Relations of the Self
SELF-REFERENCE AND/VERSUS IMMANENCE

1. Self-reference and system theory

In the last decades, self-reference has become a concept used in relation to sociological and epistemological theories. From a historical point of view, self-reference is interpreted as the consequence of abandoning absolute and transcendent foundations. When they appeared to be questionable and inadequate in scientific contexts laying the claim to independent knowledge and to autonomously discoverable truth, the focus of cognitive activity and foundation shifted to consciousness. Heisenberg’s discovery that the observer modifies the conditions of an experiment by means of his or her mere presence signified two, in some respect contradictory, consequences. It implies, on the one hand, the inability to exclude the influence of the subject from supposedly objective processes of scientific knowledge, and, on the other hand, the tendency to integrate the subject as a mere element partaking in the experiment, or, more extensively, in a system.

In the context of the development and the argumentation underpinning the system theory, which has been elaborated with particular accuracy by Niklas Luhmann, self-reference turns out to be a central and at the same time a consistently recurring component of that theory. Self-reference is understood as the capacity of the system to refer to itself. In relation to social organization, this is considered as evident, as the subject observing is also and unavoidably involved. But it also works in the context of scientific theory, progressively asking for a more exact investigation concerning the assumptions made and the correct use of concepts. The extension of this circular process, taking place in a conscious way as a consequence of developments in science and in view of the increasing complexity of world understanding, implies self-reference as an integrating part of the system concerned.

From this perspective, self-reference becomes a typical characteristic of systems and relates not only to consciousness, but also to the world of experience. It can be defined as an activity which accompanies the process of functioning and reproduction performed by every single system. As this implies an inner dynamic interrupting the simple linearity of development, and mirroring the system itself, it can be described as a circular structure. Nevertheless, this reflective circle is internalized: in the system theory, it is conceived of as a structure exclusively referring to the system concerned and developing in relation to it.¹ Since self-reference takes