

A Contribution to the Study of the First Core Principle

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Image of the Human Being: The human being in its essence is a being of Spirit, soul, and body. Childhood and adolescence, from birth to age 21, are the periods during which the Spirit/soul gradually takes hold of the physical instrument that is our body. The Self is the irreducible spiritual individuality within each one of us which continues its human journey through successive incarnations.

There are four thoughts woven together in the first Core Principle:

1. The human being is a being of Spirit, soul, and body.
2. The process of incarnating the Spirit and soul into the body takes approximately 21 years.
3. The essential Self is an irreducible spiritual principle.
4. The Self incarnates repeatedly and in human form.

Let us review these thoughts in order.

1. Rudolf Steiner's basic introduction to the nature of the human being is found in the first chapter of his foundational book *Theosophy*. The threefold (body, soul, spirit) principle is presented and then elaborated upon considerably. Briefly, and using Steiner's own example, when we look at a flower in the meadow, there are three aspects to consider: Our bodily senses give us the stimuli necessary for the flower to enter our consciousness; our spirit allows us to recognize the flower as, for example, a daisy, which means recognizing a

lawfulness that would remain even when the physical specimen is no longer before us; our soul forms a relationship between our subject and the flower in question.

The following exercise can help make the threefold human being more readily comprehensible:

Place a manufactured object such a pencil or a paper clip before you. Describe its appearance in detail (size, color, shape, smell, and any other pertinent sensory attribute). This description originates with what Steiner calls the bodily aspect of the human being.

Next, describe your personal response to this object: like or dislike, attraction or repulsion, and so forth. This response originates in what Steiner calls the soul.

Finally, try to articulate the concept of the object. In manufactured objects the concept is nearly identical with the function. A paper clip is meant to clip papers together, for example, and the clipping is more or less the thought or intention that brought it into being. You can try to follow as best you can the series of steps that led from the functional intention through the manufacturing process to the presence of the object before you. This thought process, which is not observable through the senses, originates in what Steiner calls the spirit. Only the spirit can perceive the spiritual, hidden aspects of the world around us.

2. The process of incarnating (literally "entering the flesh") takes 21 years on average. In her discussion of the second Core Principle,

Holly Koteen-Soulé presents the phases of this process in detail. A good source for this idea is Steiner's book *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science*.

From a pedagogical perspective, one of the most succinct articulations of the relationship between spirit and soul, on the one hand, and the body, on the other, can be found in the first lecture of *Study of Man*. This lecture cannot be recommended highly enough for anyone who wants the quintessence of Waldorf education brought in an astonishingly concise formulation. Steiner presents in few words a whole cosmic drama in which the individuality of the child comes into the world and needs the teacher's help in order to learn how to function properly in the flesh, so to speak.

3. An essential idea in Steiner's presentation of human nature is that the spiritual core of the human being is not a reducible epiphenomenon of matter, but rather that it predates and also survives physical existence. This notion is presented in detail in the second chapter of *Theosophy* and throughout many of Steiner's writings. (We elected to capitalize Spirit in the first Core Principle in order to emphasize its eternal aspect.) In the first lecture of *Study of Man* Steiner emphasizes that the existence of the spirit before birth is just as crucial an aspect of the human condition as the much more commonly held idea of immortality as referring only to life after death.

4. Further regarding the human being's journey through successive incarnations: In anthroposophy a human being was, is, and will be a human being. In other traditions, the various kingdoms of nature are considered interchangeable for purposes of reincarnation. Steiner considered this view erroneous, and in the chapter on reincarnation mentioned earlier (in the book *Theosophy*), he explains that repeated earth lives can be thought of in a similar manner to waking up one morning with the results of the previous day's actions

and plans. Just as it would not make sense to wake up as a sparrow tomorrow morning, so it would not be true to consider a human being as having been either a blade of grass or a grasshopper during a previous life on earth. Precisely because we are beings capable of new beginnings, new creations, we must live with the consequences of our actions and inactions (and even, according to Steiner, our thoughts and feelings) over time, both from day to day and from one life to the next.

Now that the four basic thoughts of the first Core Principle have been introduced, let us consider them in more detail. For Rudolf Steiner, the human being stands uniquely positioned between the spiritual world and the physical world. Human beings are the only earthly beings with the capacity to originate, to create new beginnings out of spiritual insights, and the only spiritual beings with the physical tools to work right into earthly substance.

To put it succinctly: Chimps can't write poetry; angels can't plant corn. There is no way to account for human spiritual activity from a purely material-causality perspective: It makes no sense to say, for instance, of the work of William Shakespeare that on Sunday night the weather was bad, but the stew his wife made for dinner was very good and his daughter slept well, and so therefore The Bard woke up the next day and wrote Hamlet's famous soliloquy. One can investigate the material and emotional events preceding the creation of a great work of art, but one cannot say that those circumstances caused the art to be created. Something surprising and uniquely individual transpires in every new creation, something that points to a level of existence at which every human being is a complete species unto him or her self. We can predict with relative certainty what a weather pattern or a particular diet will do to my dog, but we cannot predict what painting my wife will create because of the weather outside and the meal she just ate. To the extent that we eat,

breathe, walk, and so on, we are a species like other mammal species; to the extent that we create new beginnings, we are each a species unto ourselves. Even persons who are not particularly creative create something new in the form of their biography, and this makes them unique in a way that no animal ever is.

At the opposite end of the body-spirit polarity, human beings are uniquely able among spiritual beings to work directly into material existence. We can conceive an idea, e.g., building a new school somewhere, and then go about realizing that idea in the physical world. In the example of Hamlet's soliloquy, Shakespeare could take pen to paper and bring the words he conceived into a form accessible to other people. Other spiritual beings require the assistance of human beings if their intentions are to be made manifest on earth.

The soul in Steiner's tripartite image of the human being occupies a middle ground between spirit and body. I can see the daisy with my physical senses (by means of my body) and learn to recognize more and more what makes it a daisy (by what we have termed spirit), but the soul forms a personal relationship of liking or disliking, caring about or choosing to ignore that which I encounter. If the sensory aspect constitutes the fleeting materialization of the daisy, and the concept "daisy" is the eternal, universal thought, the relationship my soul forms with the daisy makes for a uniquely personal relationship between the daisy and me. It tells something about me, rather than about the daisy.

For Steiner, every human being is a spirit living temporarily in a physical body, and the soul is the mediator between the two. The soul gathers impressions of the physical world through the bodily senses and brings those impressions for the spirit to gain knowledge and wisdom, and then it brings the impulses of the spirit into manifestation on earth through the activation of the will. The twenty-one-year period at the beginning of life is, according to Steiner, the time it takes for the spirit to

reach earth maturity to the point of being fully capable of leading its own life. In many states this age used to be the voting age, and in many it is still a marker for various aspects of adult consent. In my state, New Jersey, we recognize the momentous completion of the twenty-one-year maturation process by allowing the young person to get drunk legally. Welcome to the world of responsible decision making, as it were.

Waldorf education is not the only pedagogical approach that begins with a view of the human being. It is, in fact, important to realize that *every* educational system begins with such a view, whether explicitly or not. This view would cover such questions as the essential nature of being human (e.g., the result of a series of cellular and molecular accidents; a being created by God on the sixth of seven days, and so forth). The pedagogy would then consider the development from childhood to adulthood and what a successful human being, and therefore a successful educational process, "looks like." If you believe that a human being is a complicated animal, that the animal is finally only compounded of material particles, that childhood is merely a stage of being a small adult, that success is measurable through some yardstick extrinsic to the individual (e.g., economic or academic achievement), then you will also design an educational system that aims to achieve goals that are measured outside of the individual that is being educated. In similar fashion, if you believe that all human beings are born in sin, that the goal of life is to avoid hell and join God and the saints in Heaven, and that the Church is the only door to the rightful path, then you will design a schooling that will bring the young person into the folds of the Mother Church, and this will then guide the choice of content and methods. I mention this since looking back on one's education and discerning its philosophical underpinnings can be an enlightening exercise.

If, in contrast, you hold the view that the essential nature of every student is an eternal, spiritual individuality that has to fashion its

own journey in freedom, then your pedagogy will endeavor to support that spiritual element in developing and achieving its own aims. The skills and capacities that you will strive to nurture within the student will not be ends in themselves, nor will they be preparations for predetermined later stages, but rather vehicles for the student's "I" to find its way in the world. The idea that education is an attempt to reconnect a human being with his or her own goals, and that these goals are uniquely individual, finding their place in a context of relationships and activity—this idea would then rightfully become a crucial principle of your pedagogy. It is neatly summed in the oft-quoted edict: "Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of

themselves to impart purpose and meaning to their lives."¹

References

- Rudolf Steiner. *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965).
_____. *Theosophy* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994).
_____. *Study of Man* (Forest Row, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2007).

Endnote

- 1 From the foreword by Marie Steiner to Rudolf Steiner's Ilkley lecture cycle, published in English as *A Modern Art of Education* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1972), p.23.