

## On the spirit and letter of Rudolf Steiner's philosophy

A critical reading of Hartmut Traub's *Philosophie und Anthroposophie*

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In 2011 the Fichte scholar Hartmut Traub published a 1,000 page study on Rudolf Steiner's early philosophical writings entitled *Philosophie und Anthroposophie: Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners. Grundlegung und Kritik* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag). On the one hand, Traub's book convincingly demonstrates the fruitfulness of locating Steiner's philosophy within the tradition of German Idealism. On the other, his judgment of Steiner's philosophical originality is for the most part negative. According to Traub, Steiner simply lifted many of his ideas, arguments and *termini technici* from the German idealists, especially from J.G. Fichte. The following review-essay seeks to make a contribution to the current debate on the most appropriate scientific principles for Steiner research. The text originally appeared in German in the December 2012, January and April 2013 issues of the journal *Die Drei*. My point of departure were the questions: are there any other ways of understanding the Fichtean heritage in the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner than those proposed by Traub? And how can one objectively approach the topic of Steiner's originality? Hartmut Traub replied to this review-essay in the April 2013 issue of *Die Drei*. He acknowledged that we share many points in common regarding the Fichte-Steiner relationship, however, he rejected the majority of my criticisms as largely misunderstandings on my part. As I noted in my answer to him in the same April issue, Traub's reply did not convince me that the substance and nature of my original judgments were invalid. In the present English version of this review-essay I have nevertheless tried to improve on the precision and detail of some of my criticisms.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Steiner on Fichte

The German idealistic philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte was born just over two hundred and fifty years ago, on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1762. To many readers of Steiner it is no secret to learn that Fichte's works are important for comprehending the origins of anthroposophy, for references to this philosopher are found throughout Steiner's writings and lectures. Indeed, the earliest extant text from Steiner's hand is a fragment dated 1879, and demonstrates the young 18-year-old grappling with the nature of truth and knowledge in Fichte's first 1794 exposition of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (Steiner, 1970, pp. 26-34), while in one of his earliest letters from August 1881 we see Steiner urging a friend to read Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800) as a way of overcoming his scientific materialism (Steiner, 1985b, pp. 28, 36). More than forty years later in his autobiography *Mein Lebensgang* Steiner is unequivocal about the influence that a number of Fichte's other texts had on him as a young man. For him, Fichte's *Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794) and *Über das Wesen des Gelehrten* (1805) constituted "a kind of ideal to which I myself wished to aspire" (Steiner 2000a, p. 52). This passage is often quoted, but what exactly are these Fichtean ideals that were so crucial to Steiner? They are above all a devotion to truth, morality and knowledge. For example, in the first text Fichte famously

1. I would like to thank the editors of *Die Drei* for their kind permission to allow the English versions of these texts to be published here. Unless otherwise stated, all the translations from the German texts are my own, including those from Hartmut Traub's book (cited as T, followed by page number) and from Steiner's writings, as well as from the *Johann Gottlieb Fichte Gesamtausgabe* (cited as FGA followed by series, volume and page numbers; cf. bibliography for more details).

characterizes the vocation of a scholar as: “I am a priest of truth; I am in its pay, and thus I have committed myself to do, to risk, and to suffer anything for its sake” (Fichte 1988, p. 176); accordingly, the scholar should strive to be “the *ethically best* man of his time” (ibid.); while in the second text, the scholar as writer should not simply give voice to his own personal opinions but strive instead for selfless objectivity: “The idea itself must speak, not the writer.” (Fichte 1805, p. 208). Can textual support for these ideals of truth and morality be found in the young Steiner? Looking again at his letters, we find the twenty-year-old student Steiner writing to another friend on July 27, 1881: “I am pursuing a wholly determined goal, an ideal goal, knowledge of the truth. Now, this goal cannot be reached in jumps, but it requires precisely the utmost honesty in one’s striving in the world, a striving that is free of selfishness, not to mention free of resignation.” (Steiner 1985b, p. 17). These same ideals can be later found in Steiner’s principal work on spiritual development, *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?* According to Steiner, all higher knowledge depends on a “veneration towards *truth and knowledge*”, as well as a heightening of one’s own morality and ethics; a golden rule for spiritual development is: “if you attempt to take *one* step forward in the knowledge of secret truths, so simultaneously take *three* steps forward in the perfection of your character towards the good.” (Steiner 1993, pp. 20, 67).

Steiner’s doctoral dissertation of 1891, published the following year as *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*, adopts a more critical attitude to Fichte, arguing what he thought was *lacking* in the Fichtean system of philosophy – an insufficiently developed epistemological conception: “If he [Fichte] had developed the concept of knowledge, then he would have arrived at the true starting point of the theory of knowledge: *the I posits knowing*.” (Steiner 1892, p. 40). Steiner is not claiming to refute Fichte’s philosophy here, but merely pointing out a less explored area in his writings. In what are probably two of Steiner’s least read philosophical works: *Gedanken während der Zeit des Krieges* (1915) and *Vom Menschenrätsel* (1916), Steiner points out how Fichte is *wrongly labelled* as a *merely abstract* thinker. If one makes the effort to pass beyond the initially dry presentations one can discover a living and transformative *force* in his writings. In the former text: “Whoever allows Fichte’s manner of spirit (*Geistesart*) to work upon themselves will subsequently experience that he has taken up something into his soul, something that works in an entirely different manner than the ideas and words of this thinker. These ideas and words become transformed in the soul. They become a force”. (Steiner 1915, p. 13). In the latter book he states that in the future Fichte’s philosophical writings will be able to be presented in such a way that they will be understandable to every single person: “a time will come in which Fichte’s ideas will be able to be cast in a form that is understandable to anyone wishing to think about the meaning of life from out of life itself. These ideas will become accessible to even the simplest human soul, who is far removed from what one calls philosophical thinking.” (Steiner 1984a, p. 24).

Steiner’s public lecture of 1915, “Fichtes Geist mitten unter uns”, is a testimony to how much he believed he was working in the spirit of Fichte: “If we understand him correctly, then we cannot do anything else: we have to feel Fichte’s spirit here among us.” (Steiner 2000b, p. 231). In this vein, if Steiner’s magnum opus of 1894 is entitled *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, the philosophical intention of Fichte’s Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 is no different. Exactly one hundred years before Steiner’s work, it is Fichte who claimed to have written the first philosophical system of freedom, and compared his revolution in philosophy to the contemporary political revolution in France: “My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of the things in themselves, which is to say, from those external influences with which all previous systems – including the Kantian – have more or less fettered man.” (Fichte 1988, p. 385).

Finally, in his 1908 text “Philosophie und Theosophie” (title changed to “Philosophie und Anthroposophie” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of 1918), Steiner situates his own worldview within the history of philosophy. Outlining a series of positive contributions to philosophy passing from Aristotle and the logical thought of Thomas Aquinas, down to Kant and the German idealists, Steiner again underscores the significance of the Fichtean theory of the I. For him, one of the main concerns of theosophy/anthroposophy is to provide a secure cognitive path that avoids the twin dangers of false mysticism and a speculative knowledge of nature. What are the roots of Steiner’s thought in philosophical history? – Using his own brief formulation: “Here Aristotle can be supplemented by Fichte.” (Steiner 1984b, p. 101).

## 2. Two aspects of Steiner's method

In the preface to the first published version of his system, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte gave some important advice to readers of his philosophy. He stated that he intended to change the terminology and language in every later presentation: "I have tried [...] as much as possible to avoid a fixed terminology. I will remain faithful to this maxim also in future versions of this system, up to the final perfected presentation of it." (Fichte 1794, p. VII). He reaffirmed the necessity of this method 13 years later in his main work on religion, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*: "I will untiringly reflect upon new formulations, phrases, and expressions, as though it were impossible to make myself understood to you." (Fichte 1806, p. 42). In spite of all the differences in terminology, Fichte considers his philosophy to be a unity, and one should not think that a new word signifies a rupture in his system. Why does Fichte continually change the language of his philosophy? Because he believes that a fixed terminology only leads to intellectual passivity and does not promote independent thought on the part of the student: "a fixed terminology – [is] the most convenient means for anyone clinging to the letter to rob every system of its spirit and to turn it into a dried out husk." (Fichte 1794, p. VII; for the specific example of Fichte changing the well-known early 1793 terminology of "intellektuelle Anschauung" (intellectual intuition) later on into "Genesis" in 1804 and "neuer Sinn" (new sense) in 1813, see Wood 2012).

This method of continually modifying the letter in order to promote the spirit is also followed by the founder of anthroposophy. For example, in a 1911 lecture Steiner chose another new and unusual term, the "body of love" (Liebesleib), to designate the second member of the human being that he had already designated as "etheric body" (Ätherleib, Ätherkörper) and "life body" (Lebensleib) in his writings: "Love and the longing for love is given to us in the etheric body, and we can therefore justifiably call the etheric body a 'body of love': light and love". (Steiner 1989b, p. 187). Commenting in a subsequent lecture on his practice of continually changing his approach and terminology Steiner explained: "But it is exactly the same, and I do this on purpose, so that anthroposophists do not become accustomed to cling to words, but to try and approach the object itself." (Steiner 1995, p. 194). For Steiner, all his terms are interrelated and chosen with care, and one must not dogmatically remain at the single word. Instead, the student has to *actively* bring all the meanings of the different terms together in order to form a more comprehensive concept: "The worst way to draw closer to the object is to swear by the once uttered word; rather, one should bring what has been said at different times together into a harmony" (Steiner 1995, p. 195).

On the other hand, Steiner's terminology had to come from somewhere, and like Fichte, he mostly used existing or older terminology, and gave them *new meanings*. Steiner outlines at least three reasons for doing this: Firstly, to link onto and demonstrate agreement with certain cultural and spiritual traditions; secondly, to better illustrate the progress he was attempting with respect to an earlier work (cf. Steiner 2000a, pp. 365, 390; Steiner 1961, p. 247); and thirdly, "because our modern epoch, which is far removed from spiritual scientific knowledge, does not have a terminology of this kind, and it is always easier to make oneself understood by using older terminology than by inventing a new one." (Steiner 1921-22, May 1921, p. 207 footnote). And to point out another potential misunderstanding: just because Fichte and Steiner changed their terms does not mean that they undervalued their terminology and choice of words on the whole. On the contrary, as we have just seen, their terminology itself directly points to the cultural and spiritual traditions in which to read and understand their works. Hence, as with Fichte, one has to pay careful attention to both the origins of Steiner's language as well as to the new employment and meanings that he gave to older linguistic terms.

A second more well-known aspect of Steiner's method is his manner of looking at the same topic or problem from completely different standpoints. For him one standpoint is not enough, a worldview that takes into account multiple standpoints is better able to capture the nature of reality. Contradictions arise if one remains at a single perspective. Where did Steiner learn this aspect of his method? – He learned it from Goethe and the German philosophers. In 1892 Steiner harshly criticized a book by the philosopher Karl Bleibtreu because the latter was ignorant of this methodology: "But this book is terrible, and precisely because Herr Bleibtreu does not have any idea that each and every thing has numerous sides. Of every proposition that he puts forward, the opposite is also true. [...] Since the Germans have had a philosophy

and Goethe's works they know that a *single* viewpoint is no longer sufficient for observing an object, but that one has to go around it and view it from every side." (Steiner 1989a, p. 507). An important consequence of this approach is that often *different language* and *different images* are required in order to describe the object from each new standpoint: "It is incredibly difficult for certain people to understand that when observed from different sides, every single thing presents itself in a different manner." (Steiner 1921, p. 168). Hence, the second aspect of Steiner's method of changing standpoints is closely related to the first aspect of changing terminology.

Steiner often remarked how many critics failed to understand these two aspects of his method. In *Von Seelenrätselein* (1917) he explained how well-known intellectuals like Max Dessoir simply added their *own* meanings to his words, and instead of seriously discussing his philosophy they set about "refuting" some invented "distortion" of it, "which does not have the slightest thing to do with my own." (Steiner 1983, p. 8).

### 3. Traub's interpretation of Steiner

In many respects Hartmut Traub's recent 1, 000 page study on Steiner's philosophy entitled – *Philosophie und Anthroposophie: Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners. Grundlegung und Kritik* (henceforth cited as T, followed by page number) – is a welcome addition and milestone in the research, and will hopefully stimulate more scientific debate on the relationship between philosophy and anthroposophy. Traub's book above all provides a detailed commentary and critique of two early texts of Steiner: his philosophical dissertation of 1891, "Die Grundfrage der Erkenntnistheorie mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre", published in a slightly enlarged form in 1892 as *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*, and *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1894, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1918). In their scope and detail Traub's commentaries go greatly beyond all previous academic studies of Steiner's philosophy. One of Traub's aims is to put an end to some of the extremes in Steiner scholarship. Among others, he classifies researchers into groups such as blind "apologists" who do not engage with the "contradictions in Steiner's texts" (T: 37), one-sided critics with personal agendas, and commentators lacking "critical examination" and the necessary "distance" to be objective (T: 36-39). He harshly criticizes the "retrospective manner of interpretation" (retrospektive Deutungsansatz) of many Steiner interpreters, in which they read Steiner's early writings in the light of the later ones without considering the possible changes in the different editions (T: 37). This criticism is certainly justified, as modern academic standards require researchers to be aware of the various editions, chronology and alterations to an author's published or unpublished writings. A guiding principle of Traub is not to speculate but to stay close to the actual texts, to engage in "painstaking textual work" (T: 25) that takes into account in Steiner's texts "what he actually *wrote* in accordance with the letter and the course of his thought" (T: 25). These principles could easily serve as scientific standards for Steiner research, particularly since many researchers fail to take into account exactly what Steiner wrote in the different editions of his works, and where a portion of the secondary literature is plagued by an over-reliance on unverifiable second and third-hand oral comments that Steiner apparently made. Many of these problematic issues could be easily overcome by adhering to the above principles and by following a genuine historical-critical method. (I have recently elsewhere argued for such an approach; cf. Wood 2013a and Wood 2013b). With respect to Traub's book, a question of course is: does Traub himself adhere to these scientific principles? Traub is confident that he does, and believes that his book is "the first thorough textual and critical analysis and commentary on the central and fundamental philosophical works of Rudolf Steiner" (T: 25).

One of the chief findings of Traub's study is that Steiner did not accurately represent other philosophical systems but intentionally engaged in polemics with them (T: 27). Furthermore, it appears that Steiner did not fully understand these other philosophical systems and their methods, because Traub repeatedly criticizes him for: "misunderstandings", "errors" and "failed interpretations" (T: 45-47, 75-78, 121, 136, 353, 681, 717, 799), "misguided and unsuccessful criticisms" of other thinkers (T: 464-474, 736), "lack of clarity", "confusion", and "perplexity" (T: 127, 233, 329, 366, 498, 614, 655, 722), "inconsistency" and "incoherence" (T: 220, 317, 482, 712) "insufficient understanding" and "contradictions" (T: 58, 141, 219, 264, 632, 806, 855) etc. Finally, Traub evidently does not share the view that Steiner adopted Fichte's profound dedication



to truth and morality, for he additionally depicts Steiner of operating “to the point of plagiarism” with respect to the writings of Eduard von Hartmann and other philosophers, and of a conscious/unconscious “covering up and omission” of the actual historical sources in his texts in order to heighten his own originality (T: 104, 133, 228, 302, 441f., 461, 485). It should be clear that Traub's *Philosophie und Anthroposophie* also contains an extraordinary catalogue of charges against Steiner's philosophical competence and intellectual honesty and it will be up to future researchers to either confirm or reject many of these charges. Our essay cannot examine all the points of Traub's large book, but because it plays a central role in his study we will focus on a number of interrelated elements in his understanding of the Fichte-Steiner relationship.

#### 4. Steiner in the tradition of German idealism

Three important contributions that Traub makes to Steiner research concern the historical tradition in which he situates Steiner's philosophy. Firstly, Traub's book overwhelmingly shows that the most fruitful tradition in which to read Steiner's early philosophy, and even theosophy, is that of the Western philosophical stream of German idealism. Employing a large range of sources from Kant to Schopenhauer, Traub completely undermines the views of Helmut Zander and others that Steiner's philosophy is to be placed among Eastern traditions, or that *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is indebted to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (T: 462, 896, 933, 963, 968). Three of Traub's most significant results regarding Steiner and his philosophy are: that “the fundamental ideas of later theosophy and anthroposophy are developed from the early philosophical writings” (T: 22); that Steiner always remained “in essence a European thinker” in the tradition of German idealism (T: 33); and that “Steiner's theosophy is much more strongly rooted and at home in the tradition of European, particularly the idealistic history of ideas, than in the Asian one” (T: 957).

Secondly, it is perhaps Traub's greatest merit to have highlighted the importance of Johann Gottlieb Fichte for Steiner, especially his 1806 text: *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre* (Way to the Blessed Life, or also a Doctrine of Religion). This text has been ignored by most other Steiner researchers, though a notable exception unmentioned by Traub is Diether Lauenstein, who prepared an edition of Fichte's text fifty years ago for the Verlag Freies Geistesleben. (Cf. Fichte 1962). Those who read Fichte's *Anweisung* will see that its spirit and philosophical methodology inform much of Steiner's own approach to religion. Like the later Steiner, Fichte argues that his understanding of Christianity is essentially Johannine: “The Johannine Christ says entirely the same as what teach and prove; and even says it in the same terms that we have used here.” (Fichte 1806, p. 48). Despite this harmony between his thought and the fourth gospel, Fichte was adamant that his conclusions were arrived at in a manner completely independent of the scriptures: “with the demonstration of this agreement between our doctrine and Christianity we did not want to prove the truth of our doctrine, nor was our intention to provide it with an external support. Its proof should have been apparent in the previous lectures as an absolute self-evidence, and it does not need any further support. [...] Do not expect the philosopher to lead you back into the fetters of blind authority.” (Fichte 1806, pp. 154-155). Although the *Anweisung* is new in terms of its systematic presentation, in terms of ancient traditions it is to be placed within the stream of Johannine Christianity, and it is here that Fichte even hints at esotericism: “we assert that this knowledge, in all its integrity and purity, which we are also unable to surpass, has since the origin of Christianity, and in every age, and despite being for the most part misunderstood and persecuted by the established church, that it was nevertheless able to prevail and flourish in secret here and there [...] though this doctrine may appear new and unprecedented to the present epoch, it is actually as old as the world, and is especially the doctrine of Christianity that can be found in the most genuine and purest ancient document, in the Gospel of John” (Fichte 1806, pp. 38, 154). And again like Steiner, Fichte maintains that his interpretation of Christianity will be labelled as “mysticism” by his critics but that it is in fact arrived at through “pure thinking”, because: “only the highest flights of thought can approach the Godhead, and it cannot be grasped by any other sense.” (Fichte 1806, pp. 35-37). Thus, it is precisely Fichte's modern philosophical presentation that distinguishes the *Anweisung* from the Gospel of John and constitutes its innovation. Fichte calls his exposition: “the path of a consistent, systematic and scientifically clear derivation.” (Fichte 1806, pp. 38-39). In fact, in Fichte's eyes, this scientific approach to the Johannine doctrine of the unity of the Word not only holds for his conception of religion

in the *Anweisung*, but is actually implicit in his *system of philosophy as a whole*. In 1804 he had already designated his *Wissenschaftslehre* as a “Logologia” – i.e. as a higher system of reason or of the Logos itself: “I name this oneness ‘reason’, ó logos, as in John’s Gospel, or ‘knowing’, so that one will not confuse it with ‘consciousness’, which is a lower disjunctive term that is only found in opposition to being. Therefore, I name this system ‘Wissenschaftslehre’ or ‘logologia.’” (Fichte 2005, p. 205).

Turning back to Traub’s book, we can therefore partly agree with his view when he says: “there is above all *one* philosophical work that significantly and fundamentally influenced Steiner’s early ‘anthroposophical and theosophical’ thought, indeed, his thought on the whole. It is J.G. Fichte’s *Religionslehre, Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*” (T: 901). On the other hand, we have to disagree with some of Traub’s rather negative conclusions regarding the relationship between Fichte’s *Anweisung* and Steiner’s 1902 book *Christentum als mystische Tatsache* (Christianity as Mystical Fact). According to Traub, Steiner has done nothing more than just “seamlessly incorporate” (T: 960) many central doctrines from Fichte’s *Anweisung* into his *Christentum* book. Or again in a negative sense, Steiner has simply “borrowed from it the decisive termini, topics and methodological approaches and structures for his own *philosophical worldview*” (T: 901). Our disagreement relates to Traub’s principal method of almost exclusively searching for earlier textual “sources”, *similarities* and terminological “influences” in Steiner’s texts but minimizing or overlooking the differences. This approach is limited when it neither sufficiently takes into account the method of giving *new and different meanings* to appropriated older terms, nor allows for the possibility of independent or renewed knowledge. If Traub grants Fichte’s claim that he has independently arrived at the Johannine doctrine of Christianity, even though the *Anweisung* and the Gospel of John employ – according to Fichte himself – exactly “the same images and expressions” (Fichte 1806, p. 154), then why does Traub not grant this same independent possibility to Steiner’s doctrine? Inversely, if one asserts that Steiner must have borrowed decisive elements of his philosophy from Fichte’s *Anweisung*, then one must be consistent and extend this same criticism to Fichte with regard to the Gospel of John, despite Fichte’s assurance that it is not based on the authority and the “external support” of this gospel. Alternatively, one could leave open the possibility of both philosophers having independently arrived at their doctrines of Christianity. However, as it stands Traub’s argumentation is inconsistent and displays an intellectual bias in favour of Fichte, since he only criticizes Steiner and not the author of the *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, and overlooks the major differences between their two readings (For a number of concrete examples of the significant differences between Fichte’s and Steiner’s interpretations of the Gospel of John see Section 9 below, “The Johannine Question”).

Likewise problematic for Traub’s conclusion is the fact that Steiner scarcely refers to Fichte’s *Anweisung* in his published philosophical writings, and a discussion of it is absent from *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. Traub circumvents this problem by calling upon a highly revealing letter of Steiner to Richard Specht dated 30 November 1890, which contains a lengthy quote from the beginning of the *Anweisung*. This quote in the letter begins with Fichte’s words: “For life is love, and the entire form and force of life consists in love and out of love. – What I have just said expresses one of the deepest propositions of knowledge [...]” (Fichte 1806, p. 2; Steiner 1987b, p. 37). Before quoting this long excerpt from the *Anweisung* Steiner had written of Fichte: “Early this morning a passage of his had virtually brought me into ecstasy” (“Heute früh hat mich eine Stelle von ihm geradezu in Entzückung gebracht.”) (Steiner 1987b, p. 37). Steiner then brings Fichte’s “living” understanding of love into connection with the conception of *freedom*: “I would so dearly like to make this conception of freedom into the pivotal and unified point of my entire philosophizing.” (Steiner 1987b, p. 38). This 1890 letter to Richard Specht is understandably precious for Traub, and Steiner’s words in it about ecstasy form a leitmotif for over sixty pages in the final section of Traub’s book (T: 908-973).

Nevertheless, in his zeal to champion Fichte, Traub occasionally falls into a retrospective line of interpretation by appealing to Steiner’s later positive remarks on Fichte for support (T: 530-531, footnote). As one will recall, Traub had rejected retrospective interpretations as unscientific and the preferred method of blind Steiner apologists (T: 36-39). This is not a serious problem with regard to Fichte, because of Steiner’s constant engagement with him in his early writings. Why is the retrospective form of interpretation unproblematic here? It is unproblematic to the extent that the earlier texts provide adequate evidence for a later conception or judgment. On the other hand, this form of interpretation is in general suspect when

there is a rewriting of history or biography on the part of the author – or when the early and later views simply do not match. – Here Hartmut Traub and I are in agreement. (See Traub's views on this same point, Traub 2013, p. 53).

Moreover, I believe it is obviously contestable when there does not exist *any* early textual support for a subsequent interpretation. In this regard Traub's severe criticism of the adult Steiner's understanding of the Christian church and religion as *childlike*, as "largely stuck in the naïveté of his childhood experiences, which were never reflected upon and scientifically modified" (T: 802) is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, because Traub's criticism blatantly contradicts his earlier thesis that Steiner's mature ideas on religion were significantly influenced by J.G. Fichte. – If Steiner's views on religion were "never reflected upon and scientifically modified" since his childhood, why go to such lengths to highlight the significance of Fichte's *Anweisung* for his philosophy of religion? Secondly, Traub's judgment here belongs to the problematic type of retrospective interpretation. That is to say, since there are no extant documents at all from Steiner's childhood to objectively inform us of his thoughts on religion and the church at this time, Traub's judgment is wholly reliant on the adult Steiner's much later account of his childhood in his 1923-1925 autobiography. Despite this complete absence of textual support, an absence freely admitted by the author: "for there are hardly any authentic sources [...] and we are therefore mostly directed to Steiner's own memoirs" (Traub 2013, p. 53), Traub paradoxically would have the reader believe he is not engaging in the suspect kind of retrospective interpretation, but rather in a "more comprehensive appreciation (*umfassendere Würdigung*) of what Steiner has communicated to us about his childhood." (Traub 2013, p. 53; cf. T: 796-803).

Notwithstanding, a third important achievement of Traub is to have investigated in great detail the remarks on an "Anthroposophie" by Immanuel Hermann Fichte (the son of J.G. Fichte), a philosopher to whom Steiner had also referred. Arguing against the views of Helmut Zander and Christoph Lindenberg (T: 902, 933), Traub uncovers many interesting links between this unjustly neglected thinker and Steiner (T: 973-1018). Traub classifies his own research on I.H. Fichte as "new territory" (*Neuland*), which it undoubtedly is in many respects. Somewhat ungenerously, however, he dismisses earlier Steiner research on this topic to be as a rule unsystematic and ignorant (T: 32, 228, 901, 974), in which the pioneering work of Hermann Ehret is "the exception that confirms this rule" (T: 974, footnote 575). Traub's final summary ("Resümee") is also contestable: "And finally at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Steiner finds in I.H. Fichte's *Anthroposophie* the conceptual idea (konzeptionelle Idee) and the *terminus technicus* of anthroposophy" (T: 996). One could say that Traub's own research proves the opposite. That is to say, his study shows that Immanuel Hermann Fichte could not have been a principal source for Steiner's later anthroposophy because even Traub himself cannot locate its most significant elements and ideas in I.H. Fichte's writings. These include Steiner's entire cosmology, cosmogenesis, and doctrine of the Christian hierarchies, his theory of succeeding but mirrored cultural and historical epochs, his views on mystery wisdom and the path of initiation, his physiology and theory of the human senses, and his numerous concrete examples and detailed expositions of the laws of reincarnation, all of which are absent from the works of Immanuel Hermann Fichte. These are not only enormous differences between Steiner and I.H. Fichte, but also between Steiner and Kant, Lessing, Goethe, J.G. Fichte, Troxler and E. von Hartmann. Yet Traub overlooks these many striking and considerable differences, and does not attribute any noteworthy originality to Steiner. The question has been recently raised by Renatus Ziegler (cf. Ziegler 2012), and should be a question posed by every anthroposophist: What exactly constitutes Steiner's philosophical originality?

## 5. Steiner's philosophical originality

One could argue that Steiner's most original and lasting philosophical achievement is precisely his attempt to show how Haeckel's naturalistic theory of evolution can be reconciled with an idealistic philosophy of human freedom and morality. As Steiner wrote in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*: "Ethical individualism therefore is the crown for the edifice that Darwin and Haeckel strove to build for natural science. It is the spiritualized theory of evolution transposed to moral life." (Steiner 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1918, p. 206). In 1900 Steiner dedicated his book *Welt- und Lebensanschauungen im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* "in heartfelt esteem" to Ernst Haeckel. (Although the "Einleitung" (Introduction, pp. 1-16) to this book contains one of Steiner's most extensive discussions

of Fichte's writings, the text is absent from Traub's study. This *Einleitung* is not yet in the *Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe*. In *Welt- und Lebensanschauungen im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* Steiner presents nineteenth century thought as essentially the development from idealism to realism, or from Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800) to Haeckel's *Welträtsel* (1899). For Steiner, these two texts illustrate the change from a view of the world where thinkers primarily strive "to draw truth from out of themselves", to one where the riddles of nature become uncovered through "*observation of the facts.*" (Ibid., "Vorrede", unpaginated). Although the idealistic and realistic conceptions often appear fundamentally opposed, they may in fact complement each other, since they view the world from two completely different standpoints. Moreover, Haeckel's work was highly significant for Steiner's anthroposophy. How? – Because it provided one of the foundations for a scientific theory of reincarnation that could not be supplied by the German philosophers. (Cf. Steiner 1987c, pp. 80-83, 97.) As Steiner noted in 1907: "Now, despite the whole of German philosophy, despite the entire remainder of German education, Haeckel's phylogenetic thought is the most significant deed in German spiritual life in the second half of the nineteenth century." (Steiner 2007, p. 93).

Unfortunately, instead of engaging in any meaningful way with Steiner's philosophical writings on Haeckel, in his book *Philosophie und Anthroposophie* Hartmut Traub resorts to unfounded speculations. He maintains that a key reason why Steiner exhibited a philosophical interest in Haeckel was because he wished to enlist the latter's support for a philosophy job in Jena after he had finished his doctorate. Thus, Steiner's positive reading of Darwinism and natural scientific theories is "also to be understood as a deep bow before Ernst Haeckel and his influence, which the latter could have had on the possible hiring and appointment of Steiner in Jena" (T: 791). That the combination of Haeckel and freedom philosophy "was also a strategic career decision, is not a malicious insinuation, but was also openly admitted by Steiner himself" (T: 792). Now, that Steiner counted on Haeckel's support for his career may be true, but to attribute his *intellectual interest* in Haeckel's work to this fact, and then to claim that Steiner himself *openly admitted* as such, is an entirely different matter. It has absolutely no textual basis and Traub does not supply any. What then is Traub's *primary* source for this claim? – He himself says that it is a letter of 21 March 1894 that Steiner wrote to Pauline Specht. (Cf. T: 792; Traub 2013, pp. 55-56). In this letter Steiner discusses Haeckel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party: "On the 17<sup>th</sup> February in Jena there was a wonderful celebration for Haeckel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is noteworthy that I, a non-native of Weimar, happened to be the only Weimar person among the guests. Days like this leave behind a lifelong memory, and I am glad that I was able to attend this delightful celebration of monistic natural science. Hopefully the later sister, monistic philosophy, will soon be pleased to have the possibility of communally fighting side by side with the earlier sister to vanquish the stultifying religious prejudices of the people. It was a real joy to see how Haeckel, although on this day he only wanted to speak conciliatory words, continually intimating how much hatred his heart harboured against every form of zealotism. With my own endeavours I am very much counting on Haeckel." (Steiner 1987b, p. 209). – Thus, according to Traub's reading, the above passage from this March 1894 letter in which Steiner remarks that he is counting on Haeckel's support for battling religious prejudice of every kind should be additionally interpreted as an *open admission* from Steiner that one of his motivations for writing on Haeckel and monism was a *strategic career* one in order to get an *academic job in Jena*. I think it is fair to say that an examination of Steiner's actual letter shows that Traub's thesis is entirely speculative and a distinct departure from a close textual analysis. This is unfortunate, because the Haeckel-Steiner relationship is exceedingly crucial for understanding Steiner's philosophical writings yet continues to be superficially treated in the research. In fact, Steiner's published works document that his intellectual interest in Haeckel and "Freiheitsphilosophie" began well before his doctorate and continued for the rest of his life. (For example, already in 1886 Steiner had written: "the most significant natural scientific theorist of the present time is Haeckel", Steiner, 1886, p. 65; and similar sentiments can be found in other later texts and in his unfinished autobiography of 1923-25: Steiner 2000a, pp. 218-222, 236-238; cf. Steiner 1986 (1921 lectures), pp. 102ff.).

This brings us to the originality of Steiner's mature world conception to which he gave the name "Anthroposophy." What are its philosophical origins and chief influences? As we just saw, Traub's book above all traces this stream back to the conceptions of an "Anthroposophie" held by the nineteenth century thinkers Immanuel Hermann Fichte and I.V.P. Troxler. Apart from a number of stimulating forays into the theories of Descartes and Spinoza, Traub's lengthy monograph rarely ventures beyond eighteenth and



nineteenth century philosophical thought. In one sense this is fair and understandable because a significant portion of Steiner's work links onto and engages with German idealism and the natural scientific systems of these centuries. Nevertheless, Steiner's seminal essay "Philosophie und Anthroposophie" does not merely emphasize the German idealists and I.H. Fichte or I.V.P. Troxler, but traces out a path much further back in philosophical history to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. This essay is obviously crucial to Traub, because he has taken the title of his book from it. Although Traub's work on the origins of anthroposophy is a valuable and considerable improvement on much of the secondary literature, his research does not extend far enough in my opinion, and it is particularly regrettable that he forgoes a critical discussion of Aristotle and Aquinas when examining its roots. Which writings and conceptual elements of the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas did Steiner have in mind when he traced out this long historical path? Where is an analysis either confirming Steiner's views on the history of philosophy or showing them to be incorrect? Important discussions of this nature are absent from Traub's text. His reason for omitting the philosophers Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle in his study of the origins of anthroposophy is as follows: "For an analysis of the philosophical genesis of anthroposophy these two figures accordingly do not come into question, for the reception of both happened after the grounding of anthroposophy and were then interpreted by Steiner in the spirit of his new philosophical-anthroposophical worldview." (T: 905). This statement is patently erroneous, because Steiner had already specifically brought Aristotle into connection with "oriental theosophy" (*morgenländische Theosophie*) as early as the year 1890 when outlining the predecessors to Goethe's thought (Steiner 1987a, p. 284). Moreover, Steiner mentions Aristotle's theory of art in the early 1889 essay "Goethe als Vater einer neuen Ästhetik" (Steiner 1889, p. 5) as well as his physics in the 1892 published version of his doctorate, *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft* (Steiner 1892, p. 5), while Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle are jointly discussed in the 1897 work *Goethes Weltanschauung* (Steiner 1921, pp. 28-29). Also incompatible with Traub's judgment is Steiner's March 1893 review of a book by the Aristotelian-Thomistic thinker Vincenz Knauer, in which Steiner writes: "I would like to bestow this praise in a wholly unrestricted manner on the first part of the book, which extends to Thomas Aquinas. [...] I count Knauer's presentation of Aristotelian philosophy to the clearest, most lucid and correct that exists;" (Steiner 1989a, p. 330). Either Steiner is engaging in false flattery here or he was indeed well acquainted with the works of Aristotle and Aquinas by early 1893.

One is led to conclude from Traub's book that he has rejected the possibility of Aristotle, Aquinas and other earlier philosophers having had an essential influence on Steiner's later philosophical worldview because of the absence of the *terminus* "anthroposophy" in their writings. Here one should recall Steiner's method outlined above: presenting one and the same conception from a new perspective might involve the employment of entirely different words. For Steiner, the concept and idea are not the same as the linguistic term, a view already stated in the 1894 *Philosophie der Freiheit*: "What a *concept* is cannot be expressed in words. Words can only draw a person's attention to the fact that he has concepts." (Steiner 1894, p. 52). Yet Traub seems to frequently confuse *word* and *concept*, or to treat them as identical for Steiner. For example, Traub says that he cannot find the "concept of anthroposophy" in *Das Christentum als mystische Tatsache* (T: 975), or find the "concept of monism" in Steiner's *Grundlinien* and dissertation (T: 505), when it is apparent from his discussion that he merely cannot find the *words*.

## 6. A philosophy of feeling

Another main thesis of Traub regarding *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is to reject it as a logical and rigorous work of philosophy. Instead Traub asserts that it is full of argumentative "jumps and arbitrary elements" (T: 35), and exhibits "erraticness and a lack of connectedness" (T: 36); and is "very disjointed with regard to its argumentative structure" (was deren argumentativen Aufbau betrifft, sehr sprunghaft) (T: 35; cf. 36). As with his above reading of Haeckel, Traub again goes further and maintains that this "disjointed" interpretation of the argumentative structure of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is not his own personal view but confirmed by the "author himself" (T: 36); that the "lack of comprehensibility in the conceptual interrelations of his *Philosophie der Freiheit*" was "openly acknowledged" by "Steiner himself" (T: 318); "the young Steiner was extremely conscious of the disjointedness and argumentative deficiencies in the structure of his 'major philosophical work'" (T: 36). Once again the opposite is actually true. Steiner always maintained that *Die*

*Philosophie der Freiheit* was not only highly logical, but even “that within it something reigns like a kind of mathematical thinking” (Steiner 1994, p. 116). This opinion is evidently well known to Traub, because he also quotes it at the end of his book (T: 1017). Steiner was of the view that *all* his written works were composed in a dispassionate “mathematical style”, and that he did this in order to leave the reader free (Cf. Steiner 2000a, p. 436). Contrary to a widespread misconception, Steiner does not advocate uncritical or illogical thinking; in fact, he contends that *only fully rational, logical and non-contradictory thought* can be the foundation for the path of *all* knowledge, i.e. for both scientific and spiritual-scientific knowledge, and in this respect he was building on the works of the nineteenth thinkers Gideon Spicker and Friedrich Theodor Vischer. (Cf. Steiner 1983, pp. 135-138; for more details on the cognitive influence of Vischer and Spicker on Steiner and of the importance of overcoming scientific contradictions, see Wood 2013c).

What then is Traub’s main textual source for his claim of Steiner’s open admission of “disjointedness and argumentative deficiencies” and “conceptual incomprehensibility” in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*? It is a letter that Steiner wrote to the Austrian thinker Rosa Mayreder in November 1894. Here Steiner describes how his book did not arise out of abstract theories but from a deeply personal experience of freedom: “I do not lecture; I relate what I have inwardly *experienced*. I have related it in the manner that I have experienced it. Everything in my book is meant in a personal manner. Even the form of the thoughts. A more instructive nature might have broadened the topic. Perhaps I could do it myself in time. To begin with, I just wanted to portray the biography of a soul struggling to freedom. Here one cannot do anything for those wishing to accompany one over the hurdles and abysses. One has to see for oneself how to overcome them. [One cannot] stand still and first try to explain to others how they could *most easily* overcome them, because the longing for the goal burns too strongly within one. In any event, I believe I would have fallen had I immediately attempted to seek the most appropriate paths for others. I traversed my path as well as *I* could; and then I subsequently described *this* path. Now I could perhaps find a hundred different ways as to how others should proceed. But to begin with I did not want to write about any of these other paths. I have deliberately (*Willkürlich*) and entirely individually overcome (*übersprungen*) a number of hurdles, worked myself, in my own particular manner, through thickets. Only when one has arrived at the goal, does one know one is there.” (*Ich lehre nicht; ich erzähle, was ich innerlich durchlebt habe. Ich erzähle es so, wie ich es gelebt habe. Es ist alles in meinem Buche persönlich gemeint. Auch die Form der Gedanken. Eine lehrhafte Natur könnte die Sache erweitern. Ich vielleicht auch zu seiner Zeit. Zunächst wollte ich die Biographie einer sich zur Freiheit emporringenden Seele zeigen. Man kann da nichts tun für jene, welche mit einem über Klippen und Abgründe wollen. Man muß selbst sehen, darüberzukommen. Stehenzubleiben und erst anderen klarmachen: wie sie am leichtesten darüberkommen, dazu brennt im Innern zu sehr die Sehnsucht nach dem Ziele. Ich glaube auch, ich wäre gestürzt: hätte ich versucht, die geeigneten Wege sogleich für andere zu suchen. Ich bin meinen gegangen, so gut *ich* konnte; hinterher habe ich *diesen* Weg beschrieben. Wie andere gehen sollen, dafür könnte ich vielleicht hinterher hundert Weisen finden. Zunächst wollte ich von diesen keine zu Papier bringen. Willkürlich, ganz individuell ist bei mir manche Klippe übersprungen, durch Dickicht habe ich mich in meiner nur mir eigenen Weise durchgearbeitet. Wenn man ans Ziel kommt, weiß man erst, daß man da ist.*) (Steiner 1987b, pp. 232-233)

Now it is true that the words “Willkürlich” and “übersprungen” can be found in this letter, and of course “Willkürlich” has several meanings, such as “deliberately”, “arbitrarily” or “haphazardly”, whereas “übersprungen” could mean “jumped over” or “overcome”, and to decide on the correct meanings involves examining the words in their context. Here the central question is: Do Steiner’s words in this November 1894 letter – which, as one will recall, is Traub’s principal source for his claim – amount to an open admission on the part of Steiner that the structure and argumentation of his book *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is illogical, conceptually incomprehensible or disjointed? Or is the author – almost one year after the work’s publication – more graphically recounting and critically reflecting on the enormous personal and intellectual effort that was involved in the writing of his book? I have stated my view; objective readers are free to examine the passage above and decide for themselves. In any event the path for resolving serious scientific problems is almost never smooth; it inevitably involves dramatic inner struggles, even in the domain of logic and mathematics. It does not necessarily mean that the author’s final written presentation or argumentative structure is disjointed, deficient or full of jumps.

Interestingly, Steiner's language here in this 1894 letter of overcoming "hurdles" (*Klippen*) directly parallels the language later used in two later key philosophical texts on anthroposophy, the above-mentioned seminal essay "Philosophie und Anthroposophie", and the "Skizzenhaft dargestellter Ausblick auf eine Anthroposophie" (Outline of a View of Anthroposophie), which concludes Steiner's 1914 book, *Die Rätsel der Philosophie*. In these two texts the "hurdles" to be overcome by the seeker of knowledge are false mysticism, an abstract knowledge of nature, and certain theoretical limits to cognition. (Cf. Steiner 1984b, p. 68; and Steiner 1985a, pp. 596, 599). Yet Traub completely misses these subtleties in Steiner's choice of terminology. That his reading of Steiner's letter is forced is also obvious from the reply of Rosa Mayreder herself, in a passage not quoted by Traub. Mayreder fully understood the personal element to Steiner's philosophy, yet it was precisely the book's philosophical clarity that she most prized: "that you have solved the most difficult problem of human knowledge in such a luminous and lucidly understandable form with respect to freedom, appears to me to be of incalculable importance for the future development of modern spiritual life." (R. Mayreder to R. Steiner, 22 Dec. 1894; Steiner 1987b, p. 236). Even the philosopher Eduard von Hartmann, a key figure in Traub's book, similarly praised Steiner's talent for making highly abstract topics accessible, which presumably means that he thought Steiner had understood them: "The presentation and style is attractive and skillful, just as I am accustomed from you; it has also proved to be the case that even with these occasionally very abstract topics, your talent for presentation did not fail you." (E. v. Hartmann to R. Steiner, 21 Nov. 1893; Steiner 1987b, p. 191).

In my view, Traub's effort to make Steiner into a disjointed and unclear thinker is due to his understanding of Steiner's *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* as essentially a philosophy of feeling. For Traub, "the topic of feeling", the "emotive", is "one of the central fields of interest within Rudolf Steiner's philosophical worldview." (T: 29-30); Steiner's early texts "point to feeling being unmistakably one of, if not indeed *the* central systematic function within his existence-related philosophical worldview" (T: 30). With this interpretation and emphasis on the function of feeling in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* Traub believes he has overturned "a paradigm that was considered impregnable in Steiner research" (T: 30), in which earlier researchers had almost exclusively focused on the role of thinking and falsely understood the significance of feeling (T: 522). Despite Traub's confident claim, by ascribing a superiority to feeling over thinking in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* he is simply confusing two elements in which the priority is exactly the reverse. For Steiner, "*thinking* and *feeling* correspond to the twofold nature of our being" (Steiner 1894, p. 105), and though feeling often seems to be more important and "more richly saturated with reality than the cognitive contemplation of the world" (Steiner 1894, p. 106), it is too personal and individual to form the basis of a philosophy. To anyone who thinks feeling is more essential: "One can reply to this that the life of feeling actually only has richer significance for my individual nature." (Steiner 1894, p. 106). Consequently, feeling can neither be the starting point nor operate as the central function of Steiner's worldview. What is the starting point and foundation of his philosophy? *Pure thinking*. Because in "thinking we have a principle that exists through itself" (Steiner 1894, p. 48), and this is crucial for a monistic and idealistic thinker like Steiner.

Of course feeling plays a role in Steiner's philosophical system, that is not to be denied. But anyone familiar with Steiner's methodology of multiple standpoints would realize that it constitutes just *one* aspect of Steiner's philosophy, and does not play the foundational role. Steiner's texts are so abundantly clear and unambiguous on this point that Traub's many arguments to propose feeling as "unmistakeably" the central systematic function are just not convincing. The simple fact is that a worldview primarily based on feeling can never furnish a satisfactory theory of freedom, truth, or moral intuition, because they all require thinking and ideas to explain them. This even holds for a theory of *love*, as Steiner famously remarks at the beginning of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*: "The way to the heart passes through the head. Even love is no exception in this respect. If love is not merely an expression of the lower sex drive, then it rests on the representations (*Vorstellungen*) that we make of the beloved being. And the more idealistic these representations are, the more elevated the love. Here too thought is the father of feeling. [... Many people] do not have love, because they lack the *representation*." (Steiner 1894, pp. 20-21).

## 7. The case of “soul” (*Seele*) in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*

In the second, 1918 edition of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* Steiner added a number of long supplements, as well as changing certain expressions. He did not try to hide the fact that he had made these changes. To indicate the extent of these modifications he affixed on the front title page of the second edition the words: “wesentlich ergänzt und erweitert” – *significantly supplemented and enlarged*. Steiner’s reason for changing some of the earlier formulations was to try and improve their clarity: “I have only changed what today seemed to me to be clumsily expressed” (Steiner 1918, p. 8). Regarding the *content* of the book, Steiner was of the opinion that “the content of the text is essentially almost entirely unchanged” (ibid.). Thus, though he had now changed the letter of the text in places, for him its spirit or basic conviction was fundamentally identical. He labelled as “malevolent” anyone claiming that the changes in the text implied a change in the main thrust of his philosophy: “On account of the changed passages, only a malevolent person would find cause to say that I have changed my fundamental conviction.” (ibid.) These words have been repeatedly used and abused by researchers, with many believing that by merely showing a change in his terms they have demonstrated a lack of continuity in Steiner’s worldview. Not at all. The question is *not* whether Steiner altered certain formulations or words, for here indeed he openly admits he did this. Rather, the crucial question is whether these supplements and changes to the second edition signify a rupture in the book’s *essential content*, or to the central *concepts* of the work, or to Steiner’s *fundamental conviction*.

In his book Hartmut Traub strongly disagrees with Steiner’s view of philosophical continuity in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. Traub argues that the changes to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition represent a fundamental shift in Steiner’s worldview: “in Steiner’s review of 1918 a lot became newly aligned, supplemented, shifted and also changed in essence” (T: 26). For Traub, the difference between the first and second editions of Steiner’s main philosophical work is as follows: “In the *supplements* from the year 1918 the *Philosophie der Freiheit* now became transformed into a ‘theory of the soul’ (*Seelenlehre*) in the eyes of the author” (T: 221). This accusation of a major change in Steiner’s philosophy is an extremely serious matter. What is Traub’s principal evidence in support of such a change? According to Traub, Steiner radically altered the second edition of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* by adding an entirely new word and concept, “the concept of the soul” (der Begriff der Seele), a word and concept that did not exist in the first edition of 1894:

“For the central concept of the later [1918] interpretation, the *concept of the soul*, and the related mature reflections and insights on the ‘experiences of the soul’, ‘regions of the soul’ and the method of the ‘observation of the soul’, cannot even be found in the [first edition of the] text as a word, much less determined as a systematic thought.” (T: 219).

Traub’s accusation would be devastating, if it were true. But this claim too is false, because both the concept and word “soul” occur numerous times in the first 1894 edition of Steiner’s *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. For example, a single “faculty of the soul” (*Seelenvermögen*) is compared to the “*entire* human nature” (Steiner 1894, p. 8); an entire section of the text is devoted to the physiological theory of perception and the relation between “brain and soul” (Gehirn und Seele) (Steiner 1894, pp. 69-73); and another detailed section (Steiner 1894, p. 115-123) is devoted to the representation (Vorstellung) of the “soul” by “dualists”, “physicists”, the “naïve realist” etc. To be fair, Traub does have a minor point, because the word “soul” occurs a large number of times in Steiner’s *supplements* of 1918. However, one still needs to ask: is Steiner’s 1918 *concept of soul* the same as his 1894 one? Answering this question would involve a careful analysis and comparison of Steiner’s earlier and later presentations of this complex concept. It is a grave omission of Traub not to have furnished such an analysis. Instead, Traub simply puts forward his opinion that the second edition of 1918 has changed into a theosophical theory of the soul because of the more frequent occurrence of the *word* soul. Traub then offers a psychological diagnosis, remarking that in his later theosophical phase Steiner had obviously *forgotten* what he had written in the first edition, and cites the French writer Marcel Proust’s idea of a “*mémoire involontéé*” (T: 218) to explain Steiner’s imperfectly operating memory. (In fact, Proust’s precise term is “*mémoire involontaire*”). However, that Steiner was fully aware of the difference between unconscious and conscious memory is clear from his 1917 text *Von Seelenrättseln* (Steiner 1983, p. 134), an important theoretical text from the same period that Traub likewise fails to consult here.



One could now ask: what exactly *is* Steiner's later *theosophical* concept of the soul? The chapter "The Nature of the Human Being" (Das Wesen des Menschen) in his book *Theosophie* gives a straightforward answer:

The word *soul* refers to that through which the human being connects things with his own existence, through which he experiences with them pleasure and displeasure, desire and aversion, joy and pain. [...] *Feeling* initially joins itself to sense sensation. One sensation makes the human being experience desire, another [makes him experience] aversion. These are impulses of his inner life, of his soul life. (Steiner 2003, pp. 27, 31)

There are many further aspects to Steiner's theory of the soul, and one would have to examine his other presentations to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of this concept. At any rate it should be evident from the above: one of the central aspects of Steiner's later theosophical concept of soul does not concern ideas, thoughts or moral intuitions, but is intimately related to "pleasure and displeasure", "joy and pain", i.e. to the role and existence of *feelings*. Thus, based on what Steiner *has actually written*, a genuine theosophical theory of the soul for him would be one that provides an explanation of the role of feelings in our inner life. – This is of course exactly Traub's interpretation of the first 1894 edition of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. It is unsurprising that Traub did not provide an analysis of Steiner's later concept of soul, because it would have completely undermined his thesis of a change in Steiner's main philosophical text. For if one follows Steiner's method, a method of going beyond the two different words "feeling" and "soul" to look at their *actual meanings*, one sees that these two concepts are reciprocally interdependent for Steiner. Hence, if the first edition of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is a presentation of the systematic role of "feeling", then it is essentially a "theory of the soul", and there is no substantial change to the 1918 edition. But Traub also wants to argue for an essential change to the second edition. In other words, one of Traub's two main interpretations of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is fundamentally flawed, because both are in contradiction with each other.

To summarize this problem with Traub's interpretation: he claims that there is an essential rupture in the second 1918 edition of Steiner's *Philosophie der Freiheit* because of the apparent introduction of a brand new theory – a theosophical theory of the soul – yet Traub does not critically define what this new theory of soul in the second edition is. Does Steiner have a theosophical theory of the soul in the sense of Fichte, Kant, Franz Brentano, Jacob Böhme, or Madame Blavatsky? Or is perhaps Steiner's theory of the soul wholly unique and original to him? One can speculate all one likes about this, but until one undertakes a careful textual analysis of Steiner's actual writings on this point, one will remain at mere empty words. At the very minimum I imagine a scientific analysis of Steiner's later theory of the soul would have to include an examination of his views in the 1904 book *Theosophie*, his 1910 *Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, as well as his 1917 text on the soul called *Von Seelenrätselfn*. And if one publishes a book with the title *Philosophie und Anthroposophie*, why not also include Steiner's unfinished 1910 text on physiology and the soul with this very title, *Anthroposophie: Ein Fragment*. In his April 2013 reply to me Traub now concedes that the word soul can indeed be found in the first 1894 edition of Steiner's *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*. However, he maintains that this does not mean that Steiner had a theory of the soul in the first edition, and thus it would be illogical to compare a non-existent theory in the first edition with another theory in the second (Traub 2013, pp. 57-58). However, that is precisely my point with regard to Traub's own claim for the second edition: merely *pointing out* that the *word soul* is more frequent in the 1918 edition does *not* automatically constitute the introduction of a *new theory* of the soul by Steiner, neither does it by any means demonstrate there is a change in his philosophy, nor is it a substitute for a proper *critical analysis* of the concept of soul on Traub's part. In his monograph Hartmut Traub has raised the serious charge that there is an essential rupture in Steiner's main philosophical work, but as it stands his charge remains unfounded and unproved.

## 8. No Goethe?

Traub believes that the influence of Goethe has been vastly overrated in the reception of Steiner's philosophical works, and argues for a "Steiner without Goethe" (T: 208-212). He asserts that one could completely dispense with Goethe and it would not affect the substance of Steiner's thought: "One can quite well understand, without any substantial loss, a spiritual scientific Rudolf Steiner without Goethe" (T: 973). In contrast, a

“Steiner without the influence of Fichte” is “scarcely conceivable at all” (T: 973). At first glance Traub’s idea might seem plausible, insofar as the reception of Steiner’s works has particularly focused on Goethe and perhaps contributed to the neglect of other thinkers like J.G. Fichte. And of course, Traub is free to leave the topic of Goethe unexamined if he so chooses. His choice to do so has allowed him to argue for the emancipation of Steiner from the influence of Goethe. (cf. Traub 2013, pp. 58-59). On the other hand, if there does exist an important Goethean *philosophical* influence in Steiner’s early writings, and not merely a literary or natural scientific one, then it is not unreasonable to ask that a serious study of Steiner’s early philosophy to consider or at least to draw attention to this influence.

Unfortunately, Traub rejects the possibility of such a Goethean influence without subjecting it to a serious examination. For example, he considers Steiner’s first book *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* (1886) to be more a literary text than a philosophical one: “The main direction of its argumentation, however, is less philosophical but rather more literary in character” (T: 27). And according to Traub, as a presentation of “Rudolf Steiner’s own position” this first book has only limited value and one should leave this text to “Goethe and Schiller research” (T: 27). Would Steiner himself agree with Traub’s characterization here? No, for Steiner held a diametrical view of his first book. Writing in 1886 to the philosophers Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Eduard von Hartmann, just after the book had been published, Steiner expressly says that although his philosophical research takes its point of departure from Goethe, the book should still be regarded as his own independent contribution to the theory of knowledge: “Even though it also connects on to Goethe, I actually openly confess that I above all wanted to furnish a contribution to epistemology and not at all a contribution to Goethe research. [...] Although it follows from Goethe, it is supposed to be less a contribution to the Goethe literature than rather a contribution to the theory of knowledge.” (Letters 25 Nov. & 21 Dec. 1886; Steiner 1985b, pp. 141, 145). Traub should be aware of Steiner’s position here because he directly quotes from another part of this same letter to Eduard von Hartmann in Part Three of his book (cf. T: 506-507). Hence, in 1886 Steiner himself is already arguing for a certain degree of autonomy and emancipation from Goethe. However, instead of critically examining the origins of Steiner’s epistemology from out of the Goethean worldview, Traub advocates ignoring this early period of Steiner, beginning his own 1,000 page study with the dissertation of 1891. As such Traub departs once more from his stated aim of a close textual study based on Steiner’s actual words.

Traub’s position is all the more extreme because as late as 1923 Steiner still regarded his first book of 1886 to be “the epistemological foundation and justification of everything that I later said and published.” (GA 2: 11). Again, in a scientific study it is not a matter of believing or disbelieving Steiner’s words here, but of objectively investigating them. In defence of his “Steiner without Goethe” approach Traub furthermore notes that Goethe’s name is only mentioned two times in passing in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (T: 211). However, Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s name is only briefly mentioned three times. If the criterion for importance in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* is the number of times a name is cited, then obviously one could not argue for much of a Fichtean influence either.

More problematic is the fact that Traub seems to deliberately omit some of Steiner’s most explicit statements on the philosophical influence of Goethe because they do not correspond to his “Steiner without Goethe” thesis. In other words, Traub fails to engage with contradictions to his own reading. Perhaps the most flagrant example of this concerns the earlier mentioned November 1890 letter to Richard Specht, where Steiner says he has been brought into “ecstasy” by Fichte’s *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*. As noted, Traub quotes from this letter over a dozen times, and it forms a central focus and leitmotif for over sixty pages in Part Four of his book. Yet in his “Steiner without Goethe” arguments Traub nowhere quotes the following paragraph from this same 1890 letter in full, in which Steiner writes:

It is wholly remarkable to me, how *Fichte* and *Goethe* work their way in from two sides and meet together at the summit in perfection. I believe I understand my epoch very well when I say: the idealism of Fichte and Goethe must bear its final fruit in a kind of freedom philosophy. Because “freedom” is the correlative of that concept for the two of them. (R. Steiner to Richard Specht, 30 Nov. 1890; Steiner 1987b, p. 38).

It is obvious: here Steiner not only points to Fichte as one of the sources for his philosophy of freedom, but explicitly singles out *Goethe too*. Even more, with regard to the philosophical conception of freedom both Fichte

and Goethe appear to form a harmonious unity for Steiner. This 1890 letter constitutes one of the primary sources for Traub's Fichtean reading of Steiner's early philosophy, and he continually refers to it throughout his book, yet he repeatedly leaves these words on Goethe unquoted in full, and thus the very possibility of a Goethean influence on Steiner's philosophy is left un-investigated and unacknowledged. As a result, Traub again invites the criticism of an intellectual bias in favour of Fichte, this time at the expense of Goethe. At the end of his book Traub writes: "It is remarkable, and in conclusion it is worth underscoring this once more, that in our reconstruction of the early developmental history of the foundations and structures of the philosophical worldview of Rudolf Steiner we did not come across any significant influences of Goethe, nor were we directed to any at all." (T: 973) One can only say that if the Steiner research of the future wishes to be considered as serious and scientific then it has to overcome this highly selective manner of quoting and proceeding.

## 9. The Johannine question

One of my main disappointments with Traub's book vis-à-vis Steiner is that he seems to be willing to carry out the process of looking for *positive* differences with regard to Fichte and other thinkers, but hardly ever with regard to Steiner. Naturally, Traub is *not obliged* to consider the possible positive differences, and since he rarely does this for the author of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* it is not surprising that he does not find Steiner to be very original. Some might say that Traub's own book is unoriginal insofar it merely repeats many of the criticisms of earlier research; however, I believe that this would be unfair. Despite not agreeing with aspects of Traub's interpretation of Steiner, and despite the similarity of some of his approaches and views with earlier critics, one should be open and objective enough to acknowledge the progress Traub has made in understanding Steiner's philosophy, especially in relation to the stream of German idealism. Here Traub's book should indeed be viewed as a milestone in Steiner research. Nevertheless, as a researcher Traub seems disinclined to investigate the possibility of *positive differences* between Steiner and other thinkers. As we saw, this unfortunately makes his book argumentatively one-sided and exposes him to the charge of intellectual bias. His tendency to uncover philosophical influences and similarities is without question one of the strengths of his book. However, by systematically presenting Steiner's supposed deficiencies, yet repeatedly failing to investigate the possibility of Steiner making a positive contribution to knowledge, it is hard to see how Traub is able to form an objective judgement of Steiner's originality or lack of it.

I will try to make this problem clearer using the concrete example of Fichte's and Steiner's commentaries on the Gospel of John. As mentioned above, I agree in part with Traub concerning the importance of Fichte's *Anweisung* for Steiner. In his book *Philosophie und Anthroposophie* Traub has rightly pointed out the many affinities in the explanations of Fichte and Steiner of the so-called "Lazarus miracle" in this gospel. Here both thinkers concentrate on the notions of death and rebirth, of spiritual love, and partaking in the eternal life of the Logos etc. (cf. T: 954-961). – However, does Traub see any major differences between their respective readings of the raising of Lazarus, or find anything innovative in Steiner's presentation? In general for Traub, all of Steiner's key interpretative elements in his *Christentum* book are simply taken wholesale from Fichte's text: "Steiner's interpretation of the Lazarus miracle reveals itself *in detail* – and without any real original difference – to be the entire Logos-Word theology of the *Anweisung*, the doctrine of eternal life and the possibility of an immediate participation in it." (T: 956). Traub repeatedly speaks of Steiner's "exact adoption of Fichte's wholly unconventional exegesis" (T: 956); the central Fichtean views – both exoteric and esoteric – are taken over by Steiner "without modification" (T: 960). Even Steiner's interpretation that the raising of Lazarus should be understood in terms of the *language of initiation* is not original for Traub: "Then what transpired here in the love that Jesus had for Lazarus, as an initiation event that is borne by metaphysical love, is exactly what Fichte had written about in the *Anweisung* concerning God love's for his existence." (T: 961).

Now Traub could be right here, and one could indeed try to argue that the most essential points of Steiner's exegesis of the raising of Lazarus can be found in Fichte's commentary. On the other hand, could Traub be attributing arguments to Fichte that are not really present in his writings, and therefore overlooking the originality and positive differences between Fichte and Steiner? It will be up to other researchers to

determine this in more detail. I will briefly conclude by asking the question: What elements of the raising of Lazarus did Fichte acknowledge to be difficult to explain? Fichte noted that the Lazarus event seemed to go against logical explanations, that it was not subject to what he called an inner rational or logical proof (*innerer Beweis*) like the rest of this gospel, and therefore appeared to be intellectually contradictory. What was Fichte's way of dealing with this problem? – He said he would leave the task of explaining how this episode could be rationally understood to a subsequent thinker. Writing in his *Staatslehre* at the end of his life in 1813: “The raising of Lazarus is evidently against it [the principle of an inner proof]: I will therefore leave it to someone else to investigate.” (Fichte 1820, p. 217; FGA II/16, p. 145).

Such a rational and non-contradictory explanation of the raising of Lazarus was attempted by Steiner in his writings and lectures on the Gospel of John. I am not arguing here for the correctness of Steiner's interpretation, but simply inquiring into whether there are crucial differences or new elements in his explanation of the Lazarus event compared to Fichte's. Steiner believed himself capable of providing a rational solution to this event by carefully examining the language of certain *key words* in this gospel. Steiner's explanation of words such as “love”, “come forth”, “birth” and “death” hinges on the fact that they have multiple levels of meaning. For instance, on the one level “love” refers to the “God's love for his existence” like we find in Fichte, yet on the other the term “loved” is also a *terminus technicus* of the language of initiation to be found in the mystery schools of ancient Greece and Egypt. “Loved” or “beloved” signifies that the neophyte had passed through an initiation. As a consequence, Steiner argued that many of the contradictions in the text are only apparent and could be overcome by viewing them from this perspective, and especially the death of Lazarus should be understood as part of an initiation ceremony, a ceremony that was formerly private in the mystery schools but here dramatically carried out on the public stage. (Cf. Steiner 1902, pp. 89-105; Steiner 1981, pp. 62-84). An unbiased reader should see that an explanation of this kind – which focuses on the *multilayered meanings* of the gospel's terminology as a way of *resolving its contradictions* – is explicitly lacking in Fichte.

Moreover, Steiner's reference to the mystery language of the text directly relates to what is arguably his most *original contribution* to the Lazarus debate. For in his *Christentum* book and later gospel lectures Steiner additionally tries to provide a solution to the so-called “Johannine Question”: to the riddle of the identity of the author of the fourth gospel. Steiner's solution is noteworthy for at least three reasons: first, in the spirit and method of J.G. Fichte, it is a rational or “inner proof”, and as such is not contrary to the intellect or logic; second, it is based on an analysis of the *composition* of the entire text; third, it is perfectly *immanent* to the gospel itself and does not rely on external documents or secondary texts. Working backwards from the fact that the author of the gospel does not name himself apart from calling himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved ... this is the disciple who testified and wrote these things” (John 21: 20-25), Steiner points out that this name is specifically given to Lazarus (John 11: 5, 36), and that it is Lazarus who is awakened or initiated by Jesus (John 11: 38-44). Combining a rational line of argumentation with an analysis of the gospel's terminology, Steiner shows in an immanent manner that the identity of the writer of the fourth gospel, the disciple whom “Jesus loved”, must be none other than the awakened (initiated) Lazarus. (Steiner 1902, pp. 89-105; and Steiner 1981, pp. 62-84). Fichte does not explicitly attempt a solution to the Johannine Question, to the problem of the authorship of this gospel, whereas Steiner's contribution to the authorship debate has been noted by some of the leading theological experts on this topic. (Cf. Cullmann 1975, p. 81). In other words, here we have a significant positive difference between Fichte's and Steiner's readings of the Gospel of John and an original contribution from the latter to understanding this text.

Of course, not the literal terms but the spirit of Steiner's writings is the most crucial aspect. However, as he himself says in his lectures on the Johannine documents, one can only arrive at the meaning or spirit of a text if one has *first* properly understood and has a thorough knowledge of its letter: “We first have to find this literal sense, first learn to know it. The following sentence is often quoted: ‘The letter kills, but the spirit gives life’ (2 Cor. 3, 6). Those who quote this sentence frequently do so in a strange manner. They take it as a license to freely use their own personal fantasy, which they then call the ‘spirit of the object’, and extract it from the words [...] We have to first of all know the letter, and then we can also kill it” (Steiner 1981, pp. 104-105).

I am of the view that this same process could hold for all textual work, and this is why I agreed with



so many of the scientific principles outlined by Traub at the beginning of his book. *First*, one strives to precisely understand the literal meaning of a text, how and why the author employs certain terms, and perhaps even the origins of the terminology and its relations to other texts; before *second*, attempting to move beyond these literal terms in order to understand the full meaning given to them by their author, or to more comprehensively grasp their sense or spirit. With regard to the fourth gospel Steiner also used following image of weighing gold: "And with such a profound ancient document as the Gospel of John it is really a matter of placing every single word on the gold scales in order to ascertain its correct value." (Steiner 1981, p. 82). To be sure, one should not merely admit this as a vague theoretical research ideal, but concretely strive to grasp the texts and terminology of an author *in practice*. In this sense as researchers it seems that we still have a long way to go in not only understanding the spirit of Steiner's writings, but also in comprehending the mere letter of his texts.

## 10. Conclusion

The main merit of Hartmut Traub's book is to have comprehensively situated Steiner's thought within the stream of philosophy with which it shares the most intellectual affinity – German idealism, and particularly the works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In addition to his detailed research on Immanuel Hermann Fichte, Traub's most original contribution is to have drawn attention to J.G. Fichte's *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, where he has highlighted the significance of its Johannine conceptions, language and arguments for Steiner's worldview. In the future I believe it will be impossible to make a serious study of Steiner's Christology and philosophy of religion without taking into account Fichte's *Anweisung* text. Moreover, Traub's extensive and critical research on the influence of J.G. Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and I.H. Fichte's anthroposophy has the potential to not only lead to a re-evaluation of a number of central conceptions in Steiner's *Philosophie der Freiheit*, but also in his later major writings such as *Theosophie* and *Das Christentum als mystische Tatsache*. In short: Traub's book provides a necessary scholarly and scientific orientation for further exploring some of the more disputed issues, theoretical influences and historical transitions between the domains of philosophy and anthroposophy in the writings of Rudolf Steiner. – Any research on the anthroposophical worldview that aspires to be scientific will have to engage with the proposed interpretations of his monograph.

Nevertheless, for a work of 1,000 pages called *Philosophie und Anthroposophie*, and which proclaims itself as the new standard on Steiner's philosophy, certain grave omissions in Traub's book cannot be overlooked. They include an inadequate understanding of Steiner's philosophical method of changing standpoints and terminology; speculative departures from his principle of a close text-critical analysis; a failure to critically investigate Steiner's claim that the historical roots of his thought reach back to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle; and even though Steiner explicitly points to Goethe's idealism as a key inspiration for his freedom philosophy, Traub rejects in advance a possible philosophical influence of Goethe, and omits a number of key textual sources that contradict his "Steiner without Goethe" thesis.

With such a contested and controversial figure as Rudolf Steiner, a precise and fair analysis of both the spirit and letter of his writings is needed. Just like in natural science, one must distinguish in Steiner's texts between the history of a word and its concept and meaning: "And even the natural scientist, when he wishes to investigate the nature of 'the human being', does not follow back how the *word* 'human being' has arisen and its evolution in language. He stays close to the object, not to the *word*, which is merely an expression of the object." (Steiner 1902, p. 6). It is the same with the word and concept "Anthroposophy". One could indeed trace the historical origins of the term back two hundred years to philosophers such as Robert Zimmermann, Immanuel Hermann Fichte or I.V.P. Troxler, and as we saw above, this philological aspect is vitally important. However, one must not remain at the mere terminological level but pass on to the word's concept, to its various meanings or underlying *spirit*. And to remember: when a concept or object is viewed from a new standpoint, one might be dealing with exactly the same object, except that it is now expressed in different terminology. In his foundational lecture of February 1913, "The Essence of Anthroposophy" (*Das Wesen der Anthroposophie*), given during the first ever general meeting of the newly founded Anthroposophical Society, Steiner proposed that the philosophical stream of "Anthropo-

Sophia” could be traced back not just two hundred years, but back more than two thousand years, to the birth of Sophia (wisdom) in ancient Greek thought. (Cf. Steiner 1988, pp. 59-78). A century after Steiner’s foundational talk of 1913, a scientific study of his claim for a more ancient heritage of Anthroposophy still remains a desideratum in the research.

We have taken the title of our essay from the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, so we will leave the last word to him. In his 1794 text *Ueber den Unterschied des Geistes, u. des Buchstabens in der Philosophie* (On the Difference between the Spirit and Letter in Philosophy) Fichte explains why a philosophy of feeling can never be a satisfying and fundamental philosophy. Why? – Because it would exclude a genuine knowledge of *truth*. Feeling can at most point us to truth, but it can never give us conscious knowledge of it; for this we need spirit:

Feeling points the way to where we may find the truth, but it only merely *points* to it; it does not furnish truth. [...] Feeling must be illuminated and developed; it has to be distinguished and determined by the power of judgment. Spirit is elevating one’s feeling into clear consciousness: remaining at mere feeling and calling upon it as a proof, is a lack of spirit; the abundant and inexhaustible fount of confused enthusiasm. (FGA II/3, p. 337).

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