…what is it anyway - to form an idea, a representation?

Is there anyone among us who does not know what it is to form an idea? When we form an idea of something [...] we have a representational idea of those objects. Where do we have those ideas? We have them in our head. We have them in our consciousness. We have them in our soul. We have the ideas inside ourselves, these ideas of objects.

Now it is true that a few centuries ago philosophy began to meddle in the matter, and by now has made it questionable whether the ideas inside ourselves answer to any reality at all outside ourselves. Some say yes; others no; still others say that the matter cannot be decided anyway, all one can say is that the world - that is the totality of what is real - is there insofar as we have an idea of it. “The world is my idea.” In this sentence Schopenhauer has summed up the thought of recent philosophy. Schopenhauer must be mentioned here because his main work, The World as Will and Idea, ever since its publication in 1818, has most persistently determined the whole tone of nineteenth- and twentieth century thought - even where this is not immediately obvious, and even more where Schopenhauer’s statement is opposed. We forget too easily that a thinker is more essentially effective where he is opposed than where he finds agreement. Even Nietzsche had to pass through a head-on confrontation with Schopenhauer; and despite the fact that his understanding of the will was the opposite of Schopenhauer’s, Nietzsche held fast to Schopenhauer’s axiom: “The world is my idea.” Schopenhauer himself says the following about this axiom (in Chapter One, Volume Two of his main work):

“‘The world is my idea’ – this, like the axioms of Euclid, is a statement whose truth must be recognised by anyone who understands it; though not (a statement) of the kind that anyone understands who hears it. – To have made us conscious of this statement, and to have connected it with the problem of the relation of the ideal to the real, i.e. the relation of the world in the head to the world outside the head – this, in addition to the problem of moral freedom, is what gives its distinctive character to the philosophy of the moderns. For only after thousands of years of trials with purely objective philosophizing did we discover that, among the many things that make the world so enigmatic and so thought provoking, the closest and most immediate thing is this: however immeasurable and massive the world may be, yet its existence hangs by one single thin thread: and that is the given individual consciousness in which it is constituted.”

Given this discord among philosophers concerning what the forming of ideas is in essence, there is patently just one way out into the open. We leave the field of philosophical speculation behind us, and first of all investigate carefully and scientifically how matters really stand with the ideas that occur in living beings, especially man and animals. […]
The word ‘idea’ comes from the Greek ειδω which means to see, face, meet, be face-to-face.

We stand outside science. Instead we stand before a tree in bloom, for example - and the tree stands before us. The tree faces us. The tree and we meet one another, as the tree stands there and we stand face-to-face with it. As we are in this relation of one to the other, the tree and we are. This face-to-face meeting is not, then, one of these "ideas" buzzing about in our heads. Let us stop here for a moment, as we would catch our breath before and after a leap. For that is what we are now, men who have leapt, out of the familiar realm of science and even, as we shall see, out of the realm of philosophy. And where have we leapt? Perhaps into an abyss? No! Rather, onto some firm soil. Some? No! But on that soil upon which we live and die, if we are honest with ourselves. A curious, indeed unearthly thing that we must first leap onto the soil on which we already stand. When anything so curious as this leap becomes necessary, something must have happened that gives food for thought. Judged scientifically, of course, it remains the most inconsequential thing on earth that each of us has some time stood facing a tree in bloom. After all, what of it? We come and stand, facing a tree, before it, and the tree faces, meets us. Which one is meeting here? The tree, or we? Or both? Or neither? We come and stand - just as we are, and not merely with our head or our consciousness - facing the tree in bloom, and the tree faces, meets us as the tree it is. Or did the tree anticipate us and come before us? Did the tree come first to stand and face us, so that we might come forward face-to-face with it?

What happens here, that the tree stands there to face us, and we come to stand face-to-face with the tree? Where does this presentation take place, when we stand face-to-face before a tree in bloom? Does it by any chance take place in our heads? Of course; many things may take place in our brain when we stand on a meadow and have standing before us a blossoming tree in all its radiance and fragrance - when we perceive it. In fact we even have transforming and amplifying apparatus that can show the processes in our heads as brain currents, render them audible and retrace their course in curves. We can - of course! Is there anything modern man can not do? He can even be helpful, now and then, with what he can do. And he is helping everywhere with the best intentions. Man can - probably none of us have as yet the least premonition of what man will soon be able to do scientifically. But - to stay with our example - while science records the brain currents, what becomes of the tree in bloom? What becomes of the meadow? What becomes of the man - not the brain but of the man, who may die under our hands tomorrow and be lost to us, and who at one time came to our encounter? What becomes of the face-to-face, the meeting, the seeing, the forming of the idea, in which the tree presents itself and man comes to stand face-to-face with the tree?

When ideas are formed in this way, a variety of things happen presumably also in what is described as the sphere of consciousness and regarded as pertaining to the soul. But does the tree stand “in our consciousness,” or does it stand in the meadow? Does the meadow lie in the soul, as experience, or is it spread out there in the earth? Is the earth in our head? Or do we stand on the earth?

It will be said in rebuttal: What is the use of such questions concerning a state of affairs which everybody will in fairness admit immediately, since it is clear as day to all the world that we are standing on the earth and, in our example, face-to-face with a
tree? But let us not slip too hastily into this admission, let us not accept and take this “clear as day” too lightly. For we shall forfeit everything before we know it, once the sciences of physics, physiology, psychology, not to forget scientific philosophy, display the panoply of their documents and proofs, to explain to us that what we see and accept is properly not a tree but in reality a void, thinly sprinkled with electric charges here and there that race hither and yon at enormous speeds. It will not do to admit, just for the scientifically unguarded moments, so to speak, that, naturally, we are standing face-to-face with a tree in bloom, only to affirm the very next moment as equally obvious that this view, naturally, typifies only the naïve, because pre-scientific, comprehension of things. For with that affirmation we have conceded something whose consequences we have hardly considered, and that is: that those sciences do in fact decide what of the tree in bloom may or may not be considered valid reality. Whence do the sciences - which necessarily are always in the dark about the origin of their own nature - derive the authority to pronounce such verdicts? Whence do the sciences derive the right to decide what man’s place is, and to offer themselves as the standard that justifies such decisions? And they will do so just as soon as we tolerate, if only by our silence, that our standing face-to-face with the tree is no more than a pre-scientifically intended relation to something we still happen to call “tree.” In truth, we are today rather inclined to favor a supposedly superior physical and physiological knowledge, and to drop the blossoming tree.

When we think through what this is, that a tree in bloom presents itself to us so that we can come and stand face-to-face with it, the thing that matters first and foremost, and finally, is not to drop the tree in bloom, but for once let it stand where it stands. Why do we say “finally”? Because to this day, thought has never let the tree stand where it stands.