

“... we dream our sleep ...” - Aphoristic remarks on the mental landscape of Waldorf education

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Rudolf Steiner's Critique of our Way of Knowing

In his early philosophical works Rudolf Steiner formulates a sharp critique of the epistemology of representational consciousness, which is the form modern waking consciousness normally takes. This spectator mentality exists in a state of *naïve realism*, in that it takes the phenomena, events and objects of the world at their face value, merely *receiving* them *passively* in this ready-made form. It is thus in a *finalised* state, since it simply takes in the end-products of a pre-existing, ready-made world, to which it has made no contribution. It is, moreover, *fixated* on these end-products, simultaneously giving them *fixed definitions*, and is capable only of *particularised* apprehension of things in themselves without context – a *dualistic* form of awareness. This mentality *isolates* the human being from the world, which thus becomes a mere object of destructive exploitation, as our modern civilisation has made fully apparent.

Rudolf Steiner points out that while this normal, spectator mentality is extremely alert and discriminating, and also serves to create a high degree of self-awareness – herein lies its historical justification and importance – it is nonetheless an end-product. It has no awareness of how it comes about, of the process out of which its acute wakefulness arises. As regards the conditions and requirements for its generation, therefore, it is as if caught in a state of dream or sleep. Herbert Witzmann describes it in this way: “The world in which we think we are present and *awake* is actually the dream memory of the re-composition of the world we have undertaken in a kind of sleep-state. What we currently assume to be a world of extraneous objects is, therefore, the dream memory produced by our own unconscious. [...] What we take as our waking consciousness is a dreaming memory of our own self.”¹ In his fundamental work “The Philosophy of Freedom” Rudolf Steiner says something very similar about a mode of thinking that is focused on its content, but knows nothing of its own activity: “This is just the peculiar nature of thinking, that the thinker forgets his thinking while actually engaged in it. What occupies his attention is not his thinking, but the object of his thinking [...]”² Our own participation in the construction of the contents of consciousness, which we think of as reality, is not normally something we are conscious of. We therefore know nothing of the spiritual origins of our consciousness, nor of our own spiritual origin, and our mental life, as characterised by Rudolf Steiner in “The Foundations of Human Experience”, is merely a *compendium of dead images*.

1. Herbert Witzmann: “Wir können aus diesem Traum erwachen ...” (“We can awaken from this dream ...”) – Interview with Henning Köhler. In Info-3-Extra 3/1987, p. 19f. The title of this essay is from Witzmann's book: Goethes universalästhetischer Impuls. Dornach 1987, p. 147.

2. Rudolf Steiner: The Philosophy of Freedom. (Complete Edition: GA 4) Trans. M. Wilson, London 1964, ch. 3.

But below the surface of this dead spectator mode of cognition lies the creative power of *active, cognitive participation* in reality.³ This creative mode of cognition precedes normal consciousness. It has an *initialising* quality, in that it opens up the field or awareness out of the initiative of its own powers of attention. In the Goethean sense, moreover, it is able to enter into the *dynamics* of formative processes within phenomena and grasp their inner workings with *holistic* understanding. Accordingly, it is not *dualistically* separated from things, but *monistically* united with them through the forms of its own action. These two modes of cognition, the representational and the creative, thus stand in contrast to each other in the following way:

representational cognition	creative cognition
passive	active
receptive	productive
finalised	initialising
fixed	dynamic
particularised	holistic
dualistic-isolated	monistic-participatory

Representational consciousness knows nothing of the creative consciousness upon which it depends and which gives rise to it. It persists in being a mere spectator – with acute self-awareness – of a world of separate objects. Creative consciousness is, nonetheless, always present, putting its impress on the content of representational consciousness, entirely unawares. – By day, starlight is blotted out by the light of the sun, and yet the stars are always present.

Intuition

The source of creative consciousness is the life-filled thinking that Rudolf Steiner describes as “intuition”. By means of the method of “inner observation” developed in “The Philosophy of Freedom” intuitive thinking becomes aware not only of its content, but also of the form of cognitive activity that generates this content. In doing so it both apprehends and produces the inherent meaning of the concepts and ideas it is concerned with. In normal thinking these are merely mirrored, which is at the same time the way this spectator consciousness becomes aware of itself. Since it only knows its own kind of apprehension, it therefore assumes that such cognitive mirror-images are merely subjective and historical. This is the position of *nominalism*. The kind of thinking that is consciously involved in the process of its own activity enters intuitively into the living meaning of self-consistent thought content. This meaning and, in equal measure, the thinking activity producing it, are experienced as extraordinarily powerful. This is the position of realism. The experience of thought as something powerful and real, which at the same time bestows a sense of profundity and existential security, forms the core of anthroposophical meditation, which, in turn, is the experience of union between the spiritual origin of one’s own Self in the activity of thinking and the ideal-spiritual, self-consistent origin of the content of thinking. Novalis designated this experience as “magical”. In “The Philosophy of Freedom” Rudolf Steiner remarks in this connection: “For everyone, however, who has the ability to observe thinking — and with good will every normal man has this ability — this observation is the most important one he can possibly make.”⁴ And intuition – as this experience of unifying exchange – he describes as follows: “Intuition is the conscious experience — in pure spirit — of a purely spiritual content.”⁵ This amounts to the same

3. Translator’s note: this is what the English philosopher/poet S. T. Coleridge calls the *primary imagination*. *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 13.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

thing as a self-consistent spiritual process. The path to intuition leads from representation-bound thinking to thinking grounded in will.

Rudolf Steiner's early philosophical works are an exposition of this experience of the power of thought. The difference between pale, representational ratiocination and the dynamic energy of intuitive thinking may be brought to mind by the following metaphors: Swimming in the Mediterranean you might describe the leisurely movements of the water as waves, until, that is, you stand on an Atlantic beach and see a mighty swell rolling in that has travelled hundreds of miles through the ocean. Only then do you have the full experience of waves. A further image: You step out of Köln central station to the sight of the noble and massive façade of the cathedral towering above you. All the buildings around it look merely temporary and haphazard, purpose-built blocks, scarcely deserving the name of architecture. The cathedral alone radiates power, majesty and magic. One last image: Just as the power of the wind fills the sail of a ship thus propelling it forwards, so the sail of one's own thinking activity opens itself to the power of the content of thought, thus engendering an individual experience of intuitive movement.

The central concept of Waldorf education

What we observe in today's schools and universities is a style of education geared essentially towards the inculcation of rational, spectator consciousness, as derived from Descartes via the Enlightenment. It generates the previously described dualistic mentality with all the clarity and alertness of a spectator with sharp judgment, and the acuity of an individual identity constructed upon its separateness from a world of extraneous objects. In what it is attempting to do, Waldorf education does not – as is often assumed – lag behind this form of mentality, but is actually ahead of it. Waldorf education is not aimed merely at the accumulation of ready-made content to be subsequently reconstituted from memory in examinations. At the same time, it brings life into its educational practice by integrating into it those elements that constitute the spiritual sources of this mentality. This, indeed, is its whole creative ethos. Whereas for the adult – already furnished with a fully developed “spectator identity” – this can take the form of meditative training that explores the phenomenology of consciousness as a path of self-realisation, for the growing individual, i.e. the child or adolescent, it touches mainly the undercurrents of feeling and will. For it is on this level that intense and authentic pre-rational experience of Self initially occurs. In Waldorf schools the gradual development of rationally-oriented thinking should not mean alienation from the world. The aim of holistic educational practice is individuality grounded upon feeling and will, that is aware, through intense experience, of its connectedness to the world, while at the same time developing the rational intellect.

Thinking, will, feeling

In his introductory lectures at the founding of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919, which have been published under the title “Foundations of Human Experience”, Rudolf Steiner distinguishes two poles of mental life: that of representation and that of will or volition. The so-called “cram-school” of Rudolf Steiner's time, but also the general run of schools at present, address themselves mostly to the representational pole. The intention in Waldorf schools is to bring the volitional pole into the process as well. While the representational side, as described, is wakeful and self-aware, the volitional side is more unconscious, asleep. The will lives in the deed, not in the mental picture of it. If you say to yourself, “I will get up tomorrow morning at five o'clock”, you merely have a picture in your mind of your intention or wish. What actually puts this into practice the following morning is the will. It is active in what Rudolf Steiner designated as the limb system. It is *ontic*, since it merges with the being of the world in real human deeds. Compared to this the representational side is weak and not *ontic* – it merely projects *pictures* of being. In their teaching methods Waldorf schools are geared towards practical activities and projects. The intention is that the students actively engage with the world. Rather than simply being receivers of ideas about the world delivered by cleverly designed learning systems, they should be actively involved in the world by being immersed in practical reality.

It is a particularly accurate characterisation of will that it cannot be construed in the narrow terms of subjective self-affirmation, but only as something that comes towards us, as it were, from the outside, as an experience of connection with the phenomena of the world. Just as in the well-known fairy tale of "Mother Holle" the apples want to be picked from the tree and the loaves fetched from the oven, so from the simple expressions of desire (the coffee wants to be drunk, the chocolate to be eaten) via the artistic activities that develop our talents (the violin wants to be played, the tree to be drawn) to the forms of intuitive thinking (the concept wants to be thought) the world wants us to become involved with it. Education grounded in practical reality and exercise of the senses gives children experience of this world-aspect of the will. And through the skills developed in the course of such practice the students achieve an authentically monistic connection to the world, for each skill is founded upon the concordance between the students' own actions and the laws upon which the world works. Thus Waldorf practice is not merely brain-based, but skills-based education.

Within the human make-up feeling occupies a middle realm between (representational) thinking and will. Feeling partakes of the will's energy and connection with the world, and with thinking it shares the relation to self, but on a deeper and more intense level. It is comparatively dream-like, and as a result of the will's involvement with the world is sensitive to the qualities of things. This is its expression as feeling-for-the-world. As feeling-for-self it is the experience of intention towards the world or towards other people.

The diversity of equally-weighted subjects in Waldorf education and its methodological style together permit feeling and will to confer their particular certainties in respect to world and self upon the gradually emancipating forms of an awakening, rational individual identity. The individual freedom germane to this newly-awakened representational consciousness will thus not be unaware of its spiritual origin, nor will it be isolated and alienated from the world. On the contrary, the feeling of reverence, into which flow the unconscious acts of unification involved in intuitive thinking, is a warm impulse of love which can flow outwards in human action. The poles of personal identity and connection to the world, freedom and love, light and warmth were torn apart in the Enlightenment. To facilitate rapprochement between them is the ideal of Waldorf education.

Senses

Apart from personal experience of pleasure, ordinary representational consciousness is unconscious of sensory activity. It skims over the surface of sense experience, albeit configuring the sensory content in the pale tones of representation, but failing to grasp its quality. We owe it to Goethe, to Impressionism and to phenomenological philosophy that the quality of sensory experience has been accorded the significance it deserves. This quality as such gives us an inkling of the ultimately spiritual nature of the phenomena. It can only appear in the mind if the tendency to fix images too hastily is wilfully, and indeed somewhat ascetically, held in check. Then the inner content of the sensory experience can light up in the intentionally-maintained conceptual openness of the mind intent upon knowledge. This kind of spiritual, qualitative experience of the world is practised in the impressionistic, phenomenological teaching methods of Waldorf education. Rudolf Steiner stressed that the direct appeal to the senses itself gives rise to a monistic experience: "However, where you have nerves, you are, regarding life, empty; here, light and colour do not change, and thus you live with light and colour. [...] There, you yourself become light; there, you yourself become tone."⁶

Sleepwalker

"Der Nachtwandler" ("The Sleepwalker"), a watercolour by the Sicilian painter, Beppe Assenza, has the charm of a naïve children's picture. It looks simple, but at the same time is powerful in its effect. On a dark background, which seems almost coffin-like, a figure stands out. The figure appears to have left a trail of gold behind it: the struggles of life in a body that has been thoroughly worked through. This is the glow of

6. Rudolf Steiner: The Foundations of Human Experience (GA 293). Anthroposophic Press 1996, Lecture 7, p. 131/2

abilities that a human being develops in the course of their biography. By comparison, the figure's field of vision is open and still to be taken in hand. Behind it, however, is a dynamically structured, intuitive region, which hints at cosmic dimensions. This is the realm of intuitional thinking, which integrates the dimension of cosmic eternity into our existence through continuous effort. From this emerges a stream of energy, which Rudolf Steiner designates as "intuition permeated with love."⁷ This penetrates into the arms and hands. That which lies behind the figure is plain and spiritually conceived; that which lies in front awaits the formative impulse of its intuitive will.

So whoever steps beyond the wakefulness of representational consciousness and begins opening up the dreaming and sleeping dimension of existence becomes a sleepwalker. Out of the night of our consciousness we enter in thought and action into the creative sphere of our eternal existence where we are free. Waldorf education is only a preparation for this spiritual experience of freedom, insofar as the students are enabled to approach the reality of their own self in the depths of their feeling and will activity. On this, Rudolf Steiner says: "The greatest thing one can kindle in growing children is that they come, when the time is right, to the experience of freedom through understanding the Self. True freedom is inner experience."⁸



Beppe Assenza (1905–1985) «Sleepwalker» (1985), Aquarell, 17 cm x 24 cm

7. Rudolf Steiner: The Philosophy of Freedom, own translation (Norman Skillen)

8. Rudolf Steiner: Complete Edition (GA 308), own translation (Norman Skillen)