the answer is
that the reactions of the former come spontaneously. Undergoing the experience of being watched and evaluated (negatively) is like being swept down a river by a sudden flood, in which case it is but natural to react. This is a fact of intersubjectivity in the human world. When a person interacts with others, how those others behave towards him/her influences how he/she reacts.

Hull also reports incidents where sighted people behave with overt negativity towards him due to his blindness, on one occasion with malice (*Touching the Rock* 89; *On Sight* 77-8). In the section “A Visit from a Faith Healer 5 March 1984” (*Touching the Rock* 72-5; *On Sight* 63-5), we meet a faith healer whom the diarist calls Mr Cresswell. He attempts to heal Hull of his blindness through faith and purificatory actions (*Touching the Rock* 74; *On Sight* 63-4). Soon after this incident, a hypnotherapist urges Hull to undergo healing at his hands (*Touching the Rock* 86; *On Sight* 75). However, the latter declines the offer because he considers acquiescing to faith healing as a futile exercise that degrades and humiliates him (*Touching the Rock* 87; *On Sight* 76). Accordingly, the next time at church when Mr Cresswell gives him an instruction in a particularly intrusive manner, Hull directly confronts the faith-healing man, and lets him know in no uncertain terms that he is “‘not prepared to be put under emotional pressure to do all these strange things week by week’” (*Touching the Rock* 88; *On Sight* 77) in a bid to regain his eyesight. What is interesting about faith healers who claim that they can heal the blind is that they are obsessed with the ‘normal’ body, and are not able to accept disability and illness in their religion. They consider persons who are ill or disabled to be afflicted. This attitude is in line with the medical model of
disability, which views the disabled individual as defective. By the time he writes *In the Beginning There was Darkness*, Hull has come to realise that the compulsive desire to regain lost sight expresses merely a limited, normative outlook on life ‘with blindness’: “To be delivered from the restrictions of blindness into the freedom of a sighted person’s life is one of the most desirable transformations that a sighted person could imagine. Naturally, blind people get caught up in this point of view” (45). Here he recognises the dynamics of the relationship between the sighted (non-disabled) and the blind, who are actually disabled by the social expectation of ‘normal’ sight. So, in 1997, when a proponent of faith healing for the ill and disabled (including blind persons) writes him a patronising, intolerant letter, Hull replies in a way that is accepting of his blindness. He acknowledges his disability, and says that he is blessed with “a wonderful wife and five beautiful children” as well as a good job with the University of Birmingham, which enables him to provide for himself and his family very well (*In the Beginning* 47). Further, he states in his letter, “I am a Christian like yourself. My Christian life has been deepened since I lost my sight.” So he interprets his blindness “as a strange, dark and mysterious gift from God” (*In the Beginning* 48), which has strengthened the primary way of being that he embraces. In this way, he rebukes proponents of faith healing who look down upon the blind, ill, and other

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8. Scholars working in disability studies distinguish between different models or frames of understanding disability, viz. the medical model of disability, the social model, and the cultural model. Siebers describes the first-mentioned model as follows: “The medical model situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective” (173). So medical doctors and rehabilitational professionals consider the body of the individual with a disability (or disabilities) as being defective. As a result of this, they ignore the roles played by powerful social and cultural forces such as negative attitudes and barriers in the built environment which disable that individual. This is to say that although illness and bodily make-up condition the individual’s functioning in the world, the barriers imposed upon him/her by society place obstacles in his/her path.

9. He arrives at this understanding by the date 21 April 1986, when he articulates the possibility of blindness being a gift (*Touching the Rock* 205; *On Sight* 188). He reflects on this realisation in four sections of the diaries (*Touching the Rock* 205-08; *On Sight* 188-90).
disabled people as being not only inferior to the sighted, healthy, and non-disabled, but also as incomplete Christians.

Coming to the dynamics of Hull’s interactions with other people, especially new colleagues or delegates at conferences, he says that he has to learn their names in order to know them. After he meets a person for the first time through their name, “[hears] the voice and [feels] the hand clasp which would, from now on, be associated with that name” (*Touching the Rock* 96), he builds up “the story of that person” around “the verbal cue” (*On Sight* 89) of the name. So he knows friends and acquaintances through their voices and touch, which aspects of their personalities get attached to their names. People are present to Hull, he explains further, in the form of “voices suspended upon stilts – a present emerging out of a past, in time rather than in space” (*Touching the Rock* 97; *On Sight* 90). This experience may be understood when we recognise that speaking with a person takes place in time, while they are visually available to a sighted person in space. The diarist is particularly concerned about his passivity as a blind person in the social activity of “getting to know people” (*Touching the Rock* 97; *On Sight* 90). Since he cannot look around a room in order to find people and greet them, he has to engage the help of whoever he happens to be talking with at the moment to introduce him to other people they know (*Touching the Rock* 98-9; *On Sight* 90-1). This initiative on his part enables Hull to make and keep “human friendships” (*Touching the Rock* 97; *On Sight* 90).

Hull is deeply concerned during the years he grapples with his blindness about creating opportunities to help his children understand him as a blind person (*Touching the Rock* 35-7, 61-2, 76-7; *On Sight* 30-1, 53, 68-9). He undergoes deep suffering when he is not able to play with his children with the assurance of a sighted person (*Touching
the Rock 150-54; On Sight 133-35). However, as time goes by, he devises ways of interacting with his children more effectively (Touching the Rock 187, 189; On Sight 164, 165). Having examined the multiple ways in which, for Hull, knowing the world and being with other people constitutes the self, we will now move on to the next chapter. In that, I write about blindness in Kuusisto’s life, memory, and art.