



The Self as Activity

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The self is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon that is often described through its subcomponents (e.g., self-control, self-esteem, self-compassion). The entity that unifies these subcomponents is more elusive and difficult to access, at least with standard psychological methods. In the current inquiry we set out to illuminate and extend the understanding of the self by exploring the differentiation of the self as a “content” versus a “process” (e.g., self-schema vs. self-activity). We also differentiate the “self” from the “I,” exploring characteristics of a 3rd- versus a 1st-person perspective to this core psychological entity. We pursue an empirical 1st-person inquiry that is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on concepts from both psychology and religious studies (in particular the “essential” or “core” self in psychology, as well as the “real” or “ideal” self in religious studies in the form of the “I Am” statements in the Gospels). Our approach illustrates how a consideration of phenomenological, 1st-person qualities of selfhood allows for an enriched, empirically based understanding of crucially important but subtle dimensions of I-ness that remain inaccessible to 3rd-person exploration.

Keywords: core self, first-person research, qualitative studies, phenomenological inquiry, religious studies

Thank you for speaking to the one

I can become. (Matthews, 2011, p. 70)

The self is a heterogeneous concept that is often researched through its subcomponents—as is evident in the widespread use of compound concepts such as “self-control,” “self-esteem,” “self-regulation,” and “self-awareness.” An understanding of the entity unifying these subcomponents remains elusive (cf. Baumeister, 1998; Klein, 2014; Weger, Meyer, & Wagemann, 2016). In the present article, we sought to distinguish between a representational or content-based aspect of the self on the one hand and a “process” or “activity component” of the self on the other. Our core aim was to conduct a first-person phenomenological inquiry into the processual nature of the self that we suspected might also raise an awareness of the entity unifying the different facets of the self: a Gestaltlike whole that cannot be identified in its individual parts but comes together as an entity in our active experiencing. We discuss this possibility toward the end of our article. The distinction between a process and a content side of the self is an atypical differentiation within the social psychology literature, where, his-

torically, other distinctions have been made, for instance that between a personal and a social self (for overviews, see Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017; Knez, 2016). We do not seek to overcome or amend such classifications and instead wish to focus on the fact that there is a fundamental aspect of the self that manifests itself in the capacity to initiate activity rather than to merely reflect on it.

We begin our inquiry by pointing out one of the more distinct skills of the human self—namely, the capacity of thinking—and the important observation that within thinking a distinction can be made between an activity (or process) and a content (or result; see, e.g., White, 1988; Ziegler & Weger, 2018). The result component is composed of the contents of consciousness that are readily accessible to ongoing mental life and (more or less reliably) to memory. The process component that yields these contents or concepts is more elusive, in part because mental activity is often so routine and automatized that the process is hardly noticeable. Only in rare circumstances do we become aware of the process—for instance when we cannot identify a scene or when a content of memory does not come to mind and we engage in a difficult recall process. In these cases, the process or activity side is artificially elongated. People typically experience this phase as exhausting and report feeling unsafe, lost, disoriented, because they are overwhelmed by a disorganized input or a task that is beyond their current level of mastery. But it is important to bear in mind that a process inevitably precedes the emergence of a concept—and not only in the case of lost memories but in all cases of psychological processing where we are dealing with contents of consciousness—such as object recognition, mental imagery, and many more (cf. Witzmann, 1983; Ziegler & Weger, 2018).

More generally, the distinction between a content or result and a process or activity is unique not only to thinking but to many

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psychological phenomena, including—and this is important in the context of the current inquiry—the self. What is more, we posit that much of the contemporary psychology of the self deals with content or result rather than process or activity—and we suspect that this is part of the reason why subcomponents of the self are so prominently featured in psychology whereas the entity that unifies these subcomponents remains elusive. We speculate that this integrating entity manifests itself as a process or activity rather than a content and hence does not appear in mental life in the same way in which the more prominent contents of consciousness do. We acknowledge that process accounts of the self certainly do exist in the literature, but they are typically anchored in philosophical or phenomenological approaches and have rarely been made accessible to empirical explorations that would allow for a methodological roadmap to scrutinize this facet of I-ness (for an overview, cf. Ryan & Rigby, 2015). This limitation is of course partly because conventional empirical exploration (e.g., in the sense of third-person experimentation) is difficult or impossible to implement regarding many such process-based conceptions of self—and therefore a different methodological approach is needed.

The existing processual accounts of this more philosophical tradition date back at least as far as the German idealists Fichte and Hegel, who understood the self in a processual way (cf. Sparby, 2018). But there are also contemporaries such as Brian O'Shaughnessy, Shaun Gallagher, and Evan Thompson who point to the processual character of the self. Evan Thompson, in his volume *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, for instance, pointed out that “the central idea of this book is that the self is a process, not a thing or an entity” (Thompson, 2017, p. XXXI). Gallagher (2000) referred to the role of narrative processes in establishing the self; O'Shaughnessy (2000) described experiences in general—and self-consciousness in particular—as processes that are in permanent flow and under constant renewal and construction.

In empirical psychology, by contrast, the focus of research regarding the self is on the content side of the self. This focus is particularly evident in the concept of the self-schema that can be assessed, for instance, using the 20 statements test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). In this test, a person lists a range of attributes that characterize her (e.g., I am . . . a student, a biologist, a citizen of Germany). The self-characterizations thus obtained, we posit, are attributes that have the character of results; they capture what someone has become (what is called the self-schema). In addition to these attributes, there is that which we still *can* become—a source or potential that can turn into all of these attributes (and presumably many more) because we are not limited to one particular set of roles or characteristics that are part of our current self-schema. This source or potential of what still can become precedes particular instantiations of a set of attributes, and it is this potential—the process as opposed to the content side, as we propose to call it—that we are particularly interested in, in this article.

As indicated, the psychology of the self is not limited to aspects surrounding the resultant nature of the self-concept. There are many other phenomena that tap into the process side—for instance, self-regulation, self-construction, self-compassion, and many more. Note, however, that the psychological instruments that we are using to study these yield *results*—that is, contents—that provide samples (often even quite fine grained ones) of a correlated process, not the psychological process *in actu*. With online

physiological measures such as functional magnetic resonance imaging or electroencephalography, for instance, one gains information about the physiological correlates of mental processes, not the mental processes as such. Although a phenomenon such as self-regulation is a process-aspect of the self, the way it is typically studied (namely, by noting instantiations of some sort of behavioral or physiological performance in the form of a corresponding dependent variable) inevitably yields only moments or samples of a process that can be put together in the observer's thinking only by way of inference. This is a debate of its own, resulting from the very nature (reflective or outwardly observing) of the scientific process in the natural sciences. We did not seek to address this issue in depth here and instead refer the interested reader to the further literature (e.g., Weger, Wagemann, & Meyer, 2018b; Ziegler & Weger, 2018).

As indicated, we began to realize that the source of activity or the “potential that can become” does manifest itself in the different contents or attributes and must hence be of quite a universal character, given that as individuals, each with a biography of our own, we have taken on some roles but left many others unrealized. Without doubt, studies exist that do address this universal character of the self, at least since the onset of humanistic psychology and Jung's concept of the “real” or “ideal” self (cf. also the terms *essential self* or *authentic self*; e.g., Alcaro, Carta, & Panksepp, 2017; De Freitas, & Cikara, 2018; Jung, 1969; Nielsen, 2018; for an overview, see Strohming, Knobe, & Newmann, 2017). However, these studies rarely address the processual or activity component of the self *in actu* in an empirical manner (and note that by speaking of “empirical” we do not refer to only the standard of experimentation; by empirical we mean a manner of systematically going beyond ad hoc, anecdotal evidence, for instance by reobserving findings of one's own experience or progressively differentiating them in different contextual settings). Instead, those studies are anchored in a more reflective, philosophical tradition that one may take for granted—or not.

Outside psychology, the universal potentiality of the self is addressed, for instance, in the field of religious studies, where this universal potentiality resonates through a number of distinct characterizations, in particular the so-called “I Am” statements in the Christian Gospels, in which the processual nature of the self manifests itself in an unusual but highly significant way, as we illustrate shortly. Both authors have a background in the latter context, and we hence decided to include this realm in our inquiry in a systematic, empirical manner to integrate what both disciplines—psychology and religious studies—have to say about the process side of the self. Whereas the choice of *topic* was informed by our specific interest and orientation, our choice of *method* was informed by our academic background—more specifically, by our psychological background.

The Process Side of the Self in Psychology

The process side of the self is by no means completely absent from psychological inquiry. But processes are typically approached from the perspective of third-person observation, which means that data of some sort are obtained and recorded, which in turn implies that we are working with a representational format of the process—and in fact from the very beginning mostly with a symbolic representational format (data are symbolic representa-

tions) from which the activity or process has to be inferred. The situation is of course somewhat different in the realm of qualitative research: Questionnaires, think-aloud techniques, or descriptive experience sampling methods (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2008; van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994; cf. Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Döring & Bortz, 2015) are administered to allow participants to explore their inner life in a principled manner, and we would argue that this is an important step toward addressing the process—activity side of the self. But note that this is only part of the story—and the reason for this is twofold. One is that in qualitative research there is still a regular distinction between the participant and the experimenter (Hackert & Weger, 2018). The participant may observe a process—but then has to translate it into a symbolic representation in one way or another to make it available to the experimenter. In this sense, the process may be immediately accessible to the participant, but only indirectly accessible to the researcher—unless she reexperiences the process for herself. The subject—object (or participant—researcher) gap prevents an inquiry into the immediately available processual nature of a qualitative phenomenon *in actu*. There is another, related reason for the partialness of these approaches in this particular setting: Due to the subject—object distinction, for the most part the participant conducts a spontaneous, ad hoc exploration of her inner life, whereas we claim that the process—activity side is often so elusive that it is really accessible to only a principled and research-led manner of exploration. This cannot be accomplished by a naïve participant—instead, a form of training in first-person inquiry is necessary (Hackert & Weger, 2018). When such training in first-person observation is provided, the process side can indeed be scrutinized more deliberately (cf. Petitmengin, Remillieux, Cahour, & Carter-Thomas, 2013; for further discussions of the challenges and opportunities of first-person research in psychology, see Anderson, 2018; Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, 2015b).

In the current project we sought to borrow from the psychological toolbox and use one such first-person mode of research that we sought to methodologically advance and cultivate to inquire into the process side of the self—namely, first-person phenomenology, which we have used in a number of different contexts (e.g., Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, 2015b; Weger et al., 2016). In one particular study (Weger et al., 2016), to which we here refer, we focused on a specific theme of inquiry—typically a word or a short series of words—and scrutinized our experiences in concentrating on these words. It consisted of a successive penetration through layers of meaning into what we described as a word's conceptual core. This process of inquiry through layers of activity in dealing with a word's meaning, in turn, informed us about layers of activity of the self: In pursuing different types and intensities of thinking activity, we detected different facets in experiencing the self (Weger et al., 2016). In our current study, we sought to further build on this approach, also extending it in that we sought to take the more universal character and potentiality of the self into account.

At this point we would like to introduce an important differentiation in terminology. We hope that the distinction between content and process is by now sufficiently clear. We have likewise introduced the distinction between third- and first-person observation and argued that third-person exploration is useful in researching the content aspect of the self—at least that part of the content that can be shared and communicated and expressed in a symbolic

manner (e.g., in words), whereas we described the process component *in actu* as the uniquely immediate or immersive facet of the experience, which is not accessible to outside (third-person) observation. It is accessible to only first-person inquiry. To further emphasize this difference between a third- and a first-person approach, in particular with respect to the self, we wish to use a further terminological distinction: speaking about the “self” when we refer to the content aspect (i.e., that which can be conveyed in third-person inquiry) and about the “I” or the “I-self” (cf. Ryan & Rigby, 2015) when we refer to the process or activity (i.e., the uniquely immediate, immanent or immersive aspect, which cannot be conveyed to third-person inquiry and is accessible to only first-person research). In academic psychology, the “self” is the more conventional term, perhaps because it is so easily accessible to both first- and third-person inquiry (one can speak not only of “myself” but also of “herself” or “himself”; Weger et al., 2016). But the term *I* can be used in reference to only a single entity—namely, the speaker *in persona* (cf. Jung, 1969, for a differently connotated juxtaposition of the terms *I* and *self*). To highlight this inwardly directed approach—a precondition for acquainting oneself with the process or activity side—we refer to this exclusively first-person dimension of the self as the “I.” The self is that which has condensed into a representational format and can be communicated in words and symbols and is accessible to third-person research—that which “I have become.” The process or activity is that which has not yet condensed into a resultlike format but is more adequately captured in the uniquely immediate and immersive quality, the currently unfolding here and now of the “I am” with its potential toward that which still “can become” (Weger, 2017). We wish to characterize this difference in somewhat more detail using the following example. As an illustration of the representational format—the self—consider the difference we can experience in our own behavior when we are with colleagues as opposed to with family members. The two situations involve different expectations—and in turn trigger different behaviors. In social-psychological terms, it is a type of categorization or even self-categorization that puts me into a particular “role”—an organizing pattern of that which one has become. This we would call the content or result aspect of the self. In contrast, consider a scenario where you have a deep friendship with—or love for—a profoundly respected other and the relationship challenges you to move a step up to a new level of encounter in which you wish to meet the other. It allows you to grow beyond your current level of experiencing and behaving—you are being mildly challenged to arouse something inside yourself that you are striving for and that is ready to blossom, and in being challenged, your readiness is just at the right threshold such that a cycle of challenge and mastery sets in that allows you to gravitate up toward a new level of being. This cycle of metamorphosis, which has not yet reached a destination point but is an evolution in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2017) is the process-aspect of the “I am.” It continuously crystallizes into patterns (i.e., contents of the self) as we are rehearsing a particular behavior or role—but that which precedes these crystallizations and is still in evolution is what we call the “process” or “activity” of the I. It has a uniquely immediate or immersive character that we cannot “think about” (the moment we think about it we are already out of the process and it tends to become a facet of the self)—we can only “think from within” it. This process side of the “I am” must be of a broader potentiality for it to be able to manifest

itself in the range of possible instantiations or contents that it can adopt over the course of a biography. This “I am”—in contrast to that which the self “has become”—is the focus of our inquiry. It is of a universal and yet fluent, elusive nature, and we were hence searching for conceptual guides or signposts that could inform and enrich our understanding of this side of the “I am.” As indicated, due to our own background and expertise, we were looking for pointers in this direction in the field of religious studies.

The Process Side of the Self in Religious Studies and Studies in Spirituality

The question about the process or activity side of the I—the currently unfolding character of the “I am” as opposed to the representational (memory-based) nature of what the self “has become”—is of importance to different cultural and spiritual-religious contexts. In such spiritual-religious settings, a curious and important question regarding the “I am” emerges: How can this “I am”—which we typically experience as an undeniable individual center or impulse—remain legitimate within the context of a religious-spiritual orientation in which people strive toward uniting with a universal divine, that is, the very opposite of an individual “I am”? Does uniting with a divine not mean giving up one’s own individuality? Would a religious orientation that seeks to unite with a universal divine thus not be akin to prompting people to give up their own individual “I am”—and can it really be the ultimate destination of a religious outlook to strive toward giving up the diversity of individual instances of an “I am,” including one’s own? Whereas in some Buddhist traditions the seeming paradox is solved via the concepts of nirvana and nonself (Siderits, 2015), the issue finds a remarkable culmination and turning point in Christianity where the Christ Being introduces himself as the representative of the “I Am” (“I Am the I Am”—see later). More specifically, he characterizes himself in a number of “I Am” statements that we speculate might be something of an ocular toward the process-activity side of the self: Scholars have pointed to the significance of the Christ Being as the representative of the I-Am impulse (e.g., Jung, 1969; Steiner, 2010), and we take his core “I Am” statements as conceptual guides or signposts in the sense mentioned earlier to explore the process-activity character of the I. The “I Am” statements come in two variants—namely, in an absolute and in a predicative one (Rose, 2013; Söding, 2018), and we wish to briefly illustrate them prior to coming to our phenomenological first-person inquiry.

The “I Am” in Its Absolute Sense

The precursor to the absolute “I Am” statements in the New Testament actually occurs at the beginning of the Old Testament, where a remarkable scene evolves: The ancient God Jehovah sends the early prophet Moses on a mission to save the people of Israel from slavery. When Moses, confused and not familiar with the manner he is being spoken to, inquires who is speaking to him (so he can tell his people who it is who has sent him on this mission), Jehovah answers: “I Am the I Am” and emphasizes further “Say this to the people of Israel, I Am has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14). This type of absolute statement is repeated a number of times in the New Testament, for instance in John 18:5, where Christ asks the guards whom they are looking for and a brief

dialogue ensues: “They answered him *Jesus of Nazareth*. He speaks to them I Am” (additional absolute statements of this kind can be found in John 6:20, 8:24, 8:58, 13:19, 18:6, 18:8, according to Söding, 2018).

Without doubt, the wording of these absolute statements appears odd. Usually, “I am . . .” is the beginning of a predicative qualification in which a speaker further characterizes himself in the sense of “I am this or I am that. . .” This is not the case in these absolute statements, however. In the dialogue with the guards, the response “I Am” can in principle be—and often actually is—translated as “I am he,” which would solve this confusion (cf. Just, 2012). However, the Greek original *ἐγώ εἰμι* (ego eimi) actually requires a predicative qualification, which is not added in this or in the other occasions where the *ἐγώ εἰμι* is used in its absolute sense (Rose, 2013). It is hence more accurate to translate it as just “I Am” (see, e.g., Ogilvie, 2012). In these statements, then, the “I am” lacks its predicate—it is as though the qualification ends up hanging in the air—the reader feels momentarily left in limbo and cannot achieve cognitive closure. This manner of characterization does not yield contents or pictures that could be fixated or represented in clear-cut concepts. Instead the reader is momentarily floating in a seemingly self-circular loop—and in contrast to the content aspect, this variant of the “I Am” words requires a more fluent thinking that hence appears to voice the processual or activity character. These sentences are complemented by another type of “I Am” statements where the usual predicative characterization is used—the predicative “I Am” statements.

The “I Am” in Its Predicative Sense

In John’s Gospel there are seven such predicative statements in which Christ describes himself in noteworthy phrases. In the literature, these phrases are typically quoted and discussed on their own. But each of them is followed by an afterclause that we consider to be of equal importance. Whereas the first or main clause is stated in a straightforward, unconditional way, the second clause is often framed in a quasi-conditional manner (e.g., “he who . . .”) and perhaps captures what can be described as the more human perspective on what is rendered from the divine point of view in the main sentence. The statement we focused on in our inquiry was one that we considered to have a close link to the realm of research and science (particularly the effort to shed light on something), namely: “I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12, as quoted from Just, 2012).

On first reading, this and the other sentences appear difficult to access, and prior to engaging in our first-person exercise we hence decided it would be necessary to engage with them in a more reflective or hermeneutic manner to be certain that we would be able to identify with them. In doing so, we did not set out to explore whether this and the other sentences are historically accurate or not. We did not seek to prove or disprove them. Instead, in the reflective exercise (Part 1, see later) the goal was merely to approach their meaning with our conventional manner of understanding and thereby to find out whether we deemed it appropriate to more fully immerse ourselves in them in our phenomenological exercise (Part 2, see later). For instance, our core verse—“I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”—seems to request a type of

obedience or readiness to follow that which we were suspicious about. This is why the phenomenological part is preceded by the hermeneutical part—so that we could “test the waters” and be certain it felt safe and appropriate to advance from merely reflecting about (Part 1) to immersing ourselves (Part 2) in these sentences in a more meditative manner. Part 1 was conducted prior to or in parallel with Part 2 and mostly by Ulrich Weger, whereas Klaus Herbig contributed to it later on. We present the results of the hermeneutic part here to begin with because they provide a more straightforward manner of accessing the theme.

Part 1: Reflective Exercise

As described, we limited our inquiry to John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” To begin with, it initially appeared anachronistic to be asked to follow someone; but we soon realized it was not worded or framed as a request but as an offer or invitation or even a mere description (“he who follows me . . .”). In approaching this statement, we began by taking note of the people (e.g., PhD supervisor) or the principles (e.g., scientific paradigms) that we typically follow—and in becoming aware that there is a whole range of such people or principles that we readily and naturally follow, it appeared more acceptable to deal with this particular statement and make it the subject of our inquiry.

We next asked ourselves what is special about the light metaphor. Light implies a number of unusual characteristics: It becomes visible only when shining upon someone or something else (in space or in a vacuum, light is invisible). Light shines upon everything and does not distinguish between instances of different categories. It uncovers aspects that are not noticeable in darkness, and it engenders warmth in what it shines upon. The main phrase “I am the light of the world” initially appeared to be a typical content rather than a process description because it implies a state of being; but this state of being seems to go beyond the typical content nature because of its omnipresence and universality and because light does not seem to have a static (material) reality of its own. Although we had briefly hypothesized that the predicative “I am” statements would be instances of the content side of the “I am,” whereas the absolute “I am” statements would be instances of the process side of the “I am,” it quickly became apparent that such a strict distinction could not be maintained.

There was also a paradox. As noted, we are invited to *follow* the light. At the same time, light is the prototypical instance of something that is around us no matter where we are (unless we are in a closed space or the like). We do not need to go to the top of a mountain or travel to a sacred place to encounter it; rather, it meets us wherever we are—and there is thus no need to *follow* someone or something at all in the traditional sense of the light metaphor. Who or what, then, is it that we are meant to “follow” on the one hand—and who at the same time comes to us or is already with or even within us? Recall that the “I” is the only word that is exclusively self-reflexive—every speaker uses it for a different point of reference—and a point of reference that comes from inside, not from outside. What is more, in focusing and reflecting on the “I am” in the earlier statement, one notices that it is difficult to continue to engage attention on an external entity. Instead, because the “I” is so prototypically self-reflexive, one keeps referring back to one’s own “I am.” Here we encounter the

conundrum introduced earlier: Are we to follow the individual “I Am” on the outside, or the inside? Is this individual “I am” on the inside the port of entry to an understanding of the universal “I Am” on the outside? Or is the “I am” on the inside the same (at least in potential) as the “I Am” on the outside? How do the two link up?

In working on this question, we came across a geometrical exercise that provided a clue to linking up the inside with the outside. It was not part of our introspective inquiry, but because it exemplifies the process-related—as opposed to content-related—manner of thinking that we were interested in, we briefly illustrate this exercise here as a transition from this more reflective to the empirical part later.

Consider the vertical line in Figure 1: A tangent is touching a circle at exactly one point. If the circle *I* (e.g., the left circle) gradually expands, its center point moves to the left—and gradually toward infinity as the circle extends infinitely in size. The same happens to the center point of the circle on the right. At infinity, the periphery of the circle on the left merges with the tangent; so does the periphery of the circle on the right. When both coincide at the point of infinitely enlarged circles, we are left with the periphery of a single circle. Where has the center point of this—now single—circle moved? There cannot be a center point at the left and a second center point at the right, because a circle has only a single center point. There also cannot be a half-center point on the left and another half-center point on the right, because mathematical points are infinitely small and cannot be divided further. Thus, the center point is now at infinity, and rather than being a center, it has become part of the periphery (mathematical example and description translated and adapted from Schad, 2014). The small center can be continuously transformed to become part of the larger periphery. There is no categorical distinction between being at the center and being at the periphery. It is a process of evolution to advance from the small center to become part of the big center. This relationship cannot be represented in usual contents or concepts but rather approached in logical thinking in a process of activity.

Addressing the paradox stated previously, the continuous rather than categorical transition from center to periphery (or vice versa)

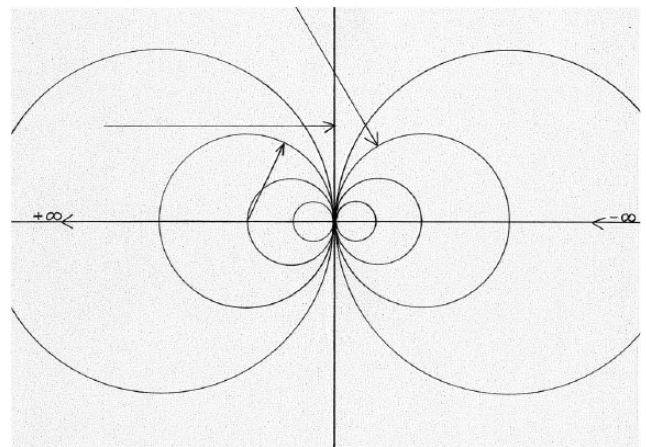


Figure 1. Two expanding circles and their center points approximating infinity. From *Der periphere Blick: Die Vervollständigung der Aufklärung* (p. 81), by W. Schad, 2014, Stuttgart, Germany: Geistesleben. Copyright 2014 by Verlag Freies Geistesleben. Adapted with permission.

struck us as an analogy for the relationship between the small “I am” and the large “I Am”: The individual “I am” may initially appear to be a center point that is isolated from the periphery but it is not a categorical distinction, and the “large” is already installed or engendered in the “small,” which can open up to—and find its connection with—the larger whole. We considered this example important in the current context because it implies a connection, or rather a continuous transition, from the center toward the periphery (the small and the large) rather than a dichotomous juxtaposition or even opposition of the small and the large. In this sense the example provided a pointer to our earlier question: Are we to follow the individual “I Am” on the outside, or the inside? Is this individual “I am” on the inside (i.e., my own individual “I am”) the port of entry to an understanding of the universal “I Am” (the representative of the “I Am” in the form of the Christ principle) on the outside? Or is the “I am” on the inside the same (at least in potential) as the “I Am” on the outside?

The example suggests that following the “I am” on the inside is not in contradiction to following the “I Am” on the outside. On the contrary, following the “I Am” on the outside implies following the “I am” on the inside and realizing it in its full—and infinite—potential. Holding this bridge alive in thinking requires a level of activity in thinking that places the process component in focus.

As indicated, the reflective inquiry in Part 1 was an effort to “test the waters” and make sure that the sentences we were going to contemplate in Part 2 did not pose a contradiction or challenge or absurdity to ordinary scientific thinking; this way it felt safe to move on. But note that the first part was not only of a preparatory nature but also had implications for the theme of our inquiry—the question about the nature of the self as a process—in the following way. The reflective part, especially the mathematical exercise, stretched our ordinary thinking in that it was no longer possible to mentally picture the two sides of infinity and their relation to the newly emerging center. It was a purely nonsensory, conceptual imagination. We posit that this nonsensory, conceptual manner of thinking is also the type of thinking that is required to grasp the self as a process. The self as a content is typically (though certainly not always) represented in pictorial—or at least sensory-motor—coordinates that are anchored in physical experience. But the process cannot be represented in this manner. Our reflective exercise was in this sense a preparation for bringing the processual side of the self into focus in Part 2.

In the next section we pursue a first-person phenomenological exercise in dealing with the “I Am” sentences. Once more, we do not set out to verify or falsify these sentences or test their historical accuracy. Instead, we seek to acquaint ourselves with them to explore whether they inspire new insights or observations toward the process or activity side of the I that we are not yet familiar with.

Part 2: Phenomenological Exercise

Method and Procedure of the Exercise

The I is perhaps the ultimate representative of a first-person experience, and in our understanding it can thus be addressed adequately in its core nature only by using some kind of first-person phenomenological exploration. In our current study, we hence used such a first-person phenomenological approach, building on our earlier methodological inquiries in this direction. Intro-

spective phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative research method that is not intended to disentangle the causal antecedents and consequents of an effect but instead seeks to illuminate the particulars of first-person experiencing, thereby deepening an understanding of the qualitative nature of a phenomenon. It is basically a single-case approach (although both authors worked in tandem), and we consider such a single-case approach justified in the current context because we are ultimately dealing with varieties of evident experience (German original: *Evidenz*). To illustrate: When performing a mental calculation, say 2.5×2.5 , and coming to a definite and undeniable conclusion (evident experience), one does not need the reassurance of another person to know that it is accurate. The inner judgment speaks for itself. Likewise, we may know that in the morning we packed a sandwich for lunch and are carrying it in our bag because on the way out we already double-checked that we really have it with us. We do not need reassurance from others to know it is there—and if, for some reason, at lunch it is no longer there, we know someone took it or we somehow lost it—but we know it was there when we left our house. There is no point to questioning such evident experience. The experiences we are describing in the current context are not of a mathematical or sensory nature but are still evident experiences in the sense just described. When approaching the core inner nature of a psychological phenomenon—here the I—one needs to rely in principle on evident experience—and reinstate such evident experience when confronted with descriptions from others. Our journey was hence in part an effort toward approaching such evident experience or *Evidenz* regarding the I (cf. Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, 2015b). As a single-case approach, this is in principle legitimate, although replication and comparison with other reports is certainly desirable.

Both authors were well experienced in introspective or inner observation. We experimented with different formats and different themes of inquiry. Regarding format, we worked both individually and also together as a group of two—and at one point with two others, and at another point with four others. Regarding the theme, we experimented with different variations. We mostly used the “I Am” statements from John’s Gospel—or small alterations of it, as indicated later (all in German translation). On one occasion, we used a geometric exercise to raise our awareness of purely conceptual, nonsensory thinking (which we do not describe here further, however, because it played a rather minor role; it was related to the exercise introduced earlier).

We started out focusing on different “I Am” statements and variants of them. However, the focus of the major part of our exercise was on the words “I am the light of the world” versus “I am light in the world,” as well as the subsequent clause “He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Other statements and exercises were also used on a smaller scale. Our work on the theme stretched over 10 months (from May 2017 to March 2018), and we had a number of telephone exchanges and three in-person meetings stretching over 1–3 days. We did not make a systematic daily regime of practicing and instead relied on the individual estimate of appropriate timing. We practiced from once to seven times a week, usually for 5–20 min. We would typically sit in a quiet place and initially say the words of the sentence inwardly (quietly). Sometimes the process ended here because we were distracted or some type of inner or outer stressor inhibited a more sustained form of concentration or med-

itation. When the level of inner quietness was sufficient, we would advance from rehearsing the words to developing a panorama of meaning, which initially was often still framed in sensory (mostly visual) coordinates but could also advance to a more gestural or even nonsensory format. The latter was an immersive experience: We were no longer “thinking about” the sentences but were “thinking from within” these sentences. In contrast to other immersive—even hallucinogenic—experiences, in these meditative exercises we remained clearly aware of being anchored in our wakeful sense of self and remained alert, attentive, and in normal command of our dealing with experiences, as we point out later on (cf. the Methodological Roadmap and Question of the Validity of Experiences section).

Included in this meditative process was also the receptive side; that is, our exercise did not consist of only mentally producing the sentence, panorama or gesture but also monitoring what was coming back as an experiential echo of our activity. These results were mostly obtained during the exercise session—but we sometimes noticed more distant aftereffects (e.g., insights, additional experiences that were “prepared” by the exercises in the sense that we developed a manner of recognizing and differentiating more subtle facets of experiences). On the other hand, our method of inquiry was at times also informed by conceptual “pointers,” or “signposts,” from outside our immediate theme of inquiry—that is, sentences from the surrounding context of the Gospels or from the literature. We detail these more clearly in the Results section. In the sense described earlier, our approach was close to the heuristic research method outlined by Cark Moustakas (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1961, 1975). This method, anchored in the humanistic tradition, is an immersive, phenomenological approach that seeks to establish “meaning via the inspirations of the self, the complexities of human experience, and the challenges of the reflective process” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 53) and combines strategies of immersion, searching, self-dialogue, and inference, among others.

Analysis and Interpretation of Our Findings

Both authors took notes while doing the exercises. Ulrich Weger took notes during the team meetings and subsequently aggregated these, also consulting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), thus yielding the descriptions mentioned later. IPA is a qualitative method that seeks to identify core aspects or central themes conveyed in a text or (autobiographical) document and aggregates them in a set of thematic statements or descriptions (e.g., Smith, 1996). During the analysis process, the researcher starts out by extracting a global understanding of the text or document and then highlights informative passages and notes the core meaning of these passages. These notes are subsequently aggregated into larger clusters and overarching themes that the researcher compiles—and typically illustrates by using quotations from the original document (for overviews, see Döring & Bortz, 2015; Smith, & Osborn, 2008). As the name of the technique suggests—and as Döring and Bortz (2015) pointed out—in IPA the researcher does not try to abstract from his own expertise or point of view but instead seeks to reflect on it—and to integrate it constructively into the research process. In the current case of introspective research, the participants generating the data and the researchers analyzing them were obviously one and the same. This

coincidence of “observer” and “observed” is typically seen as problematic in social science research. The alternative would be to keep the observer and the observed strictly separated into distinct individuals—but thus make the sacrifice and render first-person psychological phenomena as in principle unapproachable through scientific inquiry—which we would perceive as equally problematic. It is ultimately a question of whether we take the method as the given, adjusting our questions and topics of inquiry to these available methods; or take the question or topic as the given, developing and adjusting our methods around these questions and making them suitable for what we wish to study. In the current context, we opted for the latter version.

Results

Six core dimensions that characterized our engagement with these exercises, which we titled using or adapting quotes or themes from our recordings, were identified: (a) preparing the inner space, (b) richness and intensity of the experience, (c) briefness of the experience, (d) in stationary flight, (e) using conceptual guides or signposts, and (f) methodological aspects and question about validity of experiences.

Preparing the inner space. Inner work can be a challenge in a world characterized by rich and often overwhelming input. Preparing the inner space included a special commitment to the task—in fact, we noted we had to create a sense of urgency in pursuing the inner exercises and shielding ourselves against the routine distractions that occurred. It included a sense of persistence, repeated efforts, and not observing anything that we would immediately identify as being worthy of further inquiry—and still not giving up, by reassuring each other that the way we envision results is not necessarily the way they become manifest. In addition, what helped in preparing the inner space was not only commitment or excitement but also a sense of inspiration about or even reverence for our task. This was an ingredient that was by no means a natural given but would occasionally arise, supporting and strengthening the process.

Richness and intensity of the experience. We could differentiate between different types of inner experiences. There were experiences that pulled us toward something and had a certain rigor—for instance, the experience of curiosity or excitement about a certain token of distraction that had just set in. These were experiences that were not task-related in the more narrow sense but had an imposing character and grabbed or attracted attention. It was nevertheless enjoyable to remain involved in these—but enjoyable in the sense in which it is enjoyable to engage in pleasant but currently task-unrelated thoughts.

There were other types of experiences of a less imposing nature. In contrast to the former type, they did not grab or attract our curiosity toward something external. Rather, it was as though they increased and intensified the core of our own self-experience and emerged from the center and remained directed there. It was a density and existentiality, a gravity and profundity that had a joyful and reassuring character—it was not the joy of finding a momentary excitement but more the joy of finding an ongoing point of reference that has the potential of remaining a guiding compass, providing more continuing stability and orientation, something rooted more deeply and hence not so vulnerable to moments of turbulence. We comment on this again later on, because this was

one of the experiences that was also informed by our conceptual reflection. These experiences do not “take over” and “step in” on their own, but they allow one’s own inner core to gradually and subtly resonate and thus become noticeable. These experiences are typically of a more fleeting and fragile or elusive nature, and this elusiveness (or briefness) was another characteristic of the trial.

Briefness of the experience. Some of the inner experiences did set in during or right after the exercise. Others occurred later on or in other contexts: We might walk in a forest and a brief moment or insight or a thought related to our exercise occurred like a dewdrop briefly twinkling in a tree as we were walking by. We had no means of tracing these directly to our exercising. But they felt related to the theme and thus had an experienced connection to the theme of our inquiry. In more general terms, our experiences would occasionally become conscious more in the form of an afterimage—they were subtle, fleeting, appearing as a faint thought or movement of experience on the far mental horizon rather than being clear-cut or familiar affective experiences that are strong and persistent enough to be characterized in unambiguous and already familiar words. They had an elusive presence—and this presence was not controllable. We could prepare the stage for it to set in—but the setting in was a moment of being moved that we could not orchestrate. It was a faint moment of “dawn” that became briefly noticeable.

In stationary flight. One of the fleeting but yet reoccurring experiences, especially during the “I am I” meditation, was the experience of being carried *in* or *through* our own thinking. It was as though we experienced ourselves as being carried by an immaterial platform that was holding us in a purely inner, nonsensory manner. The allegories we found for this experience were those of a bird in stationary flight, or of resting on a free-floating transparent glass-platform, or of an eye that does not only see things outside but that becomes aware of itself. But these were only allegories. The core aspect of it was that at the same time, one remained anchored in one’s regular constitution of experiencing the “I am I” in the head region and simultaneously realizing that the space of awareness grew wider and held itself through—or, one could say, within—itsself. The inner space in which this “I am I” experience took place quickly moved beyond the head region—and in fact beyond the physical extension of the body altogether.

But although faint and elusive, it was an experience of immensely resonating reassurance. It was as though a dark room were briefly illuminated, and though the light may go out quite quickly again, the impression of what one has seen remains. In this same sense the experience of being held in or through one’s own thinking resonates on after the trial and maintains its reassuring character.

Using conceptual guides or signposts. We continued studying the literature and engaged in more philosophical and less phenomenological reflections. These informed our dealing with the experiences—although we also reflected on this conceptual input and the way it might inform our work.

One such reflection pertained to the philosophical juxtaposition of the small “I am” and the universal “I Am” that we had been reading about and that we kept working on and pondering about. In certain moments of our exercising, it was as though we geared our inner, experiential compass along the magnetic field of this broader horizon of the conceptual background in the pertinent literature. We would have the experience that in our exercising we could go to some more

or less advanced point—but then needed concepts and guiding frameworks from “the other side” that would allow us to move yet another step beyond our individual horizon of comprehension. These guiding principles—elaborations about the “I Am” principle, or the Christ principle, from the Gospels or the literature, especially the anthroposophical literature (in particular, Steiner, 2010)—were points of demarcation that we used for orientation purposes and to intensify our further research. Specific examples of such guiding principles were the surrounding context in which the quote from the Gospel was embedded (but also from other sections in the Gospel as well as from the Old Testament). The most frequently used pointer here was actually the “I Am” statement in its absolute sense, with its prototypical version in the “I Am the I AM” in Exodus (Old Testament). Other pointers were transcripts from a series of lectures by Steiner (2010) in which he pointed to—and elaborated on—the importance of the “I Am” as a general human principle that is not only an external entity or point of reference but a potential that is alive within every human being. These pointers became the source for a direction of inquiry that we were certainly free to take or not. But the subtlety and softness with which this reality has been characterized in some of the sources allowed us, by way of exploring and perhaps to a certain extent polishing our inner stage, to search within ourselves for experiences that could in one way or another orientate us toward—or allow us to resonate with—what was coming from these conceptual guides or signposts. This was more the beginning of a road rather than its destination—but it allowed us to experience our efforts as meaningful and also provided moments of insight that distilled beyond the research context into life in general.

Methodological aspects. In dealing with the described exercises, we made a number of observations that we subsequently condensed into a methodological roadmap that confirmed and extended our earlier work in this context (Weger, Edelhäuser & Sparby, in press). A first observation was that when pondering over a small set of words over a longer time, there is a risk that the words will lose their meaning. In such moments, distraction (in the form of mind wandering) or fatigue can set in. It is hence important to intensify the meaning of the words—to the extent of virtually acting them out inwardly. To illustrate, consider the following analogy: When carefully observing a piece of art—for instance a painting or a sculpture—one can note that one is inwardly reproducing some of the movements or gestures inherent in the piece in an effort to quite literally grasp their meaning or understand them. In the same manner, one can aim to virtually act out inwardly the semantic or conceptual gestures inherent in the words. The effort that is required to accomplish this is higher than when beholding a piece of art—after all, in the case of words there is no perceptual input to begin with, so everything has to be created by mental effort. But the meaning of the words can be assembled into a mental panorama to begin with—and one can bring about this panorama on one’s mental stage with such rigor that the words begin to trigger impressions that are as long-lasting (and hence as researchable) as those resulting from perceptual input. Finally, bear in mind that phases of activity alternate with phases of receptivity because action is always for perception and perception is always for action—compare the action–perception cycle (e.g., von Weizsäcker, 1985). The receptive side is not to be misunderstood as a passive one—in the same sense in which perception is also not passive *per se*. Rather, during the receptive phase, a continued form of active concentration and openness needs to be maintained for the echo to become noticeable. In this sense, it is important to actively pay

attention to the inner echo (the perception side) that is coming up in response to the activity. As is probably evident from our earlier description, these experiential echoes are more often than not of a more subtle and in fact elusive nature. They are samples of a process rather than a content and hence all too easily trickle through our content-accustomed consciousness like honey through a sieve—that is, they are easily forgotten. It is hence all the more important to inwardly act out the conceptual panorama with as much rigor as possible to strengthen the mental muscles and hold it more easily. And there is a special outcome if successful: Regarding *contents* of consciousness, activity and receptivity necessarily alternate—they cannot coincide. But we suspect that regarding *processes* of consciousness, the two can gradually approach each other and in fact coincide, such that activity and receptivity—or production and perception—do in fact come together. These, we suspect, are the instances described earlier as the “moments in stationary flight” where the lens becomes aware of itself (cf. the concept of intuition in R. Steiner’s work; e.g., Steiner, 1894/1962).

In more general terms, we were certainly also questioning and scrutinizing the validity of the results we were obtaining in the manner described earlier. In particular, we replicated exercises or variants of them and then asked ourselves what we could confirm and what we experienced as a solid and replicable finding as opposed to what seemed to be a more incidental observation. We challenged each other to put our observations into concepts that could be communicated, resuming a task if an observation was too fuzzy, or leaving it altogether behind if a venue seemed misleading. In this process, we made a small number of additional observations: First, it appeared as though the two of us differed in how liberal versus conservative our openness to the previously mentioned experiences was. This prompted us to experiment with this threshold criterion of actively considering versus dismissing our experiential echoes. This allowed us to at least reflect on our own approach and prompted us, in one condition versus the other, to tentatively consider more experiences as valid than we would usually do, allowing us to have a richer basis for inquiry, or to tentatively consider more experiences as invalid than we would usually do, allowing us to have fewer experiences that in turn, however, could be scrutinized more thoroughly. Altogether we determined two criteria that we decided would qualify an experience as meaningful and noteworthy. One was that we moved beyond the regular type of cognitions and that an experiential (not merely a cognitive) echo (often brief and subtle in nature) did set in—but one that did not *impose* itself but that *offered* itself. The other was that one remained aware of—and anchored in—one’s own individual sense of “I am” during the experience and remained in usual command of one’s thinking activity.

Implications and Conclusions

In psychology the self is often featured in its subcomponents (e.g., self-esteem, self-control, self-compassion), but the entity that holds these subcomponents together is rarely addressed. In the current inquiry, we set out to approach this issue by extending the concept of the self in two directions, namely by introducing the juxtaposition of content or result versus activity or process and by introducing the notion of the self versus the I, which captures the difference between the third- versus the first-person aspects of the self. We were particularly interested in exploring the processual or activity aspect of the

I—and whether this processual aspect could address the question about the entity unifying the subcomponents.

We sensed that this entity has to be of a rather universal character because the actual expression of the various subcomponents is certainly only one of a range of possibilities that we could adopt in principle and the potential manifested in this particular constellation must hence be of a more universal character. Our inquiry was hence an interdisciplinary approach between psychology and religious studies; at the center of this inquiry was a first-person exercise using an “I Am” statement in the New Testament. In reflecting on the statement (and its variants), the exercise informed and aided our understanding of this potentiality of the self in different ways. The first was that the “I Am” sentences (both in their absolute and predicative variant) inspire inner pictures—and at times ones that initially appear paradoxical or cryptic and hence cannot be fixated or represented in conventional concepts, thus requiring a more fluent (processual or activity-related) manner of thinking. Second, this more fluent thinking triggers experiences that are of a more elusive, fleeting nature, sometimes as faint as appearing to only briefly twinkle on the far shore of the mental horizon. They can likewise not be fixated or controlled; they can only be acknowledged or received with an open mind-set. At the same time, it was not evident that these experiences would be specific to our dealing with the “I Am” sentences, for we did not introduce a set of complementary sentences with different wording. Third—and this was specific to the current set of statements—pondering over “I am” statements with a more advanced degree of concentration and rigor inspired a state of identification that felt adequate and paradoxical at the same time—because the “I am” is the ultimate source of self-reference: While we were thus pondering over the statement of another being, we were also referred back to no one other than our very own I. Fourth, different experiences—especially that of our thinking holding itself in or through itself—felt like an anchorage in a self-generated activity. In these moments, we generated an activity but also perceived it. Something that cannot coincide in result-style thinking appears to have the potential of coinciding in processual thinking—the activity side of the “I am.” As described earlier, this experience was of a significant nature, and it opened a window toward a more universal character of the self; we speculate that this goes to the core of what we referred to at the beginning: the entity holding the subcomponents together. Fifth, when doing such exercises, one’s understanding of the chosen sentences can be informed and enriched only when one at least provisionally accepts them as meaningful and valid for the time being. We did not set out to confirm or disconfirm these sentences. But in at least tentatively taking them as they are and seeking to enter into their inner core, it was as though we were offered a conceptual railing toward a larger whole of which we may still have perceived only fragments. However, there is also a capacity within us that provides at least a principled understanding of how these pieces may combine: a radar toward a Gestalt-like whole that cannot yet be delineated in a clear-cut circumference but that displays its contours by means of the “in between” of what is already there—in a manner similar to how the cut-out fragments of the squares inspire the vision of an arrow in the Gestalt image in Figure 2—a process described by Gestalt psychologists as reification. Note, however, that this capacity can become active only when it is equipped with conceptual guides or signposts that in one way or another cultivate a sense of this wholeness—



Figure 2. An indirectly visible arrow in a set of partial squares. Image modeled after similar images where partial features evoke the image of a particular object (e.g., illusory triangles).

otherwise the collection of fragmented squares remains what it is: a collection of fragmented squares—as it would appear to a child who has not yet woken up to an understanding of an arrow.

Through our inquiry we have come to the conclusion that this approach of first-person research is a more meaningful one—the fact that there is a capacity within our individual “I am” through which an idea of this whole or larger “I Am” can be enkindled must also mean that there is not a categorical wall or unsurmountable distance between the center and the periphery (see the geometrical example) but that it is a path of metamorphosis on which these sentences can be a guidance.

In more general terms, we have combined a more reflective (and we could add, content-based) and a more phenomenological or immersive (and we could add, processes-based) manner of inquiry regarding the self. The typical lay or naïve manner of reflecting on the self is the content-based format; the more unusual manner is the phenomenological, process-based format. The first is reflective, the second is immersive. The content can become known to us through a manner of thinking that we have described as “thinking about.” The process, by contrast, can become known to us through a manner of thinking that we have described as “thinking from within.” Our exercise in Part 2 (prepared by the reflective inquiry in Part 1) was an effort to acquaint ourselves with this processual side that we could reach only by “stepping” into the thinking process and experiencing it from inside. The most prominent and lasting result of this effort was the experience of our thinking holding itself in itself—the coinciding of the productive and the receptive side of thinking that is not possible in content-based thinking but can become a reality in process-based thinking (cf. also Steiner, 1894/1962; in chapter, entitled “Final Questions”, paragraph entitled with “the second addition to the new edition 1918”). The sentences from the Gospels that we used in Parts 1 and 2 can in principle also be substituted with other sentences from other sources. But we consider the ones used here to be particularly useful in the current context because they are reflections on the “I Am” principle in both its individual and universal sense. Seeing the larger unity in this apparent duality of the two facets of the “I Am” is an apparent paradox, and pondering over such a paradox that cannot be fixated in distinct concepts facilitates a manner of thinking that tends to move beyond a sensory-motor (content-based) manner to an image-free, immersive grasp of the self—the process side.

Another important aspect that has emerged through our inquiry is that of the issue of potentiality and becoming—and the openness of the I to adopting, in principle, different instances of realization. Our process understanding has inspired us to think about the I not so much in terms of what it has become but also in terms of what it is and what it still can become. The process or activity character of the I is certainly anchored in the here-and-now, but it strikes us that this potential of becoming is oriented at least as much toward the future as toward the past: In observing a current “form” (the different attributes of the self-concept), there must have been a “formless” to be formed, but that means that there must currently also be a “formless” that will crystallize into a given form—or set of forms—at some point in the future, with a range of implications about the potentiality—and freedom—of development, because results and outcomes are evidently not set. This “formless” character of the I—we suspect—is also the entity that unifies the different subcomponents of the self. It is the universal source of becoming that can be connected to in a uniquely immediate, immersive way. If we ponder over it in a more reflective manner, it already tends to crystallize into what I have become—that is, the subcomponents, as illustrated earlier. This is an important topic to be explored in further work related to this theme.

Another aspect to be explored in future work is the issue of how the self described here relates to—and becomes manifest in—a physical body. We are proposing neither a reductionist view nor a disembodied one but instead understand the body as a different mode of expression of the self, perhaps in a way similar to how ice is a different mode of expression of water (cf. Weger & Wagemann, 2015b). We have attempted a first step in this direction in two recent articles (Weger, Wagemann, & Meyer, 2018a; Wagemann et al., in press), but more work is needed to refine this issue.

Finally, we also wish to acknowledge that our account may be difficult to connect to for an audience that is explicitly secular. In closing, we would like to refer to a few points in consideration of this concern:

1. Though using statements from the Gospel, our phenomenological exercise also has a secular aspect in that we believe the main findings can in principle also be replicated with other meditative or nonmeditative verses. It is true that we consider the “I Am” statements to be particularly useful for our purpose, because with these statements, in inquiring into an event or individual in the outside world, one is at the same time directed toward an internal entity, the self. And yet, bear in mind that we do not report religious insights or revelations of any form but instead present findings that are of a general phenomenological quality, as may be evident from the labeling of our subheadings in the Results section: Preparing the Inner Space, Richness and Intensity of the Experience, Briefness of the Experience, In Stationary Flight, Using Conceptual Guides or Signposts, and Methodological Roadmap and Questions About Validity of Experience.
2. A second point in defense of choosing themes from the Gospel is that in pursuing a scholarly approach, one can never quite rid oneself of one’s standpoint, and we considered it wise to be upfront and articulate this rather than maneuver around it. We suspect that other traditions in

psychology pursue a related approach. Research in mindfulness, for instance, is anchored in the Buddhist tradition—sometimes more implicitly, sometimes more explicitly—and academic psychologists across the subdisciplines have their icons, spanning from Aristotle to William James, Wilhelm Wundt, and Hermann Ebbinghaus, and others. These are sometimes cited explicitly, sometimes not—but their manner of thinking has informed and shaped a whole epoch.

And still we acknowledge that some readers may feel sidelined by this. But we hope they—and others—will still feel inspired by this account to pursue their own approach to this important theme.

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