

Poetizing our unknown childhood: meeting the challenge of social constructivism

The Romantic philosophy of childhood and Steiner's spiritual anthropology

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues for a spiritual approach to the pedagogical anthropology of childhood. Education needs a new “grand narrative” of child development to support what we have inherited from Rousseau, the Romantics, and the educational thinkers that followed them. But this requires that the challenge of the critique from social constructivism that has been voiced against all general theories of development be taken up and discussed. The peculiar epistemological and ontological dimensions involved must be carefully identified. I first examine some of the critique of developmental psychology and argue that this critique is justified in so far as psychology tends to reduce the child to a natural object and misses the transcendent, “unknown” dimensions of childhood. Three of the alternative paradigms in childhood research are then shortly presented: the *sociology*, the *phenomenological anthropology*, and the *philosophy* of childhood. All of these have made positive contributions to our understanding of childhood, but they do not present a comprehensive vision of child development. This leads to the question whether it is possible to *poetize* the transcendent dimensions of childhood and bring such a poetization into harmony with empirical research findings. This possibility is explored with inspiration from Romanticism and Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical anthropology. The latter will be the main subject of the end of the paper, as an illustration of the kind of vision we need to inform our educational practices, if future generations of the human species are to flourish in freedom and creativity.

Keywords: educational anthropology, Romanticism, childhood, spirituality

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century a consensus seems to have prevailed in the growing Kindergarten movement that its teachers needed an extensive understanding of human development (Lee & Johnson, 2007). Since (at least) the 1930's such knowledge has also been an important basis for education, especially for child-centred or “progressivist” educational approaches (Stott & Bowman, 1996). Only a few decades ago, in the early 90's, a survey conducted in UK showed that the majority of head teachers and principals ranked knowledge of child development as the single most influential contributor to professional development of teachers (Katz, 1996). However, this branch of psychological knowledge and the corresponding field of research now seem to have lost much of its previous influence on educational thinking. In recent times, and in the wake of post-structural streams of thought, a strong critique of traditional developmental psychology has appeared (for instance Morss, 1996; Burman, 2008). Developmental psychology itself seems to have turned into a rather fragmented empirical discipline with little adherence to any “grand theories”, old or new (Zimiles, 2000).

In this paper I will examine some of the critique of traditional developmental psychology in its old “grand-theory”-form. I will argue that this critique may be justified in so far as empirical developmental research tends to reduce the child to a natural object and misses the transcendent, “unknown” dimensions of

childhood. This leads to the question whether it is possible to *poetize* these unknown dimensions and bring them into harmony with empirical research findings (more about “poetize” later on). I therefore want to explore the unknown, transcendent aspects of childhood – aspects that are easily lost in the measuring and testing practices of educational institutions (Smeyers & Masschelein, 2001). Such aspects also tend to be marginalised in present childhood research, whether developmental or sociological (for instance James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). The latter, in spite of its good intentions, may therefore promote yet another reductionist view of childhood.

My overall argument is that we need some kind of “grand narrative” of human and child development to support what we have inherited from Rousseau, the Romantics, and the educational thinkers that followed them. I will suggest a more-or-less Romantic alternative for such a narrative, with Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogical anthropology as a particular example. But I will also try to assimilate at least some of the critique that has been voiced against all general theories or “grand narratives” of development. Among other things, the peculiar epistemological and ontological dimensions involved must therefore be carefully identified and distinguished.

In the following I will first recount some of the main points of the critique of development psychology that have been voiced in recent decades. I will then shortly present three alternative paradigms in childhood research; the *sociology*, the *phenomenological anthropology*, and the *philosophy* of childhood. All of these have made positive contributions to our understanding of childhood, but they do not present a comprehensive vision of human and child *development*. By “comprehensive” I mean a vision that is not a mere airy-fairy abstraction but which encompasses and accommodates concrete, natural facts about the developing human organism, as well as transcendent and spiritual dimensions. These first sections of the paper give a summary account of the present situation in childhood research. I will then proceed to present my own views, starting with deploying some concepts from Hacking (1999) in order to meet the challenge of social constructivism or constructionism¹. These concepts will be of help in “brushing up” the Romantic philosophy of childhood and human development, which informs much of Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogical anthropology. The latter will be the subject of the end of the paper, as an *illustration* of what *kind* of vision of human development that needs to inform our educational practices, if future generations of the human species are to flourish in freedom and creativity.

The field of childhood research today: some examples

The critique of development psychology

In Western cultural history, Rousseau is a milestone in many respects. His book *Émile* is probably the first to attempt to understand the *nature* of the child, to appreciate the *difference* between children and adults and to protect *the intrinsic value of childhood* as a particular phase of human development (Göppel, 1997). Various branches of educational thought, albeit in different modes, have followed the basic thrust of Rousseau; for instance Pestalozzi-Fröbel, Montessori-Korczak, and Freud-Piaget. However, already in the beginning of the 1980’s some German educational thinkers pointed out that the question of the nature of the child tended to disappear in modern development psychology (Göppel, 1997). In present times, researchers have criticized the field of early education’s dependence on an empirical developmental psychology with too limited and outdated models of development, some of which are characterized as “romantic maturationism” (Lee & Johnson, 2007, p. 234), referring to the notion that children develop and mature mainly on the basis of “inner forces”.

What were the possible reasons for these criticisms? Why was there a growing dissatisfaction with the theories and research of development psychology? One possibility is that many empirical studies again and again seemed to disprove the dominant developmental theory at the time, *viz.* that of Piaget. These studies encouraged a more contextualized and detailed look at empirical facts and findings, and discouraged the

1. The difference between these two would take some time to sort out in detail. Suffice it to say that constructionism is the more radical version of the idea that all phenomena and all knowledge are only the results of various social conditions and processes.

formulation of general theories of stages of development. Later on, post-structural, deconstructivist and post-colonial critiques of all general theories of development, whether human or social, gained an increased influence on social and educational research. For instance, Nandy (1992) points out how 19th century liberal and utilitarian thinkers modelled the relation between Britain and its colonies on that between adult and child:

Much of the pull of the ideology of colonialism and much of the power of the idea of modernity can be traced to the evolutionary implications of the concept of the child in the Western worldview. (p. 57)

The implicit belief in evolution, both natural and social, is of basic significance for such modernist ideologies. The modernist conception of child nature is based on notions of a linear progress from immature to mature, from pre-rational to rational etc. It is also based on assumptions of *universality* and *regularity*: the same laws of development apply to all living organisms – or at least all children – and irregular or non-normal phenomena are still expressions of an underlying lawfulness (Elkind, 1997). Elkind argues that the problem with this modernist conception is that all children are expected to progress through the envisaged stages of development in the same way, although many facts point in the opposite direction:

The idea that children progress in uniform fashion throughout the grades dies hard, despite abundant knowledge of the differential growth spurts that characterize early adolescence as well as early childhood. (1997, p. 244)

Such and similar critiques, here only hinted at in an impressionistic way, have led some thinkers to proclaim the end of the age of (belief in) development, progress and evolution (Chandler, 1997). This seems to be a basic tenet in much post-modern thought and its deconstructions of what has been called “the project of modernity”. The modernist project in science is, or was, based on three essential assumptions:

- 1) that phenomena themselves are less interesting and real than the structures behind them;
- 2) that human reason is capable of grasping these deep structures of reality; and
- 3) that progress towards human fulfilment and happiness depends on understanding these structures and putting them to use.

These assumptions were implicitly adopted by most of the 20th century developmental theorists (Chandler, 1997). The problem that arises on the basis of these principles is of course a moral and political one: on the basis of universal truths of development, power-based interventions in people’s/children’s lives, on a collective as well as an individual scale, are justified. Post-modern thinking therefore tends to reject any suggestions that there is something like a fixed, universal human/child nature. Foundational sets of universal principles of human functioning “are seen as a kind of apology for cultural imperialism and a threat to the very possibility of freedom” (Chandler, 1997, pp. 14-15). As soon as we think and talk about development (as opposed to change in general) we are implicitly concerned with some ultimate, mature or final state, and how education contributes to the realization of that state (Katz, 1996). However, if all conceptions of final states are seen as socially and culturally conditioned or constructed, by what right do we as adults impose them on our children?

The belief that our conceptions of development have objective validity because they are based on scientific research, provides – or have provided until recently – a justification for our social and individual efforts to educate, teach, and instruct. This in turn easily turns into haughty attitudes of “being/knowing better than you”. As Morss remarks:

We should be on our guard against the implications of the developmental attitude to people’s lives and hopes. It treats others as behind or below ourselves, but destined to follow the same path. (1996, p. 1)

The point of Morss and similar criticisms seems to be that the very intention to study human or child development is suspicious for the reason that it is based on such a “developmental attitude”, i.e., on *looking down* upon those who have not yet developed to the stage where we ourselves are, and the belief that ours is a *higher* stage. There may be some contingent truth in this. As an example, take Piaget’s idea that the stage of formal operations is the final stage of the development of human intelligence. There is hardly any doubt that he considered himself to function on that stage, as do many others who have adopted his ideas and tested them (cf. Dahlin, 2001).

On the other hand, there is no *necessary* connection between a personal attitude of haughtiness and a theory of developmental stages. A scientific theory does not prescribe a certain attitude or behaviour. It is possible to hold a theory of stages of development and to envision oneself as adult as simply in a *later* stage of development than the child one has to educate. “Later” does not mean “better” or “higher”.

This is related to other problems pointed out by the critics of development theories: that they are “adultcentric” (Glaveanu, 2011) and that they therefore see childhood as *lacking* certain abilities and capacities. The “adultcentric” perspective makes us see and judge children’s knowledge and abilities with our adult capacities as the normal frame of reference. We compare what children can do with what adults can do and usually find that children can do less. In opposition to such views, researchers in childhood sociology coined the concept of “the competent child” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998), focusing intentionally on what children *can* do. The limitation of this research approach is that it is more appropriate to older than to really small children, because children are studied as competent actors with adequate knowledge of their own lives. As Leppänen remarks:

These ideas are somehow problematic in connection to babies; they are not usually considered to be actors or creators of their own culture. Moreover, children’s agency is remarkably determined, enhanced and traced out by adults. (2011, p. 476)

It is therefore necessary to be more precise about what age-span the term “child” is actually referring to. In the UN-declaration of the rights of children, a person is considered a child up to the age of 18. But it seems rather contra-intuitive to call people in their late teens children. There is a huge difference between a newborn and an 18-year-old. In childhood sociology the focus is primarily on children in pre-puberty or their early teens. Children of this age are again very different from babies or toddlers. In the context of this paper I would agree with Ullrich (1999) and delimit my use of the term “child” to refer to the period from birth until the beginning of puberty.

Returning to the issue of “childhood as lack”, it must be admitted that the focus of most development research is on what knowledge and abilities children *acquire* at different ages or stages of their journey towards adulthood. This implies of course that in the beginning children *lack* these abilities. But there are exceptions; Dewey (1997) for instance emphasised the *plasticity* of childhood: the readiness and the quickness with which children learn and adapt. This is a capacity that is *lost* in adulthood. Such exceptions are important to remember and to re-assimilate in a new and more comprehensive vision of human development, compared to what has so far informed our educational institutions and practices. Otherwise, if all “grand narratives” of human development are thrown over board, we will certainly also throw out the baby with the bathwater – not very wise in this particular case.

The above is of course a rather sketchy and unsystematic review of the criticisms that have been launched against developmental theory from different directions, but hopefully it will suffice for my purpose in this paper. The criticisms are partly justified but they do not by far give us reason to completely abandon neither developmental research nor the attempt to formulate “grand theories” of human development. However, this field of research has to assimilate some important facets of the critique.

First of all, the post-structuralist questioning of the idea of an *essential* child nature is perhaps the most serious challenge to developmental theory (Zimiles, 2000). This questioning in addition includes the doubt that there is anything like a stable individual identity, essence, “I” or self. The human self is rather presented as “a simple assemblage of parts, and development as mere socialization” (Chandler, 1997, p. 14). However, as Chandler remarks, this view is actually a return “to the blank dust bowl days of know-nothing behaviourism” (ibid.), although that is hardly admitted by its proponents. All this points however to the necessity of a deeper inquiry into the ontology of the human self. Therefore, this challenge has to be met with a thorough analysis of epistemological and onto-anthropological dimensions of human being. I will devote the main part of this paper to this issue.

Secondly, the post-modern or -structuralist emphasis on *difference* is a useful complement to the modernist focus on *sameness* and developmental theories could profit from the post-modernists’ focus on “provinciality” and local context. Post-modern views could also help overcome the intellectual bias toward the view that

“maturity” and “the final stage” necessarily takes a particular form, free from any social or cultural influences (Chandler, 1997). This issue is related to the first. It has to do with discriminating between essential and contingent dimensions of human being.

Thirdly, it may be worth mentioning that the belief in a patterned course of child development must not be taken as parallel to a theory of the development of nations or ethnic cultures (ibid.). The notion coined by 19th century evolutionary biologists, that the ontogenesis mirrors the phylogenesis – a not identical but similar idea – is not fully applicable to human or child development. Grand theories of human/child development must distance themselves from all attempts to use them as justifications for colonialist power politics. However, this issue will not be in the foreground of this paper.

The sociology of childhood

Modern sociology of childhood arose at the beginning of the 80's (Göppel, 1997). As noted above, it tends to neglect, or objects to, the idea that there is a universal nature or essence of the child. Empirically it very often focuses on children around 10 – 12 years old. One reason for this seems to be that the children participating in the research have to be able to read and write in order to answer survey questionnaires. Göppel (1997) summarizes the findings of this research on childhood in modern Western societies in the following points:

- 1) *emotionalisation*: children no longer have any economical function in the family life, instead they are more like *providers of meaning* in their parents' lives (“Sinnlieferanten für das Leben ihrer Eltern”, ibid., p. 362);
- 2) *destabilisation*: new family structures like one-parent families, “plastic daddies” etc make children no longer expect enduring relationships;
- 3) *equalisation*: authoritarian attitudes are replaced with more egalitarian;
- 4) *isolation*: decreasing numbers of siblings and decreasing numbers of children in most habitation areas makes playing in pairs more common;
- 5) *staying at home*: urban milieus inhospitable for children and having one's own room, TV and computer at home;
- 6) *island culture*: places outside of home where children meet tend to be far apart and often demand transport service from the parents;
- 7) *institutionalisation*: pre-school, day care centres, art schools, children sport teams etc;
- 8) *pedagogisation*: this follows partly from institutionalisation plus that it is no longer self-evident how adults should relate to children;
- 9) *medialisation*: TV and Internet become children's windows to the world and they very early become conscious of the “secrets” and the negative aspects of the adult world.

Apart from these prominent characteristics other traits of modern childhood have also been noted, such as “therapeutisation”, “medicalisation”, “juridicalisation”, “technologisation” and more. Of all these characteristics, the first one about emotionalisation is particularly interesting for the later part of this paper, where I attempt to re-appropriate the Romantic philosophy of childhood. Present cultural tendencies to “romantize” childhood can be understood as ways to re-enchant life in the private sphere, as a reaction to the disenchanting, hyper-rationalized public world of work, commerce and politics (Ullrich, 1999). As an example, the popularisation of Fröbel's romantic understanding of childhood that occurred about a century ago was pre-conditioned by the institutional separation of the social spaces of children and adults and the transformation of the role of the child within the bourgeois family life, as “economically useless but emotionally priceless” (ibid., p. 361). Theoretically one could therefore expect that present social conditions would also provide fertile grounds for a widespread acceptance of Romantic conceptions of child nature and development (which is not the same as saying that these conditions somehow *cause* such conceptions to arise).

As for the relative neglect of the question of child nature in childhood sociology, it must first be noted that all of the findings presented above are primarily about childhood as a social, societal or cultural *space*, not about the *child*. In addition, childhood sociology is seldom interested in the *effects* of this socio-cultural space on children's inner, psychological development. The focus is instead on how children *relate* to this space, or to certain aspects of it, in line with the basic assumption that children are not passive victims of their circumstances but active subjects that process their environment in creative ways. All this would be well, if it wasn't for the tendency to take these findings as arguments for a social constructionist relativisation of *child nature*, which in the end makes it impossible to say anything at all about children and their development in a general sense. The historical and cultural relativisation of childhood – in terms of children's experience and ways of relating to the world – is taken as proof that all conceptions and theories about child nature and development are (mere) social constructions. This is obviously a logical fallacy, and a fallacy with serious consequences for educational research and practice, since it is only on the basis of a (fairly) general theory/narrative/vision of child development that we can evaluate the educational significance of the empirical findings that childhood sociology report.

Phenomenological anthropology of childhood

The phenomenological approach to the anthropology of childhood appeared at about the same time as childhood sociology, but its research interest is to appreciate and understand (in a phenomenological way) children's *way* of experiencing the world, or aspects of it. This research usually focuses on children up to about five years old (Göppel, 1997). The phenomenological study of childhood is a very important alternative and complement to empirical-analytical research in development psychology. The findings in the field are however too wide and diverse to summarize here. I will only point to a few things of interest in relation to the theme of this paper. They concern ideas put forward by Käte Meyer-Drawe and her major source of inspiration, the child psychologist and phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty (1992), Meyer-Drawe makes a comparison between the adult's and the child's way of perceiving the world and claims that children's perceptual life does not have the violent quality that characterize the mode of perception of adults. Perception in adults is an "act of violence" in that it "creates invisibility through visibility and inattention through attention" (1993, p. 98). The child's mode of perception, since it is more aesthetic than cognitive, lacks this quality because aesthetic experience "does not accept that the world becomes a mere manipulandum and that the human being plays herself out as the emperor over the things" (ibid., p. 102). This view agrees to a large extent with the way Romantic philosophers understood the quality of perception in childhood (more about this below).

Meyer-Drawe's characterization of the difference between adult and children's mode of world-perception does not account for social or cultural influences on perception. It is claimed to be independent of such contexts and hence belonging to the nature of the child. It seems to have been the conviction of Merleau-Ponty that such descriptions with a claim to universality could actually be found through a phenomenological research approach. He argued that it is possible on the basis of studies of child drawings, in particular, to disclose some universal qualities of the child's relation to the world, *in spite of* obvious social and cultural influences (Welsh, 2012). The child's environment has an unquestionable influence on *what* they perceive, but not necessarily on *how* they perceive things. It is not hard to accept that children's *mode* of perception may be basically and essentially different from that of adults. Phenomenology tries to recapture that mode.

In conclusion of this section a more general remark concerning the philosophical position of phenomenology today is of relevance to my further arguments. Traditionally, phenomenology has been associated with the search for "essences" and therefore adhering to the ancient dualism of essence versus appearance. Post-structural perspectives reject such dichotomies since they always imply a hierarchy and therefore lend themselves to support for illegitimate social and political power structures. Essence is for instance usually considered as epistemologically and ontologically "higher" and more valuable, being more real or true (having a higher ontological status) than appearance (which is closer to illusion). However, phenomenology does not necessarily understand essence as part of such a hierarchical dichotomy. Going

back to Goethe's way of studying nature, which by many has been interpreted as a phenomenology *avant la lettre* (Bortoft, 1996; Heinemann, 1934; Seamon & Zajonc, 1998; Simms, 2005), we find him saying: *What would become of essence if it did not appear?* ("Was wäre das Wesen wenn es nicht schien?") (quoted in Schuback, 2011, p. 50). That is, without appearance, essence would be nothing. It is only through appearance that we can come to essence. Hence, appearance is of equal importance to essence and is internally related to it.

Another interesting point can be made regarding phenomenology. There is a distinction to be made between a phenomenology of *appearing*, of phenomena as coming into being, and a phenomenology of *that which has appeared*, which is so to speak "already there" (Schuback, 2011). According to Schuback, the German Romantic Friedrich von Schelling called for the former, presumably due to the deep influence on him of Jacob Böhme and other esoteric streams of thought (cf. McGrath, 2012). It seems that Meyer-Drawe's phenomenology also is of this more dynamic and genetic kind.² Doing such phenomenology means "to realize that every image and every concept arise out of the anguish of possibilities" (Schuback, *ibid.*, p. 68). The reason is, as Heidegger said, that the "plurality of meaning" is the very element of thinking (*ibid.*, p. 171). On these grounds one can propose a philosophy that thinks in sketches, which means to create "iconoclastic images": images that do not claim to be representations of specific objects or phenomena, but rather of *processes of emergence and dissolving* (Schuback, 2011). In this respect Schelling, although inspired by pre-modern esoteric thinking, also foreshadows certain themes in post-structural philosophy, leading to a "reconstructive post-modernism" (Gare, 2002), which goes beyond both pre-modern, "mythic" thinking and modernist rationality, or rather creates a new synthesis out of their opposition. I will return to these issues when discussing the nature of Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical/spiritual anthropology.

An example of philosophy of childhood: childhood as event

The phenomenological anthropology of childhood can be seen as a form of empirical research strongly informed by philosophical principles of ontological and epistemological nature. Another area of childhood study recently developed is what Kennedy (2006a) calls philosophy of childhood. This is basically a philosophical inquiry into the phenomenon of childhood, although also accommodating findings of more conventional empirical studies. References to Kennedy's interesting and informative work will appear later in this paper. In this section I focus mainly on a paper by Smeyers & Masschelein (2001).

Drawing to a large extent on Lyotard, Smeyers & Masschelein discuss the political and educational significance of "our unknown childhood". The authors argue that ultimately, childhood belongs to the non-representable, since the experience of childhood is beyond language (drawing on the meaning of Latin *in-fans*, which literally means "without speech"). Hence, for Smeyers & Masschelein (as well as for Lyotard; see also Agamben, 2007), biological childhood seems to be defined as the phase from birth until learning to speak (or perhaps to think). As Lyotard expresses it: "I am not born, made child. I will be born later, with language, precisely on leaving childhood" (quoted in Smeyers & Masschelein, 2001, p. 151). If childhood is beyond linguistic representation, it makes of course little sense to talk about its meaning or essence. Childhood is then better understood as an *event*. *That* I have been a child, *that* we all have been children, that there *are* children, this is the remarkable thing, not *what* this childhood *is* in a general sense, not its essence or meaning. The event of childhood is beyond our rational grasp, it is transcendent and sublime in the Kantian sense: hovering on the limits of our conceptual possibilities. Such an understanding of childhood is a necessary *complement* to the instrumental rationality of educational institutions, where more or less rigorous measurement and testing constitutes the knowledge basis for pedagogical actions.

Nevertheless, childhood is not completely beyond us, it is also part of us as adults; it is "still within us, as a state of mind" (Bachelard, 1971, p. 125). Lyotard also hints at this. In addition, in psychotherapy today there is a general recognition of "the child within". This means that childhood is actually *not* a particular age or phase of development. It is rather a somewhat unmanageable "wilderness", a silence beyond language

2. Most of modern social science using phenomenology as a qualitative research approach belongs, however, to the first category. It usually describes phenomena or experiences as they have already occurred or appeared, *post facto*. A typical interview question in such research is "Tell me of an occasion when you experienced X" (see for instance Valle, 1998.)

and conceptualization. By their notion of *becoming-child*, Deleuze & Guattari (2004) – whose metaphysical turn from essence to event has perhaps inspired these francophone thinkers – indicate the possibility to re-enter this dimension of experience. Such an uncovering of experience has to do with the exploration and intensification of perception (Semetsky, 2004). Similarly, Kennedy (in Kennedy & Kohan, 2008) considers childhood a specific form of experience with a particular force and intensity. Kennedy modifies however the arguments of Lyotard and Smeyers & Masschelein (and Agamben) – whether knowingly or not I cannot tell – by suggesting that childhood is actually not the complete absence of language: it is rather *another form* of language, it is “the world languaging” and “the language of the unconscious, a multiple, polysemous code, the language of desire, the speech of the Whole” (ibid., p. 8).

In the experience of the limits of the concepts of our developmental theories we have the possibility to recognize the sublime nature of childhood as an aspect of the immensity of nature and its forces of creation and growth. For Smeyers & Masschelein this is a necessary complement to the empirical facts and theories of developmental psychology, all of which rest on the assumption that childhood is indeed representable and therefore (more or less) *manageable*. Such “scientific” and “evidence-based” discourses of child development are easily assimilated by the culture of performativity permeating present educational policy and practice (Ball, 2003). Under these conditions, childhood as a sublime silence of the unknown is occluded or neglected. Even though we all have an “inner child”, our own childhood is easily forgotten because as children we did not live so much in representations as in the silence of perceptual wilderness. As grown ups, we substitute this forgetfulness with conceptions constructed on the basis of scientific practices of observation and theory. Our inner child becomes an unknown Other, an absence that we forget and forget that we have forgotten, covered over by instrumental and economical rationalities.

Much as one appreciates Smeyers & Masschelein’s plead for an educational philosophy that brings the “transcendent event” of childhood into educational awareness (theoretical as well as practical), one cannot help asking: is this really enough to counteract the alienating practices of testing and measuring, “the terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003)? My feeling is that these latter practices would be left untouched by any such merely transcendent and sublime discourse. We need a discourse and a narrative that takes us into the concreteness of the natural *and* the psychological *and* the spiritual development of children, but at the same time admits the necessarily unfinished, provisional and sketchy character of our knowledge in this field; hence acknowledges that childhood is indeed *also* an event beyond language and rationality. In other words, the two fields of philosophy (of education) and empirical anthropology/development psychology must not be kept apart, but be synthesized into what Rudolf Steiner called “eine Philosophie über den Menschen” (Steiner, 1983, p. 32); a philosophy of the human being. In such a philosophical and pedagogical anthropology, images of human nature and development derived from very different methods of research would be brought to interaction in ways that could be both dynamic and creative (cf. Kiersch, 2010).

Childhood as a cultural construct: the challenge of social constructionism

As noted above, one of the greatest challenges to developmental theories today is the claim that there is no universal child nature and that any such conception is a social construct, that is, a product of various social conditions and processes. Some researchers have even gone so far as to claim that the construct “child” has no truth, because there are no scientific methods by which we can unambiguously demonstrate what a child is and what it is not (Göppel, 1997).³ Children become “children” only through educational discourse and practice. No education, no “child”.

Such a view is so contra-intuitive that it is hard to accept without objections or modifications. To our common, everyday view of the world, children would surely be children even if there is no science to prove their difference from adults and even if there were no schools and no education. That is not to deny that

3. “The construct ‘child’ cannot be true. Because there are no scientific research methods with which one could demonstrate without doubt what a child is and what it is not.” (“Das Konstrukt ‘Kind’ ist nicht wahrheitsfähig. Denn es gibt keine wissenschaftliche Forschungsmethode, mit der man zeifelsfrei nachweisen könnte, was ein Kind ist und was nicht.”) (Lenzen, quoted in Göppel, 1997, p. 367) However, I am not sure that this is the view of Lenzen himself.

there is a wide span of culturally different notions of what it *means* to be a child. But such meanings are like “auras” around the natural, biological fact that children are human beings involved in processes of growth and development, which are more or less different from adults (less the older they are). It is hard to imagine that there would be any culture in which people would deny this. One could of course argue that conceptions of “growth and development” would again differ between cultures, but these conceptions would still refer to an objective reality of biological facts. According to the well-known German biologist Adolf Portmann (1982), the newborn infant of all races is relatively uniform in size, and growth processes in childhood are also very similar. Racial characteristics appear more distinctly only after puberty (p. 367). So *if there is a universal human nature*, it is probably more *like the nature of the child* than of the adult.

As stated in the introduction, I believe that the challenge of constructionism cannot be met without going into the question of the ontology of human being. I will suggest an inroad to this field by taking up Hacking’s (1999) distinction between three different categories of phenomena. Hacking first presents two categories, which he calls *interactive* and *indifferent* (or natural) phenomena. Phenomena in the interactive category are constituted in a matrix of different factors, such as social, historical and individual. He points out that this does not really mean that such phenomena are *constructed* in the literal sense, but rather that they are social *products*. (However, for social constructionists, this seems to be irrelevant.) Phenomena in this category are epistemologically subjective: they do not exist without human subjectivity. An example would be *taxes*. Taxes are not natural facts, what they are depends wholly on how they are defined.

Phenomena in the second category are epistemologically objective: their nature is not dependent on how we define them; they are indifferent to how we understand them. The child as a biological organism would be an example; or the fact that all children change their teeth around seven years of age. The biological causes and processes behind this fact are independent of our knowledge about them (unless that knowledge is used to intervene in some way, but that is another issue). However, the *significance* of this fact, what it *means* in terms of development, is not an indifferent but an interactive category.

Hacking further indicates the possibility of a third category, but he does not give it a name. It could perhaps be called a *relatively* indifferent category. To illustrate this, Hacking starts with an example from Freud. Freud himself saw all neurosis as basically a biological, natural phenomenon, that is, an indifferent category (whether this is correct or not is not the issue here). Nevertheless, he considered that their treatment needed a hermeneutic approach based on the interaction between doctor and patient. Thus an indifferent phenomenon *can be affected* by an interactive phenomenon. This suggests that some phenomena may somehow be both indifferent and interactive, that is, *relatively* indifferent. Autism would be another example: a lot of research suggests that it has a biological cause. Nevertheless, its character and development is also affected by *how it is understood* by the persons involved.⁴

Hacking’s point seems to be that social constructionism is certainly relevant for some phenomena, *viz.* those belonging to the interactive and (what I have called) *relatively* indifferent categories. However, *universal* social constructionism, a view that does not recognize the existence of any indifferent categories, is absurd. Universal social constructionism implies ontological nihilism. This does not necessarily imply *ethical* nihilism but it means that different values and practices cannot be judged or critiqued on any other grounds than principles of value. Science and empirical research lose all significance in the discussion. This again would be like a return to the reductionist view of emotivism; a position with which social constructionists themselves would hardly agree.⁵

Now I would suggest that the human being as a whole encompasses phenomena of all three categories. Being human means having a physical body that is a result of biological evolution on the physical plane of

4. Hacking’s interactive and relatively indifferent categories express something similar to the sociological so-called Thomas theorem, according to which the definition of a situation has real effects on/for that situation. W. I. Thomas and D. S. Thomas formulated this principle in 1928.

5. As Hacking points out, many social constructionists have a moral agenda with their research while at the same time hesitating to admit the possibility of morality in the traditional sense, since that too would be a relative social construction. Thus, their research paradoxically leads away from the discussion of moral issues. Such a more or less implicit moral agenda can also be seen to motivate research into the social construction of childhood (cf. Göppel, 1997), aiming at an equalization of power relations between adults and children.

existence. Many or most (but not all) phenomena on this level are indifferent to our conceptual definition or understanding of them. The physical organism is therefore an obvious ontological dimension of human being. However, all phenomena of the physical body are not independent of social conditions; in particular the *life processes* of this body. An interesting example is puberty, which is occurring later in so-called primitive people, and more and more early in Western societies. This indicates a socio-cultural influence on this basically organic process of development. Rittelmeyer (2007, chpt 4) makes an extensive summary of research around this issue and concludes that several factors probably contribute to the phenomenon. One probable factor is better nutrition, but it is likely that more specific cultural trends also contribute. These would include early media exposure to sexual imagery and the so-called sexualisation of childhood. Puberty would therefore be a phenomenon of the relatively indifferent kind; hence it is not a purely biological process, it is partly also a “social construct”.⁶

As for developmental phenomena belonging to the interactive category, these would be mainly of a psychological character. There has been a long-standing debate whether psychology is a natural or a cultural science. In its beginnings, psychology certainly wanted to emulate natural science; hence it treated its object of research, the human psyche, as a natural phenomenon. This view seems still to inform the hypothetic-deductive approach to psychological phenomena, focused on objective measurement and statistical analysis. However, due to the discovery of Vygotsky’s work and his subsequent influence on Western psychology, the school of cultural psychology has gradually grown and established itself quite strongly (see for inst. Shweder, 1991). In this view, all psychological processes are understood as “internalized” social or cultural processes and psychology is therefore basically a cultural science. It is hard to completely reject this view, considering the findings that this approach to psychological phenomena has produced. In this dimension of experience, what we *understand* a phenomenon to be actually determines what the phenomenon *is*. We have also to recognize that our understanding is not always conscious. We have subconscious conceptions and experiences, which also determine phenomena in the psychic realm.

Here we must however stop and consider the possibility that Merleau-Ponty is right in claiming (as mentioned above) that the *way* one experiences the world differs radically between children and adults, and that this difference is invariant, independent of social conditions. This would mean that there actually *is* an aspect of psychological life that is not interactive, but indifferent. On the other hand, the question is whether this aspect does not belong to another dimension: the spiritual – which of course interacts with the psychic but nevertheless in itself belongs to a different ontological level. The dimension of the spirit goes beyond that of the psyche. As Dewey (1958) said: “Soul is form, spirit informs” (p. 294).⁷ If the spirit has no form but is that which *in-forms*, it cannot in itself be a social construct, because such constructs have **forms**; hence they are rather the results of the in-forming action of the spirit. (This is not to deny that our *conceptions* of “spiritual” are to large extent social or cultural constructs.) If this argument makes sense, it means that *the child’s psyche has a different relation to the spirit, compared to the adult* (see below on the spiritual significance of childhood).

The nature of the spiritual dimension of the human being goes beyond the horizon of our present common understanding; it is therefore rather futile to go further into this field. Too much personal speculation would be involved. Suffice it to say that there probably are human/spiritual phenomena of both a relatively indifferent and a wholly indifferent kind. An example of the latter would be what Rudolf Steiner and many other spiritual thinkers call the individual Self or the “I” of the human being (Steiner, 1991). This so-called higher Self is “given” from the spiritual world and not subject to social constructions. Our personal, subjective identities and self-images belong however to the interactive category. They are the results of innumerable

6. It may be asked that if the process of puberty occurs more and more early could it not be that many or even all aspects of children’s biological development be speeded up due to cultural conditions in modern societies? Then there would be little or nothing left that belongs to the indifferent category of universal natural processes. This would make the human being as a whole a “social construct”, but only in the *relatively* indifferent sense. The “construction” is still conditioned by some basic factors of an indifferent kind.

7. Dewey also noted that the terms soul and spirit might be so overloaded with mythology that we may no longer be able to use them in science and philosophy. But, he added, “the realities are there; by whatever names they are called” (1958, p. 294).

communications and interactions between oneself, other people and the world. In summary, with the help of Hacking's three different categories of phenomena, which have here been used to explicate the ontological dimensions of human being, we can construct an onto-anthropological spectrum displayed in Figure 1 below. This scheme is not to be taken in any final or absolute sense. It is nothing but a rough sketch that points out a direction for further research. One problem is that the four dimensions in the scheme are not mutually exclusive or independent. Most probably there are interactions between all of them – and these interactions themselves belong to indifferent or relatively indifferent categories. One example would be blushing in shame or embarrassment: a psychological process interacting with a life process. Such interactions probably occur also on subtler and unconscious levels, and forms the basis for psychosomatic medicine.

<i>Onto-anthropological dimension</i>	<i>Hacking's category</i>
1. Physical organism	Indifferent (mainly)
2. Life processes	Indifferent or relatively indifferent
3. Psychological phenomena	Interactive (mainly)
4. Spirit	Indifferent (mainly)

Figure 1: An onto-anthropological spectrum of the human being related to Hacking's (1999) categories.

In the next section I will first introduce the Romantic view of human development. This will serve as background to the presentation of Steiner's pedagogical anthropology, which has many parallels with the Romantics. The scheme above will then be used in order to explicate Steiner's thinking.

The Romantic vision of human development

The appreciation of the spiritual qualities of child nature

Conceptions of the child expressed in Romantic thought are not completely without forerunners in cultural history. As Kennedy (2000) points out:

[T]he counter-image of the child that Romanticism seized and developed was also present as early as Plato, and before that in Taoism and Christianity. It is the other side of the deficit/danger symbolization: *the child as somehow more in touch with spiritual reality than the adult.* (p. 519-520; my italics)

The Romantic image of the child is a "counter-image" in that it was a reaction against the predominant and longstanding view of children as "born in sin", lacking in reason and control of their desires (the deficit/danger imagery); and therefore in dire need of discipline and correction. According to Kennedy (ibid.), Rousseau was the first to seriously challenge this notion of childhood in the West, and his ideas had a strong influence on Romantic thinkers in both England and Germany. But as hinted in the quote, there are ancient forerunners to this counter-image. In the age-old Taoist yoga tradition, the achievement of spiritual realization is symbolized by the inner birth of "the eternal child" (Rousselle, 1970, p. 73). This is also expressed in the *Tao Teh Ching* (ca. 600 B.C.; see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/taote.htm>) where Lao Tzu says:

Who knows his manhood's strength,
 Yet still his female feebleness maintains;
 As to one channel flow the many drains,
 All come to him, yea, all beneath the sky.
 Thus he the constant excellence retains;
 The simple child again, free from all stains. (Verse 28)
 He who has in himself abundantly the attributes of the Tao is like an infant. (Verse 55)

In other parts of humanity we can find more or less similar conceptions of the spiritual nature of the child's being. In almost all religious traditions, the birth of a child is an event of "spiritual reconnection" for

adults (Surr, 2012). In Balinese culture, babies are not allowed to touch the ground – that is, the Earth – for the first year of life, because they are seen as belonging to Heaven and closer to God than adults (Winell, 2011). In ancient Hindu culture there was a similar idea (Kakar, 1979). As for Christianity, the well-known sayings of Christ about children belonging to the kingdom of Heaven also bear witness to the spiritual qualities of children or child nature. As Zimmer (1970) points out, these sayings are not based on an appreciation of children's moral qualities, "but because they live by their wholeness, without inhibition" (p. 38). Zimmer goes on to connect this with a Middle Eastern story about how Jesus commanded his disciples

... to stop by the carcass of a dog, to endure its stench, to behold its beauty, its white teeth, amid its putrefaction, to look upon it as a part of the world's beauty, instead of rejecting it as vile. (ibid.)

This is obviously an exercise in perception, in learning to see beauty where we instinctively or habitually see ugliness. Rudolf Steiner refers to the same story in introducing one of his inner exercises for spiritual development (Steiner, 1992). Thus the story seems to be about developing a childlike quality in perception.

It was such facts about similar religious and mythic conceptions in different parts of the world that lead Jung (1970) to formulate the hypothesis of the existence of archetypes in the collective unconscious of mankind. One of which he labelled the Divine Child. Jung found that this archetype often appeared at a particular point in the inner development of adults, as a symbol of anticipated wholeness, the integration of conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. For Jung, the process of inner development in adulthood, what he calls the individuation process, begins "in the children's land, i.e., at a time when rational present-day consciousness was not yet separated from the historical psyche, the collective unconscious" (1970, p. 351). In Jungian psychology, a baby is understood as totally identified with the Self (the spiritual essence of individuality) and therefore experiences itself as a "deity". Many researchers in different disciplines seem to think that spirituality cannot appear in children before they are able to use language, identify themselves as separate individuals, and/or understand some basic religious concepts (Surr, 2012). However, human spirituality exists even if one is not aware of it. As Templeton and Eccles put it:

One could claim that if the goal of spiritual development is self-transcendence, newborns are inherently spiritual beings. Many theories in psychology, such as attachment and ego psychology, imply that newborns do not differentiate self from other and thus exist in a state of 'oneness'. (2006, p. 258)

Thus we can see that the Romantic conception of the spiritual nature of the child is not unique to Western cultural history and that it has lived on into present day thinking about childhood, human nature and development.

The spiral of development

One of the central themes in Romantic thought derives from Plato's *Symposium*, Plotinus, Gnosticism and the Orphic mysteries: that "the cosmic course [of creation] is from the One and the Good into evil and multiplicity and back to the One" (Abrams, 1971, p. 155). However, the whole pretext and agenda of Romantic thought is different from that of these ancient thinkers. In particular, there is a subtle difference in the conception of the "final stage": in Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism it is a simple "return to the One" but for the Romantics the final stage was on a higher level. It is also questionable whether they considered any stage as "final" in an absolute sense.

Another basic tenet of most Romantic thinkers was that a further spiritual development in adulthood was possible and even necessary for the fulfilment of humanity, as well as of human culture and society. Together with the appreciation of the spiritual qualities of childhood and the above mentioned modification of the Neo-Platonist notion of "returning to the One", it formed the basis for a spiral view of human development. Hanegraaff (1998) calls this "the educational spiral"; an aspect of the Romantic idea of evolution connected to Western esoteric thinking (more about this later on). Thus, the further development of the grown up person was seen as a kind of return to childhood, but on another level. The child represented the original unity of consciousness and the unity with nature "before the fall" – a fall into the internal divisions and conflicts that characterize adulthood. The child represents not just the "beginning" but also the end; the goal

of the life cycle being a re-appropriation of childlike spiritual qualities. As Schiller said:

They are what we were; they are what we should become once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature. (Schiller, 1993, p. 180)

It is important to note that the “fall” into division and multiplicity is here considered *necessary* for the higher unity to emerge. In its genuine form, Romantic thought is not an attempt to escape from the problems and conflicts of life and dream oneself away into an idealistic heaven.⁸ It is a striving to overcome or transcend the conflicts of multiplicity and fragmentation, but the path goes *through* this “vale of suffering”, not away from it. And the path, as Schiller says, is – or should be – a *cultural* path of reason and freedom.

This vision of development – which covers both the individual and the collective/historical development of humanity, even of the Earth or the whole of Creation – is clearly expressed by Novalis and extensively described by Geppert (1977). Novalis (like many other Romantics) considered neither the world nor the human being as final and ready-made. Everything is in constant movement and development, striving to realize the immanent teleology of Nature. Novalis anticipated Hegel’s idea of development as proceeding according to the structure of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Thus, if the child is the “thesis”, the adult is the “anti-thesis” and the “synthesis” is the fully developed individuality, which incorporates or assimilates the qualities of both child and adult. The problem is that culture and society raise many obstacles for adults to continue their development from what Novalis calls “the *merely* grown up human being” (“dem *bloßen* erwachsenen Menschen”) (ibid., p. 247; italics in original) – most commonly a male (!) – to self-realized individuality. This is the basis for the social, cultural and political critique inherent in Romanticism.

Inspired by Herder, Novalis saw the human being as both spirit and nature. She is a being of reason and consciousness as well as of nature, instinct and unconsciousness. Nature has produced “the human organ” (“das Organ des Menschen”) (ibid., p. 30), which is an organ of spiritual perception. Thus, the human being encompasses different ontological levels. In order to describe the potential “educational spiral” that each human being is called upon to actualize in her life, Novalis points out many different qualities characterizing its three stages. Some of them are summarized below:

- 1) There is a movement from the *innocence* of the child in the sense of not knowing what is right and wrong from a normal/social point of view, via the *guilt* of the adult, to the *higher innocence* of self-realized individuality.
- 2) There is a movement from childlike *joy*, via adult *seriousness*, to *higher joy*.
- 3) From *unity* – perceived through feeling and intuition, via *plurality*, to *all-one-ness* (“*Allheit*”).
- 4) From *nature*, via *culture*, to *individuality*.
- 5) From instinctive, unconscious *faith*, via rational *knowledge*, to higher and *conscious faith*.
- 6) From *imagination*, via *rational understanding* – according to Novalis, the world of the normal adult is “a desert of rationality” (ibid., p. 247) – to trans-rational *wisdom*.

All of these aspects are related internally to each other. For the purpose of this paper I will focus mainly on the last point, which has to do with the development of consciousness and knowledge. As noted above, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, the child’s perceptual relation to the world – the *form* of their experience – is probably qualitatively different from that of the adult. In terms of knowledge: if the adult’s knowledge is rational, the child’s is pre-rational. But in Romanticism, this pre-rationality is not to be taken merely as a “deficit” or lack, because it means that the child is more open to transcendent realms of experience. Novalis even envisioned the child as a “spiritual seer”:

The first man is the first spiritual seer. To him, all appears as spirit. What are children, if not such primal ones? The fresh insight of children is more boundless than the presentiments of the most resolute prophets. (Novalis, quoted in Kennedy, 2000, p. 519)

⁸ This tendency may nevertheless have been present among some of the Romantics, especially those who experimented with drugs like opium and hashish.

The direction of inner development in adult life is geared towards a recapturing of the transcendent openness of childhood experience. It means that the rational understanding one has achieved as an adult is not abolished but developed further into a trans-rational realm. Thus we can describe this aspect of the educational spiral as going from the pre-rational (in a non-derogative sense), via normal rationality – a kind of socialization of cognition – to trans-rational wisdom or higher knowledge.

In terms of consciousness, this development can be described as going from unconsciousness, via consciousness, to another form of unconsciousness. The difference between the first and the last state is subtle and difficult to conceptualize. First of all we have to recognize that we are not dealing with the Freudian concept of unconsciousness. For Freud, the unconscious consists mainly of repressed desires based on childhood phantasies. But as Welsh (2012) points out (drawing upon Merleau-Ponty), the unconscious is also a realm of *non-thematic experience* continuously going on parallel to our conscious life. It is a realm that actually creates, surrounds and supports our conscious experience. Schelling had a similar view of the relation between consciousness and the unconscious. He viewed the borderline between these two realms as always present and very close to us. (Similarly, Steiner said the line between them is sometimes as thin as a spider's web (see Meyer, 2011, p. 25.)) In his study of Schelling, McGrath (2012) notes that our contemporary forms of the non-Freudian unconscious includes those derived from Jung, from archetypal and transpersonal psychology, and from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. These perspectives represent a “counter-movement in Western intellectual history which is at least as old as Renaissance Hermeticism and as contemporary as Tolkien” (ibid., p. 22). Freud and Jung's different concepts of the unconscious are also intrinsically related to their concept of childhood, as pointed out by Mercer (2003).

Another issue regarding the *un*-conscious is that it is often equated with the *sub*-conscious (again usually in a Freudian sense). But if there is a subconscious, there may also be a *super*-conscious; not in the Freudian sense of the super-ego (our socially conditioned conscience), but in the sense of mental processes and activities taking place above or beyond our personal consciousness, not below its surface as repressed phantasies or instinctive emotional reactions. It seems that Gustav T. Fechner was the first (in psychology at least) to suggest a similar idea of “superconsciousness” (*Überbewußtsein*), which he associated with divine beings (Kerslake, 2006, p. 221).

The notion of the superconscious can be related to the debates around *intellectual intuition* in German idealistic philosophy. For Kant, intellectual intuition meant knowledge without sense perception, which he considered impossible for a finite subjective consciousness to achieve.⁹ For Fichte it was the subject's transcendental experience of its own activity, for Schelling a non-dual absolute knowledge in which subject and object cannot be distinguished from one another. Schelling's conception may sound like a kind *unio mystica* but is actually a distinctive act of intelligence or reason. Yet it is not a conscious act, because consciousness presupposes the subject-object duality. Thus intellectual intuition is for Schelling “an absolute knowledge hidden in the subject's unconscious, that undifferentiated unity that consciousness has always already left behind but that *continues to make possible everything that the ego knows*” (ibid., my italics). It can never be defined, but it can be artistically or aesthetically expressed. Art is for Schelling the objectification of intellectual intuition. The original state of human consciousness is actually a non-reflective grasp of the reality of God. Before we become self-conscious, we are conscious of God, but this is not a consciousness we *have*, it is one that we *are*. It is therefore unconscious from the point of view of the ego.¹⁰

It seems to me that this account of Schelling's idea of the unconscious fully justifies the application of the term “superconscious” to it. This is not to deny that for Schelling the metaphor of the “Ground” is a prevalent expression for the unconscious, indicating something “below” us. Nevertheless, this “Ground” grants the possibility of knowledge and wisdom and is therefore also a source of grace – which traditionally,

9. In this paragraph I follow McGrath (2012, p. 96ff).

10. It may be interesting to note that Schelling's theory of consciousness finds a resonance in the present day developmental psychology of Jacques Lacan:

Much as in Lacan's developmental psychology, in which the symbolic order that gives the ego a position in language is attained at the price of the infant's identification with its life, Schelling's theory of consciousness renders the ‘I think’ an achievement of individuation at the expense of being, at the price of the fullness of the intuition, ‘I am’. (McGrath, 2012, p. 98)

as we know, descends from “above”.¹¹

The knowledge achieved in intellectual intuition goes beyond rational understanding. It is trans-rational, a kind of un-knowing similar to the “docta ignorantia” of Cusanus. As Steiner (2000, p. 53) points, the “learned un-knowing” of Cusanus is not a lack of knowledge; there is more knowledge in it “than in many a book that calls itself learned”. Intellectual intuition is “un-knowing” because it is unconscious in the sense of superconscious. In childhood this knowledge gradually drops down into consciousness, primarily in the form of imagination, later in the form of conceptions and concepts (cf. Kühlewind, 2001). It then develops into the rational knowledge of adult life. At this stage there is the possibility to remain in “the desert of rationality” or to embark on an inner journey of transformation, leading back into the superconscious realms, but in a conscious way. The difference between the unconscious in infancy and in the self-realized individuality is that the superconscious activities in the small child do not yet have conscious faculties at their disposal, through which they can manifest or express themselves.

Georg Kühlewind has developed the concept of superconsciousness in the context of both child and adult inner development (see for instance Kühlewind, 1992; 2001). According Kühlewind (1992), the threshold from consciousness to the subconscious is the same as that to the superconscious. Whether we enter the one or the other realm if we cross this threshold depends on our stage of inner development. (Perhaps Goethe hinted at this in *Faust*, when concerning the famous “descent to the Mothers” he lets Mephistopheles say, “Descend, then! I might also tell you: Soar! It’s all the same” [Goethe’s *Faust* is available at *The Alchemy Website*: <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/faustidx.html>]. Similarly it is said in the *Tibetan book of the dead* that the demons you meet in the “afterlife” are basically identical with your own Buddha nature.) In infancy, the higher parts of our spiritual nature soon become superconscious, while consciousness itself still remains very different from that of the adult’s. The perceptual life of the small child is basically of a feeling-willing character. Meanings are not perceived in concepts but as immediate feelings. Those feelings are not subjective emotions or associations, “they *are* the real feel-able essences of things” (“es *sind* die wirklichen fühlbaren Wesenheiten der Dinge”) (Kühlewind, 2001, p. 53). This is in accord with the Romantic conception of the child as living in a state of mind in which there is no space between words and things. It is as if the “infant” is “without speech” simply because it does not need it.

Kühlewind’s (2001) thesis is that many of the children today that are being diagnosed with ADHD and similar disorders have difficulties to live out their excessive spiritual energy in a materialistic culture based on technology and commerce. They cause difficulties for adults because they are so strongly connected to the superconscious realm, whereas adults in general have lost all conscious relation to it. Whether one accepts or not the idea that these children are relatively highly developed souls now incarnating in an increasing number on Earth (so-called Indigo-children; see Carroll & Tober, 1999), Kühlewind’s spiritual anthropology of childhood throws a new light on the question raised by Kennedy (2000); a question that is of vital importance to education:

If children, for whatever reasons, do know the world differently – if children’s knowledge is not just a weaker, or sketchier, or more rudimentary version of adults’ – *then what can they tell us?* (p. 515; my italics)

If the child’s voice reaches us from beyond the borders of adult discourse and rational social life, *how do we hear it?* It probably depends on whether we have become stuck in “the desert of rationality” or whether we are prepared to take further steps of inner development towards trans-rational wisdom. Perhaps present cultural conditions will open our ears and hearts to children more than in earlier times. The child as a symbol for potential human development and the idea of maturity as a second childlikeness has gained some influence in present Western culture through the attention paid in psychotherapeutic circles to “the child within”. So

11. Schelling’s preference of the term “Ground” is due to a strong influence from Jacob Böhme. The term “superconscious” must not detract from the significance of this break from the traditional metaphors of God “in the heights” or “in Heaven above”. It points to the emergence of a new paradigm of esoteric thought in Europe, described by Hanegraaff (2012) as a kind of “inductive” and “incarnational” spirituality, in which the body is not denied but affirmed as a spiritual reality in its own right. This kind of thinking is akin to the Tantric approaches of Hindu and Buddhist yoga, as well as to the occult tendencies of Deleuze (Kerlake, 2006). The earlier, Neo-Platonic tradition tended to disregard or deny the significance of the body in spiritual life.

in spite of the fact that children are increasingly marginalized in present technocratic, instrumentalist society, what they represent psychologically for the adult mind is of increasing significance (cf. the “emotionalisation of childhood” registered in sociology).

All of this points however to another question of fundamental educational importance for the Romantic view of education, which is also a strong but perhaps mostly implicit motive in Steiner’s pedagogical thinking and practice: *how do we educate the child so that the stages from infancy to adulthood become as good a preparation as possible for further inner development of the adult towards self-transcendence and wisdom?*

The plasticity of childhood

The question raised at the end of the previous section seems to be of little or no relevance to the prevailing mainstream currents of educational research, policy and practice. An opposite tendency seems rather to be at work: “the sooner the better”. That is, the sooner children learn and acquire the competencies necessary for normal adult life in modern society, the better. Why? First, because children learn much easier when they are young; second, because the earlier one acquires knowledge or abilities, the longer one can make use of them; hence, the more profitable it becomes for one’s life. One could call this tendency *the intentional exploitation of the plasticity of childhood*. To some degree, this intention has always been part of education.

We noted above that Dewey (1997), like the Romantics, appreciated children’s power to learn, to grow and to develop as something that is often more or less lost in adults. In order for inner development to continue in adulthood, a certain measure of this childlike plasticity has to be present; this is one aspect of the Romantic “cult of childhood”. But the child’s potential for change and development can be appropriated in more sinister ways for adult social and political purposes. Thus, the plasticity of childhood is of central importance to all utopian ideas and even “places utopia at the heart of education” (Papastephanou, 2008, p. 101). In attempts to realize utopian social visions, education always becomes an important instrument (cf. Dahlin, 2009; 2012). The innocence of childhood becomes the blank slate upon which the adult generation inscribes its hopes, dreams and desires for the future; the child becomes the very symbol of utopia. Utopian notions of social change are not absent in Romanticism, but they are not based on explicitly delineated descriptions of the structures and institutions of Utopia. Instead, they are based on the ideal of human self-realization and self-transcendence. Children are not seen as formless matter to be moulded into pre-established shapes, but as representations of a state of consciousness that has to be recovered in adulthood. Thus, it is not “the sooner the better”, but rather the contrary.

Novalis claimed to know that “the longer the human being remains a child, the older she will become” (“Je länger der Mensch Kind bleibt, desto älter wird er”) (quoted in Geppert, 1977, p. 242). Now the intuition of this Romantic seer actually seems to have been somewhat corroborated by modern empirical research. In a longitudinal study carried out by Kern and Friedman (2009), it was found that early school entry was associated with *less* educational attainment, *worse* midlife adjustment, and even *increased mortality risk*. They also found that “early reading was associated with early academic success, but less lifelong educational attainment and worse midlife adjustment” (p. 419).

Schiller’s naïve and sentimental poetry

The quality of plasticity characterising infancy and childhood is both of a biological and a psychological nature. Biologically it is the basis for the growth and development of inner organs and external bodily structures. Psychologically it is manifest in the fluid and rapidly changing “stream of consciousness” that we commonly recognize in children. This is in line with Kühlewind’s thesis that children’s perceptual consciousness is of a feeling-willing nature. Perceptions based on rational concepts presumably have a more rigid, less flexible character. Hence, children often manifest quick movements of perceptual imagination: a wooden stick can one moment be a horse to ride on and the next a rocket, or something else.

As noted above, the Romantics appreciated a childlike quality in perception, which for them was connected to imagination. Imagination was seen as a key factor in the “restoration of the world of perception through a re-appropriation of the perceptual life of the child” (Kennedy, 2006a, p. 64). Kennedy (ibid.) relates this to Winnicott’s (1991) notion of the transitional space of experience characteristic of childhood, where the clear-cut borders between subject and object or self and world have not yet been established. (This intermediate region does not necessarily disappear in adults; it can be retained throughout life in intense experiences in the fields of art, religion, or in creative scientific research.) Imagination manifests in creative perception, which makes out of the material of everyday experience a new world by “defamiliarizing the familiar through a refreshed way of looking upon it” (Abrams, 1971, p. 379). The criterion for such freshness of sensation is the *sense of wonder*, often ascribed to children’s experience of the world. Another theme belonging to this cluster of related childlike qualities in Romantic thought is *joy* (Abrams, 1971). Joy often had a special meaning, also related to perception. For Coleridge, for instance, joy has to do with the breaking down of the boundaries between subject and object in perception, due to an overabundance of vital energy. All of this points to a prevalent concern about “refreshment” and “restoration” of adult perceptual consciousness through a “defamiliarization of the familiar”, a *de-habituation of everyday experience*.

Romantic poetry has to be understood in the context of these ideas. The aim of poetry is conceived as recapturing the freshness of childhood perception, as well as its feelings of wonder and joy in life. The only task of the poet, according to Schiller (1993), is to describe this ideal in adult life and give it its most complete expression. In this work, the poet has two options; he can either *be* the ideal, or he can *seek* it. The former makes for naïve poetry; the latter becomes sentimental. In naïve poetry, the poet expresses what he perceives in the actual state of creative imagination; in sentimental poetry he expresses his search and his longing for this lost state of consciousness. Presumably, it is especially the naïve form of poetry that Shelley refers to when he says that poetry “purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being” (quoted in Abrams, 1971, p. 384).

As for philosophy – which according to Novalis would attain its highest form in poetry – Carlyle said: “What is Philosophy throughout but a continual battle against Custom” (quoted in ibid., p. 384). This “battle against custom” is not very different from what in phenomenology is called the *epoché*; the attempt to disregard everything one knows about a phenomenon in order to approach it with fresh eyes. Thus it could be said that in phenomenological research, a similar kind of freshness is strived for as in Romantic poetry. Semetsky (2004) detects a similar tendency in the philosophy of Deleuze, related to his notion of “becoming-child”. Becoming-child is the innocence of perception freed from common sense, i.e., from habits and custom. This innocence

...creates the conditions in real experience for the production of meanings. As becomings, *it is imperceptible, unless perception vitally increases in power*, which is the characteristic of Deleuze’s method of transcendental empiricism. (ibid., p. 59; my italics)

The imperceptibility of “becomings” points to the relevance of the notion of the superconscious discussed above, and the vital increase of perceptual power relates to the inner work necessary in adult life, in order to recover the childlike qualities of wonder, innocence and joy.

To romanticize, and other approaches to superconscious experience

We have seen that the psychological plasticity of childhood is related to its unconscious and even superconscious experiential dimensions. These dimensions cannot be grasped or fixed in rational conceptions pertaining to the normal adult state of consciousness: the “desert of rationality” in Novalis’ terms. Hence, an educational anthropology of childhood has to find ways to overcome the limitations of normal rationality. Novalis and the Romantics were searching for such ways in their poetry, but sometimes also in their philosophy. Novalis called it to *romanticize*:

In giving to the lower a higher meaning, to the ordinary a perspective full of secrets, to the well-known the worthiness of the unknown, to the finite an appearance of infinity, I romanticize. [Indem ich dem Gemeinen einen

hohen Sinn, dem Gewöhnliches ein geheimnisvollen Ansehn, dem Bekannten die Würde des Unbekannten, dem Endlichen einen unendlichen Schein gebe so romantisiere ich es.] (Geppert, 1977, p. 81)

This approach to poetry and philosophy is based on the idea of “the world as symbol”. Kerlake (2006) demonstrates how Jung draws upon this Romantic idea in his analytic psychology, and Deleuze in his philosophy. A symbol is an expression of the unconscious, it differs from a sign in that it refers to something relatively unknown, something that is first apprehended in unconscious intellectual intuition. There is of course also a certain difference between Novalis and the Romantics on the one hand, and Jung on the other, in that Novalis’ poetical philosophy is a conscious attempt to reach beyond consciousness to *find* appropriate symbols for his intuitions, whereas Jung’s work goes in the other direction: to *interpret* symbols which have already been spontaneously produced by the unconscious in dreams. In his interpretations Jung used a strategy he called *amplification*, which consists in contextualizing a symbolic expression by relating it to other more or less similar symbols that can be found in other myths from other times and cultures. In doing so, the original symbol is “amplified” and thereby made more accessible to the understanding.¹² Thus, if one dreams of a child, the child symbol can be related to myths of the Divine Child that appear in different mythologies. This archetype is a symbol of the Self, the core of individuality; hence such dreams can be highly significant for the process of individuation, which involves the integration of unconscious contents into consciousness.

Novalis’ *romantisizing* and Jung’s *amplification* are two theoretical/contemplative approaches to the un- or superconscious realms of experience. There are, I contend, two other and more philosophical approaches: those of Heidegger and Deleuze. Heidegger’s philosophy is of a negative or apophatic character in that he is not claiming to know anything in the ordinary, representational or scientific sense (Marten, 2012). Heidegger was particularly drawn to the pre-Socratic thinkers in order to uncover the “original” in their thinking; not in a temporal/historical sense but in a *vertical* one. In his hermeneutics of these ancient philosophers he tries to uncover layers of meaning that lie deeper – or higher – than what these thinkers themselves were able to bring forth. In this sense he is also trying to approach the unconscious realms, beyond representational rationality. As for Deleuze, I have already hinted at his approach in the quote from Semetsky (2004) above. Kerlake (2006) and Lovat & Semetsky (2009) are examples that further develop this aspect of Deleuze’s thinking, which is very complex, unorthodox and “wild” in character.

There are many problems connected with these four approaches to the transcendent, more or less esoteric dimensions of experience. Furthermore, they are obviously very different in their results, in what they present as the outcome of their philosophical endeavours. My main point here is only that they are a further development of the Romantic impulse in philosophy and that they *exist*, even in our present time. Hence, Rudolf Steiner is not the only one – even in the academic world – to claim that superconscious dimensions of the human being and the world are accessible to the human mind, albeit not to its normal rationality and state of consciousness.

To poetize: a constructivist approach to higher knowledge

I would like to suggest the verb “poetize” as a summary expression for the four approaches to superconscious experience described above. The word “poetize” derives of course from “poetry”. Poetry as we know is an art form very much devoted to the expression of sublime or extraordinary experiences, which often requires that it transgress conventional linguistic forms. The etymology of the word goes back to old Greek *poiesis*. *Poiesis* signifies a productive activity based on a corresponding form of knowledge called *techné*. Here it is interesting to note that Steiner sometimes uses the term *Denktechnik* (for instance Steiner, 1984, pp. 88ff); that is, a *techné* of thinking; a thinking that produces something: ideas, concepts, images, or metaphors. To poetize means to engage in a special form of *Denktechnik*, in which imagination, in the Romantic sense,

12. Kerlake (2006, p. 211 note 9) quotes Jung about amplification:

Certain kinds of psychic material mean next to nothing if simply broken down but display a wealth of meaning if, instead of being broken down, that meaning is reinforced and extended by all the conscious means at our disposal – by the so called method of amplification. The images and symbols of the collective unconscious yield their discursive values only when subjected to a synthetic mode of treatment. (CW7: 81)

plays a central role. The purpose of this *Denktechnik* is to produce a linguistic expression of an experience that transcends ordinary consciousness: a *Darstellung*, to use an appropriate German term.

To produce a *Darstellung* is a creative and constructive process in which the producing subject is highly active. The poetizing approach to transcendent experience can therefore also be described as *constructivist*. It is similar to how constructivist theories of knowledge and learning depict the knowing/learning process. For constructivism, knowledge is never “given” in an objective sense, but always a construction of the knowing subject, who is active in the process. This perspective on knowledge and learning is fairly well established in educational thinking today. One could perhaps derive this epistemology from Romanticism, though it falls out of the scope of this paper to do so. If the derivation holds, however, it would show that present day constructivism is actually a watered-down version of Romantic epistemology.

Romanticism in education: progressivism and its critics

It is commonly accepted that the so-called progressivist movement in education draws a lot on Romantic conceptions of childhood (Ullrich, 1999, p. 21ff). Comenius, Rousseau, and Fröbel represent a stream of ideas that considers children as a continuous gift from God to mankind in order to raise our potentials for humanity. In 20th century progressivism this idea has been secularized. Progressivism holds an image of the autonomous child that is usually connected to the idea that children will develop “by themselves” or “from within” if they are just given the right conditions. The child’s original perfection shows itself in its desire to know, its imagination, playful self-activity and creativity. These ideas imply that childhood is not just a state of lack, a deficit pre-stage of adulthood, but has its own completeness and perfection. The development from child to adult does not only mean the acquisition of good things, but also the loss of good qualities, like the intensity and wonder of experience, and the living imagination as opposed to the rigid rationality of the adult world. The adult’s interaction with children can be a rejuvenation and can awaken again the will and the energy to work for better human life conditions. Thus, progressivism saw education as a means to reform society.

There are many critics of these progressivist ideas of childhood and education, which see them as wishful interpretations or mere *projections* of adults. The progressivist ideas are not empirically verifiable; they are merely aesthetic and/or moral constructions, expressing mystifying visions, a myth or a cult of childhood, metaphors of a regressive irrationalism that has not adapted to modernity. Such critical descriptions conceal or neglect that progressivism actually encompasses significant modern concepts and values in that it “brings into practice a concept of education and learning that is closely related to democracy” (Skiera, 2012, p. 58) (“einen demokrati-nahen Erziehungs- und Lernbegriff ins praktische Spiel bringt”). It has also assimilated the fact of modern psychological insight, that fear is an obstacle to learning, and intends to make possible learning free from anxiety (ibid.). Progressivism is therefore better understood as an alternative form of modern education. The critics’ talk about myths and cults does not mean the same as what the progressivists themselves refer to (Ullrich, 1999). It is rather a *pejorative* use of such concepts, whereas for the Romantics and their followers, myth does not mean false, untrue, or unreal. As we saw in the previous sections, mythical symbols are a kind of intuitive knowledge of the unconscious – the sub- as well as the superconscious. Myths must be taken seriously, especially in an extremely rationalistic culture like ours, because they are the expressions powerful psychic energies.

The image of the child as creative origin [...] would then be understood as a modern, secular manifestation of the collective archetype of the child, through which adults in pedagogical relations to children can again experience community and wholeness. (Ullrich, 1999, p. 351)

It was the empirical anthropology of Lévi-Strauss that first made us aware of the polymorphism of childhood, its wide cultural variations. The conclusion was that the question of the nature of childhood must remain a forever open question. This then became the basic premise of most present day sociology of childhood, the implicit stance of which is that children are not really different from adults. In this situation the Romantic image of childhood has a certain critical potential, which could be summed up as follows:

- 1) Childhood has an intrinsic quality and value, different from that of adulthood.
- 2) The child is a complete human being in the same sense as the adult. There is no “deficit” in childhood.
- 3) The child is in continuous change and development. It has an organic and psychic plasticity that the adult most often has not.

These three points indicate the *Unverfügbarkeit* of childhood and the respect for its own inherent qualities. They constitute the beginnings of a philosophical anthropology of childhood that does not limit itself to purely empirical and rationalist models of socialisation and development. The critics of progressivism fail to realize the necessity of this kind of anthropology for education, of which Steiner’s is a paradigmatic example.

Steiner’s esoteric anthropology for education

The esoteric nature of Steiner’s thought

Is Steiner’s anthropology of human development naturalistic and objectivistic? Is the nature and development of the child taken as a natural fact, as a “given”? The answer to these questions is not a straightforward yes or no. There probably are Waldorf teachers who take Steiner’s pedagogical lectures in a naturalistic way, but this is a misunderstanding (Kiersch, 2010). Steiner certainly included many natural facts in his accounts of child development, for instance the change of teeth around the age of seven, to which he gave particular significance (see below). However, many of the terms and expressions he used are not to be taken literally, they are more like heuristic devices. They implicitly claim to be based on forms of higher cognition, which cannot be completely expressed in rational concepts and therefore have to be *poetized* in order to be communicated.

According to Steiner, *imagination* is the basic form of higher knowledge. In the Western esoteric tradition, imagination is similarly understood as a higher – or deeper – form of perception, expressed in myths and symbols. Hanegraaf (1998) argues that imagination in this sense is most probably one of three elements that Romantic philosophy incorporated from Western esoteric traditions. The other two elements he calls organicism and temporalism. These were also key elements in Steiner’s thinking, as well as in Theosophy in general. Organicism refers to the pantheistic view of the world as an “organic whole”, the parts of which are related according to certain cosmic correspondences, such as sun – gold – heart, or moon – silver – reproductive organs. Organicism is opposed to the mechanistic worldview of Newtonian science. Temporalism implies the idea of continuous evolution to higher stages of being, one aspect of which is the educational spiral described above in connection with Schiller.

As for imagination, Hanegraaf notes that it is not taken as merely subjective interpretations of an objective reality. It implies instead “a close *participation* of the perceiving subject in the perceived object, which means that the object (the world) is *constituted* in the very act of perception” (ibid., p. 259). Esotericism rejects the Kantian claim that the human cognitive faculty cannot go beyond space and time.

From an esoteric perspective, the human cognitive faculty is generally considered to be unlimited, although how ‘open’ this faculty is in any given individual depends entirely on whatever stage of intellectual and spiritual development that individual has reached. (Iwersen, 2007, p. 5-6)

This naturally flies in the eyes of all adherents to mainstream modernist, rationalist Enlightenment. Such critics of esoteric thinking usually regard it as regressive and falling back on pre-modern – even anti-modern – forms of thought. However, as McGrath (2012) points out, this is a misunderstanding:

Western esotericism, at least in the form it has assumed in the last 500 years, is an expression of the same wave of humanism that generated modernity, sharing the impulse toward human amelioration through science, although it articulates an alternative way of working with nature. Western esoteric nature-philosophy refuses to follow mainstream natural science and split mind from matter, spirit from animal, finite from infinite. Esoteric modernity is [...] a modern approach to nature, which was openly rejected in the seventeenth century because it did not grant us the calculative control which techno-science demanded of the Western mind. (p. 22)

Thus, in parallel to progressivism, in the fields of philosophy and science esotericism is also better

understood as an *alternative modernity*. It shares with mainstream modernity among other things the belief that research and knowledge are important for the development of human beings and society. But it was rejected and suppressed in the 17th century because the science it envisaged and tried to realize did not produce a strong enough predictive control over nature (cf. Foucault, 1994).

Romanticism itself was also neither anti-modern nor pre-modern, but alternative-modern. It was as committed to progress, development and evolution through science and technology as its rational Enlightenment brothers and sisters. The difference is that its vision of science and technology, and therefore also of progress and development, is based on *other* principles, ideals and basic assumptions. As every logician knows, basic assumptions are not provable in a logical deductive sense, because they constitute the very basis of all such proofs. They can, however, be *experienced* as true. But in the case of the Romantic worldview this presupposes a certain de-conditioning of our perceptual faculties. As we have seen, such de-conditioning or de-habituation of perception was a major concern of the Romantics.

This characterization of Romanticism goes also for Steiner's further, esoteric development of this Western cultural impulse into what he called Anthroposophy. It too represents an alternative modernity, based on a "spiritual" rather than a "materialistic" or reductionist science. It adheres to the Enlightenment ideal of individual *freedom*, but considers its nature and the possibility of its realization in another way (Steiner, 1977). It may also be pointed out that Steiner, like his Romantic forerunners, clearly saw the importance of the three social/political ideals of the French revolution: *freedom, equality* and "brotherhood" or *solidarity* (Steiner, 1985). It is obvious that these ideals have played a significant role in the development of modernity, and also that so far no political system has managed to realize a viable and balanced synthesis of all three of them.

The integral vision of four onto-anthropological levels and four "births"

In connection with Hacking's critique of social constructionism I suggested an onto-anthropological spectrum of four dimensions or types of phenomena (Figure 1 above). Anyone familiar with Steiner's anthropology and cosmology will recognize these four dimensions. In terms of anthropology, Steiner (drawing upon esoteric traditions) calls them physical body, etheric body, astral body and "I" (Steiner, 1987). However, one must remember that this is just a primary "classification" of the aspects or dimensions of human being, which Steiner further differentiates and refines in his books and lectures. Of all these "bodies" or dimensions it is only the physical body that is known to science today. There are, however, a few exceptions in philosophy and philosophical reflections on scientific findings, where something rather similar to what Steiner refers to as the etheric body shows up.

To begin with, Schickler (2005) points out that the basic dualism between mind and matter that has characterized Western thought since Descartes could be resolved if one recognized the existence of a third, intermediate substance. It was implicitly realized already by Kant that if "such a substance which mediates between matter and thinking beings [...] could become an object of regular empirical experience, then its implications for philosophy would be highly significant" (ibid., p. 124, note 14). German brain researcher Gerald Hüther (2005) provides a more recent example of how such a mediating substance can be understood. According to Hüther the remarkable characteristic of living organisms is not the complexity of their life processes, but the ability to *govern and link* all these processes, so that the organism is *maintained as a whole*, in spite of the fact that by the laws of physics and chemistry alone it should really disintegrate. Therefore, living organisms must be seen as structures (*Gebilde*) that are able *to use* matter in accordance with an inherited inner pattern, "that is, an *inner image* of how it must be or what it can become" (p. 33; my italics) ("also ein inneres Bild von dem, wie es sein müsste oder werden könnte"). This is very much in agreement with Steiner's alternative term for the etheric body: *Bildekräfteleib* (approx. "body of image-powers").

A similar notion is found in Sheldrake's (2006) relatively well-known ideas about morphogenetic and morphic fields. Morphogenetic fields are related to the biological world (and was suggested already in the 1920's, Sheldrake says), whereas morphic fields have a more general extension. Like Hüther, Sheldrake points to the necessary presence of an inner organising force or agency in living organisms. For instance, if the same genes are present in all cells irrespective of which organ they belong to, how can we explain that

cells develop differently in different organs? Sheldrake also refers to the mathematician René Thom, who has developed mathematical models for morphogenetic fields (Thom, 1983), in which the end points towards which living systems develop are called *attractors*. All morphic fields have attractors, Sheldrake claims, and he even identifies the force of these fields with “the force of *habit*” (p. 33; my italics). One kind of morphic field is what Sheldrake calls *perceptual* fields. These fields link us to our environment and to each other and extend far beyond the brain. They explain for instance why we sometimes can sense someone looking at us from the back (Sheldrake, 2005a, 2005b). They also form the basis of telepathy and telecommunication between pets and their owners. (Probably also between parents and their babies, we could add. This may have to do with etheric forces of animals being less corrupted by egotistical influences, according to Steiner, and this ought to apply also to babies and small children.) However, it should be noted that the concept of morphic fields does not explain how forms *arise*, only how they are transferred. (This is in line with the general esoteric idea, that higher forces “inform” the etheric body, which then transfers them to the physical level.)

Finally we can trace the idea of the etheric body in Deleuze’s notion of “a body without organs” (often shortened to BwO) (Kerslake, 2006). Deleuze borrowed this expression from the French poet and actor Antonin Artaud, who was strongly influenced by occult ideas. In one of his descriptions of the BwO, Deleuze draws upon an obscure work of D H Lawrence, in which the so-called subtle body (a common term in esoteric thought) is depicted as consisting of a “vital magnetism’ organised in dynamic polarities” (ibid., p. 172). Deleuze himself says the BwO “is an affective, intensive, anarchist body that consists solely of poles, zones, thresholds, and gradients. It is traversed by a powerful, non-organic vitality” (quoted in ibid., p. 172). The expression “non-organic vitality” is interesting in that it implies that life forces are not exclusive to biological organisms but have a wider, even cosmic extension – which is also in line with how Steiner describes the etheric realm. It may also be noted that Deleuze talks about “making” a BwO, as if it did not already exist as a dimension of human (and other) being. This is perhaps the result of Deleuze general emphasis on “becoming” rather than “being”. It can also be related to the *development* of the etheric body that is described in certain esoteric traditions, for instance in Tantra yoga (Woodroffe, 1974) – also hinted at by Deleuze in his recurring references to the “Tantric egg” (Kerslake, 2006).

From these admittedly sketchy accounts it can be seen that the *concept* of an etheric dimension to human being and the world is not completely out of reach to some present (but more or less marginalized) academic thought. It is also fairly clear that etheric processes may be influenced by social and cultural conditions, since they are not limited to the purely biological aspects of existence. Hence, what I referred to as life processes in Figure 1 above may to a certain extent be “socially constructed”. An interesting example of this are the so-called Sworn virgins of the Albanian highlands, who, in order to escape unwanted marriage, or as a result of blood feuds, turn themselves into men (dress like men, take men’s jobs etc). As a result, their breasts diminish and their physical appearance become more and more like that of a man. Many of them even stop menstruating after some time (see Wikipedia, “Sworn virgin”, and especially Elvira Dones’ documentary *Sworn virgins*, Dones Media LLC, released 2008).

Moving on to the so-called astral body, references to this or similar concepts are harder to find in academic literature. In its basic form, however, the idea is not strange because it simply refers to our inner, conscious or unconscious, psychological life: the continuous flux of mental representations, remembrances, plans for the future, dreams, phantasies, desires, fears, expectations... Neither does it take much serious self-observation to realize that there is a kind of topography – maybe even a typology – of this personal inner life, which is different from that of other people. In that sense, our inner life is organised like a “body”. (Deleuze also says somewhere that representations [conceptions, *Vorstellungen*] are bodies too.) A body does not have to be made up of physical matter. Even in higher mathematics one talks about bodies. However, the real problems with the notion of the astral body begin when one considers the claim made in esoteric traditions, that this body is “astral” because it is related to “the stars”, that is, to the planets and the cosmos. As far as I know, such an idea falls outside the range of any present day academic thought, philosophical or other. Be that as it may, it is clear that things like mental representations, desires and fears etc are influenced by our social and cultural environment, even more so than our bodily life processes. Hence, this onto-anthropological dimension is to a large extent “socially constructed”.

Regarding the fourth dimension, the “I” or the Self of human beings, the idea that this “innermost core” of the human person is of a purely spiritual nature, beyond all social constructions, today meets resistance on two academic frontlines: that of brain science and that of post-structuralist human and social science. The first reduces the self to some kind of epiphenomenon (at the most) of purely material brain processes. The second reduces it to a social or discursive construction that varies from context to context, without any essential identity. In answer to such reasoning, it may be said that 1) neither Steiner nor any other esoteric tradition denies that *for the normal state of consciousness* the brain is necessary in order to have a sense of “I” or personal identity; 2) to the extent that post-structural thinking argues for the *decentred* nature of the human “I”, it is in agreement with the Romantics (Bowie, 2003) and therefore, implicitly, also with Steiner (and other esoteric traditions). For Steiner, as well as for Jung (Lauer, 2002), the *real* “I” resides in the unconscious, beyond any processes of social construction. Our normal I-sense is a mere reflection of this spiritual reality, a reflection indeed produced by the brain. *This* sense of “I” is therefore also subject to various social and cultural processes. Finally, we must remember that there *are* philosophers and brain researchers who argue for a basically spiritual understanding of the human person and of the brain, for instance Spaemann (2006), Popper & Eccles (1998), and Beauregard & O’Leary (2007).

One basic idea in Steiner’s pedagogical anthropology is that these four dimensions of human ontology develop successively in four different “births”, with intervals of approximately seven years. At seven years of age, the etheric body of the child is “born” in the sense that it reaches a certain degree of autonomy from its environment. Some of its forces are also set free for more cognitive functions (see below). About the age of 14, the same happens to the astral body, which is related to the awakening of sexuality. Finally, at the age of about 21, a certain autonomy and maturity of the personality appears, expressing the “birth” of the individual Self. The birth of the etheric and the astral bodies are both accompanied by physiological changes (the change of teeth and puberty), but the birth of the “I” is not (at least not visibly). However, the achievement of legal autonomy has in many countries been found to be appropriate around the age of 20, which is an indication of a common intuition that something related to the capacity for autonomous judgment happens around this age.

The qualities and processes of growth and development taking place in these three seven-year-periods are very different in character. These differences have to be considered in education and in how the teacher relates to the children and youngsters in her care. But the scheme of development described here would not find an easy acceptance in educational theory today. The idea of seven-year-periods simply appears “too good to be true” as it were. It also smacks of the traditional idea of “stages” of development moving from “lower” to “higher”. In answer to these criticisms one could first point out that we are not talking about stages as much as of periods. Stages may imply moving from lower to higher levels, but periods do not. Furthermore, Steiner never meant his descriptions of child development to be exact pictures valid for all individual cases. They are more like ideal sketches of very shifting empirical realities; cf. the example of puberty above. The developmental scheme must not be taken as an absolute truth; it is more like *a virtual pattern continually distorted by actuality*, to borrow some terms from Deleuze – who, by the way, considers the virtual and the actual to be *equally real*.

The integration of fact and myth: the example of the change of teeth

Critics of Steiner’s educational thinking sometimes claim that it represents a fall back to pre-modern forms of thought, or to a kind of objectivistic naturalism that have not assimilated the modern insights of constructivist epistemology. I have tried to show that such criticisms of *Steiner* are not valid. They may however be valid for some of his followers (Kiersch, 2010). In this section I will try to illustrate how Steiner’s pedagogical anthropology goes beyond both the naturalistic limitation to mere facts and the pre-modern forms of mythical thinking. It does so not by denying or rejecting them, but by *integrating* them into an *imaginal vision* (based on “imagination” as a higher form of perception). I believe that this is the only way to realize Rittelmeyer’s (2012) call for a pedagogical anthropology that not only *talks* about the significance of the body in learning but also use modern instruments to make clear exactly *how* spiritual and psychic processes express themselves in the body, and how they are *essential* for it. Considering that such spiritual and

psychic processes are to a great extent *unconscious*, they cannot be grasped in purely rational concepts: they have to be poetized. Such poetizing encompasses all the four onto-anthropological dimensions. It means “to think in sketches” (Schuback, 2011; see further below), not in absolute truths.

For Steiner it is highly significant that a child becomes “ready for school” around the age of seven, because this readiness is connected to the completion of the change of teeth.

The organic forces that develop the new set of teeth are “set free” around this age. Where do they go then? Nothing in nature ever completely disappears, it is only transformed. We do not know these forces scientifically, but clairvoyant people like Steiner claim to be able to experience them and perhaps human beings in ancient times had an instinctive knowledge of them, expressed in myths and symbols. This provides a basis for their poetization. To begin with, the substance of teeth is very similar to that of horns. It has been noted that animals in which the canine teeth are retarded/reduced develop horns instead (Portmann, 1982). The forces bringing forth teeth and horns seem to have a hardening, crystallizing function, bringing organic matter into a purely physical, crystal-like form of existence. Looking at ancient myths we find that horns are actually associated with *wisdom* and *power* (Biedermann, 1989; Eliot, 1994, p 203f). Now Steiner claims that the liberation of the organic forces from their work of growing new teeth means that the child is ready for school learning, because these forces are now available for the further development of *memory* and more precisely depicted conscious *conceptions*. Such mental capacities are obviously related to wisdom, or at least to its beginning. A certain mental power or energy is also needed for them to work. If school learning is begun before these (actually etheric) forces are set free, it affects the development of inner organs in a negative way and may even have consequences for health in adult life (cf. the reference to Kern & Friedman above).

In this context the so-called wisdom teeth are highly interesting. The expression “wisdom teeth” is similar in many languages all over the world. Already Hippocrates called them *sophronisteres*, which is related to *phronesis*, meaning practical wisdom. They appear between 16 and 25 years of age, if at all (see <http://www.wisegeek.com/why-are-the-back-teeth-called-wisdom-teeth.htm>; accessed 2012-09-01) Hence, the organic growth that produced such teeth seems to form an additional “quantum” of etheric forces set free for inner soul activity – which perhaps is why they have been related to wisdom.¹³

This is a small and rough sketch of how fact and myth can be integrated into a holistic vision of the relation between soul (cognition, memory) and body (formation of teeth). This sketch can most probably be further developed and expanded, and similar attempts can be made with other of the many “strange claims” Steiner (1932) makes in his pedagogical anthropology (for instance that the most important thing the child has to learn in the first years of school is *to breathe*). These “claims” are not to be taken literally, according to their “information”. The reader of an informative text does not have to develop any *new concepts*, but the reader of poetized sketches or symbols has to do so. Such reading must therefore be a kind of meditation (Kühlewind, 2008). The reason is that the translation of spiritual experiences and insights into logical descriptions is somewhat like breaking off stones from beautiful rock formations and build houses of them (Steiner, 1962). However, beyond the logical constructs the real content can be intuited.

To think in sketches

The “crystallizing” character of the forces forming the teeth are transformed into the soul’s ability to form more precise conceptions; that is, the thoughts of the child gain an increased ability to *come into form*. Interestingly enough, this is a process that is very significant for modern hermeneutic philosophy. Brazilian born philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, whom I have already referred to, describes how philosophy today is leaving traditional forms of representational rationality for the “intensity in a *coming into form*” (2011, p. 28; italics in original; my transl.). There is a turn away from the relative rigidity of *forms* of thought towards the *movement* of thinking. Philosophy in this new mode moves in living, flexible concepts. If philosophy accomplishes this “turn” it dissolves the traditional dichotomy between *Logos* and *Mythos*,

13. There is even an extremely rarely occurring possibility of growing a *third* set of teeth. It is said of Hercules, half-god and half-man, that he did so, but apparently it is not only a mythical event (Samson, 1939).

between abstraction and fiction, which has bereaved philosophy of imagination, and imaginative fiction of conceptual thought (ibid., p. 31). Schuback takes up Schelling's Romantic philosophy as an attempt in this direction, finding in his book *Clara* clear expressions of what it means to understand philosophy as imaginative thinking (the name *Clara* possibly hints at *clairvoyance*). She denotes this mode of philosophy as thinking in "sketches". But the sketch is here not understood as a mere first step towards a more complete picture. Sketches have an intrinsic value in that they make visible a kind of search. *A sketch is a search for a way of relating to the depths of the world.*

A sketch breaks through like a lightning, not because it displays quick movements and lines but because it puts forth contradictory movements, simultaneous densifications and compressions, collections and distinctions. (Schuback, 2011, p. 174)

The lightning quality of sketched images belongs also to the imaginative images of poetry and poetic philosophy. In such philosophy, ideas are not made up of clearly determined and defined concepts, related to each other in logical, non-contradictory ways. Instead they display "contradictory movements" and simultaneous distinctions and compressions. As Schuback explains (ibid., p. 174f) (drawing upon the writings of the artist Paul Klee), this thinking in sketches is further related to "the mysterious transition from thought to text" – a transition that Steiner often referred to as particularly difficult when trying to give verbal expressions to higher, imaginative perceptions and cognitions. The movement from thought to text is again a "coming into form". All this comes very close to the kind of renewal of philosophy that Steiner called for in his time, which he described as the assimilation and experience of (etheric) life forces in the thinking activity, thereby opening up for imaginative cognition (see Steiner, 1999a, p. 69ff).

In education, Gough (2011) and Semetsky (2011) give voice to similar attempts to renew our theoretical activities through what Gough calls a "*conceptually charged use of the imagination*" (ibid., p. xi; my italics). Semetsky for her part draws upon Henri Corbin's esoteric notion of the *Imaginal* world:

Developing the creative and active imagination becomes the soul's inner means for achieving spiritual gnosis, which exceeds the factual knowledge obtained by modernity's 'scientific method' that leaves no room for imagination. It is our cognitive function as *enriched* with the three I's of imagination, insight and intuition that provides access to the *Imaginal* world... (ibid., p. 252; italics in original)

The kind of knowledge achieved in these ways, a "gnosis" or "knowledge by analogy", does not claim to establish one single scientific truth about things, but results in a plurality of diverse meanings and values embedded in the life of practical experience in different contexts. Semetsky quotes Jungian psychologist James Hillman saying that an image itself is "the true iconoclast [...] which explodes [with plural] allegorical meanings, releasing startling new insights" (ibid., p. 258). Again, one is reminded of Steiner when he says about the science of the spirit that he tried to develop, that its concepts should not be taken as "schemas and paradigms" but that in each concept must be sensed "something that blows up the word and the very idea itself, something that can at most flow out into the polysemic of pictures" (1999b, p. 57) ("etwas empfinden [...] was das Wort, was die Idee selbst zersprengen will, was höchsten in die Vieldeutigkeit der Bilder ausfließen kann").

The spiritual significance of childhood

The American Transcendentalists

So far my philosophical re-contextualization of Steiner's thinking has drawn only upon European thinkers. Therefore, in accord with what was said in the previous section, let me just briefly point to another formulation of a holistic, imaginal vision of childhood and education, derived from Ralph Emerson, Henry Thoreau and other so-called Transcendentalists in the USA and described by Miller (2011) (although Emerson, Thoreau *et al* did not call *themselves* Transcendentalists, the label was stamped on them by others). These American Romantics incorporate elements from Hinduism and Buddhism as well as from German Romanticism. They also have a common core of esoteric philosophy that strives towards a "universal truth" beyond sense perception, but intuited in contemplation. They emphasised the education of the whole child

– body, mind, soul and spirit. Education should be for self-knowledge, wisdom, and happiness. The personal presence of the teacher is of paramount significance. Their pedagogical methods include sensory observation, imagination, journal and autobiographic writing. Much of this is very similar to what Steiner recommended in his pedagogical lectures.

Here I would like to emphasise one particular idea expressed by Emerson in his famous essay “Nature” from 1836 (echoing Goethe’s well-known poem on the same theme) (Emerson, 1971). Emerson pictures the human being as “a god in ruins” and says the world would be insane if not kept in check by two things: death and infancy. Infancy he describes as “*the perpetual Messiah*, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise” (p. 42; my italics). It is as if without the vulnerability of the newborn child and the certainty of their future death, human beings would lose all restraints on their inherent, potential madness (which manifests strongly enough even so). The child is the sign, or the symbol, that *everything could be different*. Associated with the idea of the plasticity of childhood referred to above, it is as if children represent a possible *metanoia*: a turning of the mind and heart towards inner change and development.

Child theology

In the Christian tradition the link between children and spirituality has clear roots in the New Testament, which has recently given rise to so-called Child Theology (CT) (Mountain, 2011). CT is a theological enquiry into the enacted parable in Matthew 18:1-5 (also Matt. 11:25 and 21:12-16). What does it mean when Jesus puts a child “in their midst” as an answer to the disciples’ question about who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? This story is like a seed that has remained largely dormant in the Holy Script, but is now perhaps ready to burst and grow. The conditions pointed to by Kennedy (2006b), related to our relatively recent psychological recognition of “the child within” and its significance for adult maturity, may contribute to this growth. CT asks what we can learn from children; how we can be like a child and how to connect with the child within. It examines the spiritual qualities of childhood in order to uncover ways to live as mature adults.

The appearance of a perspective like child theology may be “a sign of our evolving consciousness” (Mountain, 2011, p. 263). The evolution of human consciousness is a theme of rare occurrence in educational discourse (Gidley, 2007). From the Romantic point of view, as well as from the perspective of Steiner education, it is however of basic significance. This evolution must involve the realization of new values and qualities of life, which an inquiry like child theology may help to uncover. Mountain (2011) identifies five such life qualities:

- 1) Living based in *relationship*, including relation to ones own inner self. This presumably also includes a conscious relation to “the child within”.
- 2) Living in *vulnerability*. A child learning to walk gives us an important lesson: to accept vulnerability and failure, but to never give up.
- 3) Life as an *unknown becoming*. “It does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2). We should never rest in the belief that we have “arrived”.
- 4) Living in *imagination, creativity* and *play*. Here it may be added that the prevalent association of childhood with creativity is a typical inheritance from Romanticism and has been viewed with scepticism by present day cognitive psychologists, who maintain that the creativity of children is confused with behaviour that does not follow socially established norms and rules due to lack of knowledge (Glaveanu, 2011). To this one may answer that surely it is a sign of creativity that children are able to behave this way *in spite of* lacking such knowledge.
- 5) Living in *openness and hope*. The association of these qualities with childhood is again an inheritance from the Romantics and has been criticized as an idealisation contradicted by many empirical facts (Bradley, 1989). Such criticisms must be kept in mind. But one must also understand that the Romantics were pointing to an inner soul quality that is strongly present in children under normal conditions but which can certainly be prevented to manifest under unfavourable ones.

Steiner's view of the spiritual forces of childhood

The notion of the infant as the “perpetual Messiah” and the reflections of Child Theology are very much in line with Steiner’s view of the spiritual significance of childhood. Similar to Schiller’s claim that children are “what we should become once more”, Steiner (1989) claims that in order to embark on spiritual development in adult life we must consciously appeal to the forces at work in us during the first three years of our life. These forces are Christ-forces and the first three years of childhood mirror the three years that the Christ-spirit incarnated in the body of Jesus. Emerson’s “perpetual Messiah” is therefore “a perpetual reminder of the higher self” (Moore, 1991, p. xii). To understand the developmental forces at work in early childhood means to understand the Christ. The Christ-forces are the basis of what has been called the “plasticity of childhood”. *Christ is an eternal “becoming-child” of immense intensity.* Steiner even claims that the plasticity of the brain of Jesus Christ was such that its structure was continually changing, in harmony with the constellations of the planets and the stars.

That we have to call upon the Christ-forces for our inner development does not, however, mean that we have to become Christians in the conventional or traditional sense. From Steiner’s point of view, all this has nothing to do with nominalistic belief-systems, but with the *essence* of spiritual realities. This is clear from the following quote:

Imagine that you were on an island where there were as yet no scriptures about the mystery of Golgotha: if people there worked in such a way that they through their spiritual life in full consciousness took in the power of early childhood all the way up to old age, then they would be Christians in the true sense. (1989, p. 96)

Whether a child is born in a Christian, a Muslim or any other religious community makes no difference, it is still the same spiritual forces at work in its being that can be appealed to by the adults around it, under whatever name and form they find most inspiring. This is the universal spiritual significance of childhood.

Conclusion

From all of the above it is obvious that a philosophy of the human being, as well as a philosophy of childhood, that tries to incorporate both the facts of empirical anthropology and the imaginal cognitions of Anthroposophy and similar approaches can hardly be presented as the logical system of concepts that is commonly expected of a scientific theory. This of course does not mean that rigorous scientific research about children is useless. On the contrary, the facts produced by such research are essential for the imaginal poetizations that try to capture all the onto-anthropological dimensions described above.

All talk about children’s needs imply conceptions of human nature and development (Katz, 1996), and how can we educate without such talk? But the reductionist character of mainstream empirical research is rarely enough to satisfy the practical needs of teachers (Zimiles, 2000). Education is therefore virtually impossible without some general “grand narrative” of children’s nature and development (Göppel, 1997; Ullrich, 1999) – even if it is only the simple scheme of “school, vocational education, work, retirement, death” (“Schule, Ausbildung, Arbeit, Rente, Tod”), expressed by the German school shooter Sebastian Bosse in his suicide letter published on the Internet. (It is surprising that this letter has not been subjected to closer analyses from educational points of view.)

Within other academic fields new conceptions are presently emerging as “grand theories” of human development, and therefore implicitly also of child development. They consist mainly of speculations based on Neo-Darwinism and are fervently propagated by the prophets of the global church of scientific materialism, such as Richard Dawkins (1996) and his colleagues. Thus, if education does not engage in the work of formulating “grand theories” of human nature and development, others will not hesitate to do it – are in fact already doing it. Do educationalists really want to voluntarily disarm themselves in this field of thought?

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