

Dimensions of the Self in the work of Rudolf Steiner

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The pure spring is a riddle. Scarcely
Susceptible is its secret even to song.

_____ Friedrich Hölderlin: The Rhine

The Self is mysterious. It is not accessible to observation from the outside. Rudolf Steiner points out that the Self lies hidden in the inner sanctum of the human being, and that even the Godhead cannot see into it.¹ The mystery consists in the fact that the word “I” can never impinge on my ears from outside when referring to me.² It is thus an intimate inner experience. On the other hand, however, it also resists inner observation. The moment it is observed, the observed instantly becomes the observer, and thus eludes apprehension. Fichte conceived the Self (the “I”) as the act of thinking, as pure activity. His teaching instruction in illustration of this pure activity has been made famous by the Norwegian-German philosopher Heinrich Steffens in his autobiography. Steffens quotes Fichte as having said: “Gentlemen, fill your mind with the thought of the wall.”³... “Have you done so?” ... “Now, gentlemen, fill your mind with the thought of that which filled your mind with the thought of the wall.” But here also the “thought of the wall”, once it has been made the object, is in turn distinguished from the actually thinking subject (“I”) that thinks the “thought of the wall”. – Because the “I” is a pure activity (in general terms this would be the nature of mind) it cannot be objectified. Rudolf Steiner makes this point in chapter 3 of “The Philosophy of Freedom”, where he writes: “There are two things which are incompatible with one another: productive activity and the simultaneous contemplation of it.”⁴ And with reference to Fichte’s statement he says: “I can never observe my present thinking; I can only subsequently take my experiences of my thinking process as the object of fresh thinking.”⁵ Then a little later there is a sentence which seems to contradict this, in that it suggests that present thinking could be observed: “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.”⁶ Rudolf Steiner describes this observation of present thinking as an exceptional state within the context of normal consciousness, which is usually directed towards external objects and not towards its own activity.

1. Rudolf Steiner: Theosophy. An introduction to supersensible knowledge of the world and the destination of man (GA 9), p. 27.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

3. Heinrich Steffens: Was ich erlebte. Aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben [1841] Ch. 6
[<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/was-ich-erlebte-424/6>].

4. Rudolf Steiner: The Philosophy of Freedom, basis of a modern world conception. Ch. 3, Michael Wilson translation, Rudolf Steiner Press 1964.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

So, on the one hand, we have thinking being incapable of apprehension “on the run”, and on the other we have thinking being actually observable by means of an exceptional state of mind – so-called “inner observation”. For the time being we will leave this apparent aporia unresolved.⁷ It is sufficient for now to get clear just how difficult it is for philosophy to address the question of the Self or “I”. We will therefore proceed by taking a historical look at the emergence of Self-consciousness.

The emergence of Self-consciousness

Rudolf Steiner explains that although the “I” itself might be something very old, the sense of individual identity that we possess today is a relatively recent product of cultural history. In the history of art we have figures like Dürer and (a little later) especially Rembrandt, as examples of artists who gave expression to the new experience of independent Self-consciousness. Rudolf Steiner and numerous historians are of one mind in marking this time as the start of a new epoch. A new inner faculty is born enabling a different way of developing self-awareness. This should form – as Rudolf Steiner says at the start of his lectures on the Foundations of Human Experience – the point of departure for a new kind of education. This new approach to education, he said, should take account of what happened in the history of consciousness in and beyond the 15th century, namely, that a new consciousness of Self had awakened in humanity. Accordingly, Waldorf Education could rightfully be called “Education for the Self”, because it is especially geared towards this new experience of Self, and tries to do justice to it.

The development of the new sense of individual identity manifested in the philosophy of René Descartes. We need only remind ourselves here of the maxim “Je pense, donc je suis”⁸ (“I think, therefore I am”), which bases Self-consciousness solely upon the existence of thinking. This was then carried forward in the period of the Enlightenment. Here the human being was designated as the *animal rationale*. In a certain respect, however, this was a *narrowed down* or *short-sighted* view of things, to which Rudolf Steiner also drew attention, the point being that the Self, or “I”, is much more than our rational capacities.

That there was a discrepancy between a sense of individual identity which was based on reason and had, in a certain respect, become autonomous, and the full reality of the “I” or Self was keenly felt in the 18th century. Goethe had objected in fairly vehement terms to reading too much into a rationally-oriented sense of self. This was also the early source of his conflict with Schiller: “He [Schiller–JS] had enthusiastically absorbed the Kantian philosophy, which elevates the subject so highly, while seeming also to constrict it. It brought to fruition the extraordinary qualities that nature had endowed him with, and he, in the extremity of his feeling of freedom and independence, was ungrateful towards the great Mother [nature–JS]”⁹ This newly acquired sense of Self does indeed behave as a free agent, enabling the human individual to assert the validity of his own thinking, independent of church and state. But Goethe was very wary of the *overly subjective* orientation of idealist philosophy, because it leads to a kind of self-aggrandisement of the human being, whereby in the overblown power of his reason he elevates himself above nature, thus isolating himself. Today, in view of our civilisation’s destructive effects upon nature and the sheer arrogance of our technology we now see just how right Goethe was. The individual’s acquisition of an autonomous sense of individual identity was bought by loss of the world.

Waldorf education addresses this situation: the students are not treated to dry, self-complacent intellectuality that might make them arrogant and lose all connection to the realities of the world. The idea is rather that they develop a feeling of responsibility towards the world, and through encounter with it develop their talents and learn to use their hands. Their thinking should never be divorced from real phenomena. Connection to and participation in the world are Goethean elements of Waldorf education.

7. Anyone interested in following up this subject is referred to an essay by Michael Muschalle which is very well worth reading: *Ausnahmezustand und Spaltung der Persönlichkeit. Untersuchungen zur Beobachtungsporrie im dritten Kapitel der “Philosophie der Freiheit”*. In *Jahrbuch für anthroposophische Kritik*. Ed. Lorenzo Ravagli. Schaffhausen 1999, p. 56-157; further material can be found on his web-site: www.studienzuranthroposophie.de. - Even though I don’t agree with everything he says, his thorough examination of the problem area is very helpful and profound.

8. René Descartes. “Discourse on Method”, pt. 4, sect. 3

9. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Glückliches Ereignis*. In *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 24, p. 435.

Steiner's criticism of Goethe

Now it is interesting that it is precisely on this point that Steiner is critical of Goethe. He hardly ever criticised Goethe, but here he does. His point is that while Goethe succeeded in his devoted attention to nature, he never entered into the region of the human mind's awareness of its own activity. Goethe repeatedly laid stress on this point himself, designating, for instance, the Delphic Oracle's "Know thyself" as a "trick of a secret society of priests" dedicated to diverting human beings from their true purpose in life.¹⁰ And then there is the following somewhat ironic formulation: "I have been extremely clever - / Have I ever thought about thinking? Never!"¹¹ The path of introspection, of inner contemplation of the mind was never Goethe's way. Through this attitude he set himself in sharp contrast to his time – to German idealism and romanticism. In this respect he was isolated, and his friendship with Schiller was the only compensation for this imbalance.

Novalis

Romanticism also constituted a polar opposite to Enlightenment rationalism. In a similar way to Goethe it set itself against the coldness of reason, the reductionism of rationality. But it did not follow Goethe's path into deep involvement with Nature, rather it chose the one leading into the world of inner experience. It entered into the human mind's regions of feeling and will. It attempted to find the place from which our thinking, our consciousness, springs. Novalis is foremost among those who posed the question of the nature of inner experience, of the Self. From him stems this famous passage – from "Philosophical Writings" (1798): "The mysterious way leads inwards. Eternity with its worlds—the past and future—is in ourselves or nowhere. The external world is the world of shadows—it throws its shadow into the realm of light. At present this realm certainly seems to us so dark inside, lonely, shapeless. But how entirely different it will seem to us—when this gloom is past, and the body of shadows has moved away. We will experience greater enjoyment than ever, for our spirit has suffered privation."¹²

Turning his attention inward like this – which at first appears completely "ungoethean" – was a step Novalis took after the death of his fiancée, Sophie von Kühn. In a certain respect it is an esoteric step, requiring meditation in order to understand it. Novalis was convinced that within the human mind lived a power that was spiritual in nature, and that was constantly being deadened by the flood of sense impressions and their concomitant faculty of reason. This so-called representational consciousness curtails our own inner spiritual dimension. It is the "body of shadows", which darkens the spiritual light of our own consciousness. This representational consciousness is blind to the spiritual in the world – to which Goethe was awake – and is deaf to the spiritual in the human being, which Novalis was trying to sound out.

In his philosophical writings Novalis followed on from Fichte. Fichte – as has already been mentioned – has become known as the philosopher of the "I", because for him the form in which the act of thinking occurs arises from the activity of the "I". It is a power, which through its own activity calls itself into being, which exists in and through itself and through nothing else. This condition of being the sole basis of one's own self-existence is ultimately reserved for the Godhead. And it is for this reason that Rudolf Steiner also attributes something God-like to the "I" or Self.

Positivism

With Descartes, Goethe, Fichte and Novalis a few authors have been named upon whose work Steiner based his concept of the Self. In his early philosophical writing with its close connection to Nietzsche and Stirner, Steiner himself embraced a very radical form of individualism. Nietzsche placed so much weight upon the autonomy of the human subject that he went so far as to declare that "God is dead".¹³

10. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Considerable assistance from one ingeniously chosen word. In "Goethe's Botanical Writings", trans. Bertha Mueller, Oxbow Press 1952, p. 235.

11. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Zahme Xenien.

12. Novalis: Philosophical Writings.

13. Friedrich Nietzsche: Die fröhliche Wissenschaft. 3. Buch, Aphorismus 125 «Der tolle Mensch», S. 480ff..

With the positivist triumph over idealism and the advent of complex personality theories in the 20th and 21st centuries, the possibility of a concept of the Self or “I” with any real substance was lost. The Self tended to be conceived as some kind of composite entity. It was essentially determined by external factors, be they socialisation processes as in the theory of behaviourism, be they genes as in the then less popular heredity theories. What this came down to was that the Self didn’t really exist. Repulsed by the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment, Michel Foucault, echoing the radicalness of Nietzsche, spoke of the “death of the subject”.¹⁴

Since then neuroscience has stepped into the position of chief interpreter of human nature, in that it also denies the existence of the Self. The American researcher, Joseph LeDoux, for instance, describes the Self as simply a synaptic phenomenon.¹⁵ Philosophy also takes its cue from such propositions. The philosopher Thomas Metzinger, from Mainz, regards the Self as a construction of the brain, created as such as an evolutionary advantage. He uses the image of the Napoleonic army, which would have had no power without Napoleon. Only through the central force of Bonaparte’s leadership, organisation and will was this great army able to display its power. Similarly he speaks of the Self as marshalling the various intellectual, emotional and volitional aspects of the human being, thus granting us a survival advantage. And it is for this reason, he maintains, that we cling to the illusion of the Self, which is a product of the brain. Ultimately, however, we will have to admit *that the human being has never been, nor ever had, a Self*.¹⁶

Rudolf Steiner’s concept of Self

Upon this background, how, then, is Rudolf Steiner’s decidedly multi-dimensional concept of the Self to be construed? On the one hand, Steiner adopts an understanding of the Self stemming from the Enlightenment, a modern conception of subjective consciousness, that bestows autonomy and tends to see itself as distinct from an external world of objects. This Self, founded upon reason and independence, is also the modern ideal of education. Kindergarten, school and university are united in striving towards this ideal of the open-minded personality capable of critical thinking. This Self or “I” can be designated as the “individual I” or “inner I”, since it appears within the activity of the mind and forms the basis of our self-awareness. To this individual inner-I, however, adheres a certain one-sidedness, as already mentioned. It experiences itself as separated from the world, trapped in a condition of dualism. This lends it a certain strength, but isolates it in equal measure from the world (as pointed out by Goethe) and from the depths of its own being (as intimated by Novalis). And this dualistic separation from the world extends to our bodily nature, such that a much more intense body-mind dualism arises. Many of the current problems of civilisation can be traced back to this one-sidedness of an individual Self grounded upon reason. Because nature is perceived as the Other, as something alien, and we have the dualistic experience of being separate from it, we see civilisation as the business of subjugating it, which means exploiting and destroying it. We do not feel ourselves to be involved in nature, as an integral part of it. And this, expressed through the power of our technology, has led to the large-scale ecological crisis that threatens us. The relationship to our own bodies also suffers from these effects of our dualistic civilisation. Doctors and teachers are warning that the motor capabilities of children and adolescents are diminishing. The high rates of media consumption – yet another way in which minds can be separated from the world – contribute to this.

Waldorf education attempts to counter this one-sidedness by bringing nature, the world, the Other, into school. The idea is that the students should not be subjected to a purely rational and intellectual learning process. They should have direct experience of the phenomena concerned, actively engage with them. This experiential style of teaching in Waldorf schools is intended to introduce students into the practicalities of the world, so that they learn how to approach practical problems with confidence. This is especially true of craft and handwork lessons, where they learn skills that will enable them to do so. And the way the subject of art is taught awakens the realisation that human beings can integrate themselves into the world through

14. Michel Foucault. *Schriften in vier Bänden (Dits et écrits)*. Band 1. Frankfurt/M. 2001, S. 1002.

15. Joseph LeDoux: *The Synaptic Self – how our brains become who we are*. Viking, New York, 2002.

16. Thomas Metzinger: *Being No One. The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge 2003.

feeling. The intellectual aspects of all these activities are in no way undervalued, they are simply relieved of their one-sidedness. The subject of eurythmy also has an important task in this connection, in that it gives children and adolescents a reliable way of combining the deepest aspects of their inner life with the movements of their bodies.

Universal or external Self

As already indicated, Rudolf Steiner's concept of the Self, however, is not restricted to the perspective of the individual inner "I" alone. It reaches out beyond this. In his understanding something exists that can be designated as the "universal Self", or as the "external Self". This universal, external Self or "I", to begin with, is not part of our conscious experience. It does not appear within the activity of consciousness. The individual inner "I", in its rational condition, generally knows nothing of this outer dimension of its own being. Feeling and will reach down somewhat deeper. In the Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts, Rudolf Steiner describes this deficiency of consciousness as follows: "In our sense-perceptions, the world of the senses bears on to the surface only a portion of the being that lies concealed in the depths of its waves beneath. Penetrative spiritual observation reveals within these depths the after-effects of what was done by souls of human beings in ages long gone by."¹⁷ That reality has this accessible deep dimension is not part of the experience of rationally-based object-oriented consciousness. There is, nonetheless, an outer dimension to the Self, that has this depth of reach. The universal external Self or "I" is described by Rudolf Steiner as the power that brings forth and sustains the human individual's body. And this in turn relates to Steiner's portrayal of the three-fold nature of the human organism, which is comprised of a neuro-sensory system centred in the head, a rhythmic system centred in the chest and a metabolic-limb system associated with the abdomen and limbs. The external "I" is active in the chest and limb systems – an activity of which the inner "I" is unconscious. As such it is the medium of our connection with the world. What we sense and feel, where we direct our steps, what we grasp with our hands, all this belongs to our being and is likewise part of the wider (encompassing both inner and outer "I") human individuality. Steiner's claim is that the chest system and especially the limb system are part of the cosmos. Thus in karmic terms it is the cosmos itself which, in the form of our universal, external Self or "I", enables us to place one foot in front of the other, to take hold of things and to sense and feel the world. By virtue of this experience of the world our individual inner Self then grows and gradually becomes aware of its own dimensions. For instance, it is a common fact of our experience that we grow and mature through meeting people who have had a significant impact on our biography.

Many of Rudolf Steiner's meditation exercises are intended to make the inner Self more and more aware of its universal, external dimensions. An exemplary instance of this is the "Anthroposophical Calendar of the Soul", which is a meditative path into the cosmic dimension of individual consciousness. In the Leading Thoughts we find, on the same point: "Human destiny reveals the workings, not only of an external world, but of the individual's own Self."¹⁸

Intuition

Earlier, with reference to chapter 3 of "The Philosophy of Freedom", the problem of observing thinking as it is actually happening was pointed out. Usually thinking is object-related and, in Cartesian terms, registers the difference between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*. Should the special mental state designated by Rudolf Steiner as inner observation now set in and thinking thus direct itself towards its own activity, it will initially only be able to make its already past activity the object of its actual activity. In other words, it cannot apprehend the actuality of its own activity. But this only remains a problem if we follow Fichte and focus

17. Rudolf Steiner: Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts. (GA 26, rsarchive.org), Leading Thought 62 (translation slightly amended). What is presented here describes and comments on a line of thought which runs from no. 62 to no. 65. These will be referred to here and in what follows.

18. Ibid. Leading Thought 64 (amended from translation in Rudolf Steiner Archive – rsarchive.org).

solely on the activity aspect of thinking. At the same time, however, thinking is always involved with contents of some kind, with concepts and ideas, in other words, with actively relating one thing to another. These are – as demonstrated by Rudolf Steiner, and as some thoughtful observation will easily reveal – entirely self-defined, even when they arise through an act of human thinking. Every concept, every idea is self-identical in terms of content and relates to other concepts and ideas within a universal realm. The individual act of thinking enters into this universal thought sphere, thus universalising itself, and an ontological exchange takes place, which Rudolf Steiner designates as “intuition”. We are normally unaware of this universal aspect of our thinking, because our experience in normal consciousness is of universal concepts and ideas individualising themselves, thus forming the content of representations. By means of inner observation we bring this other complementary stream within us into our consciousness, that is, we become aware of how the individual act of thinking universalises itself in its content. In the *Leading Thoughts* Steiner describes this experience as follows: “To ordinary self-observation the inner world of man reveals only a portion of that, in the midst of which it stands. Intensified experience in consciousness shows it to be contained within a living spiritual Reality.”¹⁹ Rudolf Steiner describes this intensified experience as intuition. Since thought-act and thought-content exchange and completely merge, the problem of one-being-an-object-to-the-other is eliminated. Rudolf Steiner writes in chapter 9 of “*The Philosophy of Freedom*”: “Intuition is the conscious experience — in pure spirit — of a purely spiritual content.”²⁰ In this experience the individual inner Self meets the universal outer Self and they join together, gradually permeating and learning more of each other, in that the individual act contemplates itself in the universal content, and the universal content progressively permeates the individual act. A meditation formula of Rudolf Steiner’s, that encapsulates this experience of inner observation, runs: “I am a thought which is thought by the Hierarchies of the cosmos.”²¹

Hyacinth and Rose-blossom

In Novalis’s “*Story of Hyacinth and Rose-blossom*”, which is part of “*The Apprentices of Saïs*”, a man’s path through life is described. As a young man he took profound pleasure in the world, wholeheartedly appreciated everything the world had to show him, and was in love with a maiden called Rose-Blossom. Soon, however, after meeting a wise stranger, with whom he had long conversations, he began to retreat into himself. He took leave of his parents and of Rose-Blossom, and set off in search of the dwelling place of the goddess Isis. At first his way was fraught with hardship and privation as he travelled through desert regions. Step by step, however, nature became more abundant and pleasant. He reached a grove of palm-trees and fell asleep. In a dream the goddess Isis appeared to him. The story relates: “... he lifted the delicate, shimmering veil and Rose-Blossom sank into his arms.”²²

In the simple images of this story Novalis portrays the path of the esoteric idealist, whose inner Self is initially enchanted with the world, through which it encounters and becomes aware of itself. As soon as the motif of the search for wisdom and self-knowledge sets in, however, this inner Self detaches itself from the world and begins reflecting upon itself. This retreat from the world is at first associated with suffering and pain. To the extent, however, that this individual Self bravely follows the path inward by striving to come to grips with itself in thinking, the inner world becomes ever richer and more expansive. And insofar as it surrenders in its thinking activity to the thought-content it is receiving and lingers in the sphere of intuition, it approaches its own being in the form of its universal external Self. Rose-Blossom, who initially represents the universal external Self in the world and with whom we have been united since childhood, comes, as an intuition arising from the activity of the individual inner Self, to meet us once more, now as the universal, purely spiritual external Self. The passage referring to this in the *Leading Thoughts* is: “The experiences of the human soul reveal not only a Self but a world of the Spirit, which the Self can know by deeper spiritual knowledge as a world united with its own being.”²³

19. Ibid. *Leading thought* 63.

20. Rudolf Steiner: *The Philosophy of Freedom*, as above, Ch. 9.

21. Rudolf Steiner: *Human and Cosmic Thought* (GA 151), Lecture IV, rsarchive.org.

22. Novalis: *Poems. The Apprentices of Saïs*.

23. Rudolf Steiner: *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, as above, no. 65.

Rudolf Steiner on the Experience of (musical) Tone

In his lectures on “The Experience of Tone” Rudolf Steiner describes how the musical intervals relate to the human constitution, how the experience of tone concretely reveals the physical, psychological and spiritual constitution of the human being. With regard to the experience of the octave he says: “The other feeling that will come about but as yet does not exist in our age is the feeling for the octave. A true feeling for the octave actually has not yet developed in humanity. You will experience the difference that exists [for the prime] in comparison to feelings for tone up to the seventh. While the seventh is still felt in relation to the prime, an entirely different experience arises as soon as the octave appears. [...] Every time the octave appears in a musical composition, man will have a feeling that I can only describe with the words, ‘I have found my ‘I’ anew; I am uplifted in my humanity by the feeling for the octave.’”²⁴ Here the prime corresponds to the individual inner Self and the octave brings experience of the universal, external Self, as it is apprehended by intuitive thinking. In these lectures Steiner also describes the Self’s developmental path, which is just like Rose-Blossom’s first appearing as external Self or “I” that is, as it were, karmically in the world, involved in the structuring of our bodies and active as will in our limbs. Steiner expresses this as follows: “The ‘I’ lives in us in a twofold way. First, inasmuch as we have become human beings on earth, the ‘I’ lives in us by having descended into the physical world in the first place and then building us up from the physical.” That is the outer “I”, which accompanies us throughout our childhood. In contact with the world, especially through our sensory experience, it grows more and more inward. Thus it gradually becomes the inner Self or “I”: “Then the ‘I’ dwells in us by virtue of gaining influence over us through the senses or by taking hold of our astral nature, where it gains influence via our breath [...]” It doesn’t stop there, however, but continues to work as external Self in our limbs, the volitional sphere of our being: “Only in the movements of our limbs — if we move our limbs today — do we still have in us the same activity of nature or the world that we had within us as embryos.”²⁵

In summary, Rudolf Steiner describes the developmental path of the Self as follows: “We have to – you see, we began from the inner “I,” the physical, living, inner “I” when we started from the first tone of the octave, and we have ascended through the etheric and astral bodies to the seventh, and it must now transition to the “I” we can sense directly, in that we arrive at the next higher octave tone [...]”²⁶ This is the anthroposophical path of knowledge, which Novalis had already traced out with his esoteric idealism. What it entails is that the conscious individual who is in possession of a strengthened inner Self brings the spiritual dimension of the external Self once more to inner realisation through intuition. This step leads the individual human being into the divine dimension of their own being. For this is indeed – and this is to be understood in a spirit of deep reverence and not in any way as hubris – the experience of the intuitive consciousness of Self; in other words, the merging of the individual inner Self with the universal outer Self as the realisation of its human divinity. This is expressed by Rudolf Steiner as follows: “This link to the world will be discovered one day when the experience of the octave comes into being in the manner previously outlined. Then, the musical experience will become for man proof of the existence of God, because he will experience the “I” both as physical, inner “I,” and as spiritual, outer “I.” And, simply, when use of the octave in this way becomes as prevalent as current use of the seventh, this will appear as a new way of proving the existence of God. That is what the experience of the octave will be. When I first experience my ‘I’ in the prime, and then experience it a second time the way it is in spirit, then this is proof of God’s existence from personal inner experience [...]”²⁷

24. Rudolf Steiner: *The Inner Nature of Music and the Experience of Tone* (GA 283), Lecture V, translation slightly amended.

25. *Ibid.* lecture V.

26. *Ibid.* Lecture V, translation amended.

27. *Ibid.* Lecture V, translation amended