

ORIGINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONSCIOUS
(FREE) INTENTION FROM THE VIEWPOINT
OF RUDOLF STEINER'S SPIRITUAL SCIENCE
(ANTHROPOSOPHY) IN RELATION TO HUSSERL'S
TRANSCENDENTAL REDUCTION

THE PARADOXICAL APPEARANCE OF MENTAL CONTENTS

Anyone observing her or his mental life will soon notice a curious paradox pervading it at nearly every step: the contents of our mental life seem to be totally unrelated to the dimensions of space and time and yet they persistently appear bound to these dimensions, for they always appear in a specific place (in case of thoughts this place is of course our head, in case of feelings it may be another part of our body, e.g. our chest) and at a specific point of time. The fact that mental contents are experienced as being above or beyond space and time is particularly apparent in the sphere of our thoughts. Already with simple thoughts relating to sensory experience, such as the concept of a tree, it is evident that whereas it is thoroughly meaningful to ascribe temporal and spatial properties to the object of the concept, or its extension – the questions about the age, size, and position of a particular tree are certainly meaningful questions – it does not make sense to ascribe such properties to the *concept* of the tree itself: the question how large, or how old it is cannot be answered in any meaningful way.

It is not difficult to extend this observation to other mental contents, such as complex thoughts, mental images, memory pictures, feelings and the like, even though one should exercise caution in distinguishing what I would term genuinely mental contents, which are always perceived within the borders of our bodies, from other contents of our consciousness, such as visual, aural, olfactory, or tactile *perceptions* which – at least to the naïve consciousness – are certainly experienced as being outside of our bodies and in this sense as endowed with the spatio-temporal dimensions: the tree I perceive, I perceive out there and certainly not in my head. It is the *recollection* of a direct

perception (German has a good word here: *die Vorstellung*), not the perception itself, which is experienced in the mind.

The discovery of the fact that (genuine) mental contents are devoid of spatio-temporal dimension is not mine and is not new. It goes back at least to Edmund Husserl who already in his *Logical Investigations* pointed out that temporality can be ascribed only to our psychological thought processes ("real thoughts"), but not to the thought contents ("ideal thoughts") (Husserl, 1970, *Logische Untersuchungen*, p. 173¹). In recent years this observation has been made repeatedly by different philosophers. Thus e.g. Colin McGinn stated that "[O]ur consciousness presents itself to us as by its very nature not spatial. [...] Already to ask about the spatial properties of visual experiences means to commit a kind of a category mistake similar to that of asking about spatial properties of numbers" (McGinn, 1996, p. 183, my translation).² Robert Spaemann also states that all intentional phenomena cannot, as far as their intrinsic nature is concerned, occur either inside or outside of our bodies (Spaemann, 1998, p. 57f), and points out further that all intentional acts are as far as their intrinsic nature is concerned timeless, and only *appear* to be events in time (op. cit., p. 170f). Even the currently influential but materialistically orientated German philosopher, Thomas Metzinger, acknowledges the non-spatial character of our self-consciousness, or, in his terminology, our "mental self-models" (Metzinger, 1999, p. 163f).

THE INVISIBLE SPRING OF THOUGHTS

Once it is accepted that mental phenomena are intrinsically devoid of spatial or temporal properties, the fact that they do appear localized in time and space loses the air of obviousness with which it is usually regarded and becomes a puzzle or a paradox requiring an explanation: I shall attempt to offer such an explanation later on. But the emergence of this paradox paves the way to a further and an even more important discovery. When we shift our attention from the observation of specific mental contents to the observation of the *flow* of thought itself, we are confronted by another and deep puzzle: how is it that our thoughts take the course which they actually take? There does not seem to be any logical or natural necessity for them to flow in the order in which they actually do. On the contrary, it is an obvious fact that different individuals thinking about the same subject develop entirely different trains of thoughts; were this it not the case, a perfect harmony of views would be the order of the day. Indeed, even one and the same person thinking about the same subject at different times is highly likely to reformulate his/her earlier thoughts sometimes substantially even in the absence of any significant changes in the