

A new paradigm in dealing with anthroposophy

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Practice without theory

It has become a characteristic feature of post-Cartesian thinking to regard mind or spirit merely as an abstract name rather than as something real. Of course, most scientists nowadays do not arrive at this view by philosophising. They simply pursue science, which involves collecting data and deriving conclusions from it. If there is a hypothesis to be proven, predictions will be made from it and then tested by experiment. When it comes to such a hypothesis as that of spirit or God there may well be a philosophy of religion or theological tradition to account for it, but experiments along the lines of physics or other sciences cannot be expected to provide any kind of proof, and so it will be seen either as a fiction or an assumption justified by a venerable tradition, or at best it will be banished into the realm of purely subjective experience.

Rudolf Steiner's works consist largely of descriptions of, or arguments leading to, spiritual facts and processes, i.e. their content for the most part is unashamedly metaphysical. It does not matter that he adopts a realist as opposed to a nominalist view of thinking in order to portray so-called super-sensible components of the human organism that inhabit the physical, or beings and processes completely beyond the dimensions of time and space: according to today's standards they will all be deemed unscientific. That this has become the "official" position has much to do not only with the ascendancy of science since the 15th century, but also with Immanuel Kant's strict separation of belief from knowledge. For Kant knowledge of the super-sensible is only possible as the transcendental reflection of the structure of cognition. Ideas like God, freedom and immortality thus end up as the prerogative of religious belief, concrete descriptions of spiritual facts as "spiritualist dreams".

The radical step Steiner took was in questioning the exclusion of the super-sensible from the realm of factual knowledge. With anthroposophy he launched a science of spiritual reality. This science involved entering into the domain of the spiritual as an observer applying a particular method, and its only acceptable content was to be direct individual experience arising from such observation. This impulse to develop a new approach to mystery knowledge (i.e. according to the method that had been taking hold of the sciences ever since the 15th century) could not help but be in potential conflict both with traditional religious attitudes and with a science that had entirely secularised its objects of study. In doing so the latter lays itself open to the serious charge of systemically unjustified metaphysics.

Anthroposophy, however, is methodologically at odds with religious belief and ontologically incompatible with the physicalism of natural science, and as such is never going to fit into either milieu. Its marginal academic existence as an intellectual pariah was and is scarcely to be avoided, and thus conflict with the academic establishment is a foregone conclusion. Its apologists have therefore pitched their tents in the fields of practical life, put down roots there and found thereby a certain degree of public acceptance. Practical

success has led them to leave the vagaries of theory in the background, and, what is more, they have been encouraged by well-meaning critics to continue their anthroposophically-based practice, but minus the worldview overload and even, if possible, without Rudolf Steiner. However attractive for some ears this might sound, before too long the enterprise will not be able to keep pace with itself, as an inevitable consequence of bad faith. For just as good engineering practice cannot be sustained without theory and ongoing research, so anthroposophical practice can hardly expect to succeed for long without recourse to its knowledge base and to renewal through research. Effectiveness in practice depends upon the solidity of theory, and if the latter is marginalised, sooner or later this will undermine practice and render it obsolete. The satisfaction of practical success on its own will not be enough to meet the reality of the situation. Theory and research are indispensable, and in this particular case are not easy requirements to fulfil.

Expertise and Discourse

Anyone with even a little familiarity with anthroposophy will be aware that it is a very demanding subject. Going deeper will, if anything, make things more difficult. The thing is that it grants considerable scope to the powers of thinking and experience, confronting its readers or listeners with concepts and facts which are very complex and far removed from every-day thinking and the phenomena normally dealt with in the established sciences. Moreover, among the public there exist images and opinions of it which can often cause embarrassment, even shame, for those interested in anthroposophy. In this age of mass media, in addition to the simple act of reading a book or attending a lecture, we have the world-wide dissemination of all kinds of information and misinformation, which unleashes its effects with little regard for the truth. In these hastily compiled postings and “revelations” it is not possible immediately to distinguish what is accurate and what not, and on top of that there are within the anthroposophical world no professionals charged with the task of giving out reliable information. The case of Helmut Zander is a clear indication that there is a crying need for such people. What is remarkable here is that someone who, like Zander, is a catholic theologian engaged in the training of priests at the ecclesiastical university of Fribourg could have managed to develop the reputation of a recognised expert on anthroposophy. In recent years Zander has been asked for comment not only by high-profile newspapers and periodicals, but also by the German Science Council (“Wissenschaftsrat”), and on occasion will offer his opinions unprompted.

The phenomenon “Zander and anthroposophy” is both remarkable and strange. Given the fact that one might want to portray anthroposophy as some kind of dogmatic religious movement, it would be somewhat inappropriate to bring in a representative of another religious movement also based on a system of dogma, in this case catholic theology, for the purposes of independent, critical appraisal. Whoever wishes to gain reliable knowledge of protestant or catholic theology is surely not going to consult a mullah in Ghom or the Dalai Lama, but will turn to actual followers of these teachings. The same goes for more trivial contexts: while it is possible to ask a handball player what he thinks of judo, his judgement on the matter would not be expected to out-face someone with many years’ experience of doing judo, nor would wine connoisseurs be asked to assess the quality of whisky.

If, in keeping with Steiner’s own view, we accept that anthroposophy is every bit as much a science of the spirit as natural science is a science of nature, then the peer-review principle should be encouraged in equal measure. The latter stipulates that a paper, say, on epistemology cannot be satisfactorily evaluated by an ethics expert or, for that matter, a geologist. Rather, its initial appraisal must be performed by someone expert in the actual subject. It might be objected that Zander is only asked for comment in his capacity as a historian, and that it is, therefore, perfectly valid for him to be trusted as an expert on anthroposophy as a historical phenomenon. If this were the case, there would be nothing else to say. But the reality of the situation is different, for Zander is much less often asked about the history of anthroposophy and its relationship to theosophy than about anthroposophy itself; e.g. areas such as philosophy, educational theory etc., where he is not known as an expert.

Experts from the outside

My intention here is not to enter into a discussion of Zander's perspectives on Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, nor would I wish to deny that Zander's view, as it were, from outside can be really stimulating for "insiders" as well as "outsiders". I am much more interested in the question of how this strange development of a non-expert being elevated to the position of publicly recognised expert on matters of Steiner and anthroposophy could come about, and how his judgement should be preferred for its higher objectivity.

In certain journalistic and academic circles people have evidently latched onto the notion that if an objective, factual assessment of anthroposophy is what you are after, then it is better not to consult Steiner sympathisers. The assumption seems to be that this group of people are incapable of such a thing, or at least will find it highly problematic. Simply pointing out that an author is obviously "an anthroposophist" is usually enough to make many a critic repudiate his scientific credibility. Clearly, behind all this lies the presumption that Steiner's supporters are either generally incapable of objective judgements, or in a particular case unsuitable on account of their identification with Steiner's ideas. By the same token, people who are sceptical in relation to a given worldview, the Steinerian one in particular, are felt to be better placed to deliver well-founded comments on it.

When these assumptions are thought through their weakness becomes obvious. They suggest that recognition of Steiner's theories cannot be founded upon rational grounds, and approval of anthroposophy can only be the result of an irrational decision. This approval is likely to be traced to indoctrination, subjective, psychological weaknesses such as a tendency to mysticism, or to some other kind of logical blindness; but even if it is considered to have come about through rational insight, objective evaluation remains in the hands of those who have not allowed themselves to be influenced by Steiner's ideas and have preserved their sceptical and disapproving distance. Thus it appears as if outsider experts are the only feasible way to arrive at reliable Steiner criticism.

These mostly unspoken assumptions are found in all shades of public opinion. As far as I can see, they owe their prominence and effectiveness not so much to their power of philosophical or scientific persuasion as to a certain image of anthroposophy and other spiritual worldviews that lives in the kind of intellectual discourse that influences public opinion. Here anthroposophy and other spiritual worldviews only eke out a dubious, marginal existence. Spiritual practices figure in many people's private lives, but just like naturopathy, many varieties of which are widely known and used, they are not intellectually "respectable". As a rule they are an aspect of life-style rather than the current culture of intellectual ideas.

This is particularly true of the public attitude to anthroposophy, and anthroposophists' fondness, in relation to Steiner's presentations, for putting experience before understanding, openness to inspiration and the testimony of sleep before debate and intellectual effort has doubtless produced its social consequences. It has meant that the public image of anthroposophy has so far been one of academic professionalism and seriousness only to a very limited extent. Broadly speaking, what is perceived instead is a lay movement, which as regards its practical and theoretical interpretations of Steiner's works has very little in the way of corrective debate or a culture of criticism. A trained elite which sets critical standards has never really taken shape, and where such a course has been attempted, these instances remain isolated or have not been understood.

In his lifetime, however, Steiner certainly did set standards of criticism, but those who came after him mostly tried to justify themselves not so much through the quality of their own utterances as through their biographical or textual closeness to the author. The post-Steiner anthroposophy of the 20th century has had a basic tendency to engender fear of intellectuality, and thus fundamental discursive analysis has been branded as abstract and unnecessarily fastidious. The intelligentsia at large has reacted to this with something like "anthroposophobia".

Courage to participate in discourse and research

My contention is, then, that this lack of constructive critical discourse within anthroposophical ranks has created a "reflection vacuum", which on account of the breadth of public awareness of anthroposophy in

practice has led inevitably to the call for external criticism. Helmut Zander's influence on the public debate owes its effectiveness to just this discursive vacuum and the lack of a culture of critical research in relation to Steiner's works among those attempting to render them accessible. Zander's findings on the history of anthroposophy, much more than his commentaries on Steiner's ideas, are helpful in my opinion and capable of contributing much to specialist discourse in this field, although not of replacing it entirely. Authentic critical discourse comes less from outside than from within a particular discipline, and should be a part of any well-founded field of knowledge. In the case of anthroposophy this does not mean sliding into a quotation trade-off, critics vying with each other for the position of Steiner's true interpreter, the first to have understood him correctly (the anthroposophical movement has seen enough of this already). Rather, following Steiner's example, the thing is simply to try, however modestly, to render spiritual reality accessible, and to offer the fruits of these attempts for discussion. This is as straightforward as it is exacting. We must find a new way of working with anthroposophy. One that takes Steiner more seriously in a methodological sense and is, at the same time, more authentic. If this doesn't happen, then we can be certain that the Spirit will completely change course, withdrawing from those who think they have it in their grasp, to range according to its own being wherever and however it will.