

# Reconciling philosophy and anthroposophy in the works of Rudolf Steiner – obstacles and possible ways round them

Hartmut Traub

## Part I Obstacles

*Introduction. The “distinguishing feature” of the early writings*

On 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1895 Rudolf Steiner receives from Ernst Haeckel, the famous biology professor, a letter, the content of which is as follows:

*Most Highly Esteemed Doctor Steiner, before his Magnificence, the rector of our university and the provincial minister of higher education write to you formally, I take it upon myself to inform you of an important matter pertaining to yourself, and without further ado will come straight to the point. Following the departure of their colleague, Julius Lange, for Kiel, the academic board of the faculty of philosophy at the University of Jena is seriously considering you as the replacement to fill this vacant professorship. Your recently published Philosophy of Freedom, together with your numerous other philosophical writings have convinced the faculty of the originality of your philosophy, and they are willing to recognise your works to date as sufficient to fulfil the conditions of professorial appointment. That I – subsequent to our conversation at my sixtieth birthday celebration, which you were gracious enough to attend – was not entirely uninvolved in the decision-making process, you can well appreciate. But on that account, my dear Steiner, mum’s the word. So, you may reckon with the fact that you will shortly be called to Jena.*

*I heartily congratulate you upon this, the fulfilment of your dearest wish. At last you will have the privilege of – as you once so beautifully expressed it – “being free to soar in the clear heaven of pure philosophy teaching”. I look forward to our working together on monism, a subject that lies so close to our hearts.*

*Most respectfully yours,*

*Ernst Haeckel*

*Jena, 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1895.*

Then in the winter term of 1895/96 Steiner takes his seat as Professor of Modern Philosophy in Jena and lectures there on *the foundations of epistemology*, and on *pessimism and optimism* as well.

Steiner has at last achieved the aim of all his literary efforts.

Things could well have turned out like this. Nor would it have been entirely improbable if they had.

However, Haeckel wrote no such letter, nor was Steiner ever called to Jena – to his great disappointment. Soaring off into “the clear heaven of pure philosophy teaching” never happened. Whether this boded well or ill for Steiner could not then be discerned.

What do we learn from this thought experiment? As far as I can see, two things.

Firstly:

This highly possible turn in Steiner's biography towards an academic path would in all probability have severely curtailed his professional interest and later involvement in the esoteric movement. He would very likely not have met Jakobowski, Blavatsky and Besant, and, of course, without them he would never have developed his own esoteric theory and practice.

Secondly, there is the fact that the things Steiner had written up to then would still exist even without his later shift towards the esoteric, and would have to be understood without their later anthroposophical revisions and interpretations.

This means that it is not only possible but a very good idea to study Steiner's early philosophical writings without paying any attention to their later anthroposophical reinterpretation. These works would have existed even if Steiner had not found his way into theosophy and anthroposophy. This opens up the possibility of doing legitimate, non-anthroposophical research on Steiner.

Extraordinary as it may seem, this approach is advocated by Steiner himself. In the foreword to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Theosophy* he states that that book and *The Philosophy of Freedom* represent two different ways of pursuing the truth, and that in doing so "to understand the one [...] the other is not necessary." (Steiner, 2003, p. 12)

In thus pointing out the viability of a non-anthroposophical approach I am not pleading for a strict separation between an anthroposophical and a pre-anthroposophical Steiner. Quite the contrary. Rather, what is being underlined is the need to make clear distinctions within the context of Steiner's works viewed as a whole. A view which enables us to chart the history of the emergence of anthroposophy from its non-anthroposophical roots *without* – so I postulate – *anthroposophically overelaborating philosophy in the process or philosophically diluting anthroposophy*.

For the point is that while knowledge of either one, as was stated above, is not essential for understanding the other, "for many", as Steiner says later in the same Foreword, "it would certainly be useful." (ibid.)

I would like to illustrate what I mean by anthroposophy overelaborating the philosophical texts by describing two problems.

#### *The first problem: Three examples of anthroposophical overelaboration of the philosophical texts*

1. In his essay on *Rudolf Steiner's Philosophy of Freedom*, entitled "Von der Intuition zur Erfahrung. Denkbeobachtungen in ihrem inneren Zusammenhang"<sup>1</sup>, Dietrich Rapp maintains that chapter III of *The Philosophy of Freedom* ("Thinking in the service of knowledge") is built, "as Rudolf Steiner says", upon a model of thinking that ascends through four stages. In upward order these are named as "the activity of thinking", "the clarity of thinking", "the foundation of thinking", "the ontological reality of thinking". On the fourth and highest level, according to Rapp, the spiritual activity of the universe individualises itself, whereby the thinking individual is made party to this activity. In summing up the model, he states that without this fourth stage the other three "would be left vaguely hanging [...], ultimately unfounded [...], open to doubt [...] and capable of being misconstrued as a metaphysical construct" (RSPF, p. 236 et seqq.). In a further step Rapp projects Steiner's assumed four-stage scheme onto the whole development of philosophy, and especially the historical debate on the concept of intellectual intuition, assigning to Kant, Fichte and Schelling stages one to three, and the grand culminating fourth stage to Steiner.

Rapp's anthroposophical overelaboration upon the original text consists firstly in the fact that he asserts that Steiner himself spoke in chapter III of "four 'characteristic features' of 'thinking' as a concrete reality" (RSPF p. 226 et seqq.). This is simply not the case. The commentator has insinuated the number four into the text. Steiner himself is numerically non-specific in speaking about "the particular nature" or "a further characteristic feature" of thinking (Steiner, 1995, p. 42). Even piecing together such fragments from the text is already going too far.

The second way Rapp "anthroposophises" the text here lies in the fact that he takes all the supporting

---

1. Rapp, 1994, p. 223-256. In subsequent references RSPF.

arguments for the construction of *his* model of thinking exclusively from Steiner's anthroposophy-inspired additions to the second edition – which were not solely concerned with this chapter. In the original text of *The Philosophy of Freedom* there is no mention of thinking as an *ontological reality* or as a *being* or special dimension in which the other three modes introduced by Rapp culminate.

Let us now look at the section called “From Kant to Steiner”, where Rapp brings things to their historical climax. This is a not altogether happy combination, for it would require that chapter IV of the first edition contain discussions of the positions of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, but not of Steiner himself. This would in itself have made things somewhat unclear. But added to this is the fact that the original text does not speak of Kant or Fichte at all. It does, however, speak of Descartes, of Eduard von Hartmann by way of implication, and of an unspecified physiological theory of cognition.<sup>2</sup>

Rapp's construction, in chapter III of the *Philosophy of Freedom*, of a four-stage model of thinking culminating in Steiner does not have to be accepted, nor do I in fact accept it. The original text provides good grounds for this. In my opinion chapter IV contains a coherent, evidence-based theory of how the constitution of the self can be experienced through thinking. Upon this basis, then, in chapter VI (“The Act of Knowing”) a theory of the universality of thinking is built up. This conception, which is constitutive of the self (the “I”) and at the same time opens the way to the universal, complements, on the one hand, the particularity of percepts with their universal, conceptual aspect and thus opens, on the other hand, the door to objectivity and the knowledge of “total reality”. It is, therefore, not Steiner's amendments of 1918 but the original chapter six which contains the “element” that forms the basis of Rapp's envisaged fourth stage: namely, that universal attribute of thinking which as “an absolute power pure and simple [...] orders my limited existence from a higher sphere.” (Steiner, 1995, p. 90).

As we see, to arrive at this insight there was no need for Rapp's anthroposophical coating and arbitrary alteration of chapter IV.

The original text, in my opinion, has philosophical substance in its own right. It contains a complex and creative theory of thinking which is worthy of discussion without its coating of anthroposophy. To regard this theory as mainly emerging from Steiner's later additions and to interpret it arbitrarily in terms of a four-stage model is not only to overstep the original remit of the chapter but also to destroy the meaningful context it establishes for the considerations that follow.

Second example of anthroposophical overelaboration,

In a detailed review of my book in “Die Drei”, the *Zeitschrift für Anthroposophie in Wissenschaft, Kunst und sozialem Leben* (Journal for Anthroposophy in Science, Art and Social Life)<sup>3</sup>, David Wood criticises my contention that no anthroposophical theory of the soul, in other words, no clear *concept of the soul* is to be found in the first edition of the *Philosophy of Freedom*. Steiner, in 1918, was more concerned – according to my contention – with highlighting certain passages in the first edition in terms of the theosophical-anthroposophical theory of the soul.

In his review Wood tries to prove that this assertion of mine is false. He says that in order to discover the anthroposophical soul concept in the first edition we need to keep in mind what Steiner wrote about the soul in *Theosophy* in 1904, namely, that it is bound up with the “role of the feelings”. From this the reviewer then argues that since Steiner also has much to say in the first edition of *the Philosophy of Freedom* on the subject of feelings, it follows that it also can be seen, in essence, as containing an anthroposophical theory of the soul.

One could not hope for a better illustration of retrospective “anthroposophising” of earlier philosophical texts and my reasons for criticising this.

The original text is not permitted to speak for itself. In order to make sense of it (i.e. anthroposophical sense), the later developed theosophical model of the soul must be pressed into interpretive service – albeit a very small aspect of it. Only by mustering the full machinery of anthroposophical interpretation does Wood

2. This subject is dealt with in more detail in: Hartmut Traub, 2011, p. 329-380. In subsequent references *PuA*.

3. Die Drei, 2013, p. 52.

gain access – if at all – to the meaning of the first edition's text, and only to a very limited extent at that. In my opinion my critic is not following a legitimate scientific method here. For one thing, it superimposes upon the text a meaning – based upon a theosophical-anthroposophical theory – that it does not contain.<sup>4</sup> For another, the anthroposophical style of interpretation devalues the first edition of the *Philosophy of Freedom's* clear definition of a concept. To construe the few attempts to provide a theoretical account of human feeling scattered through the first edition as evidence of its containing a complete, theosophical theory of the soul is, in my opinion, somewhere between risky and absurd. Wood's contention here cannot be seen as proof, but at best as an assumption in need of testing. That Steiner himself understood the concept or idea of the soul as something other than the problematical correspondence of two expressions with similar meanings need not be gone into in the present context. This is already well-known. On the subject of the soul in the first edition of *the Philosophy of Freedom* there is nothing that fulfils the criteria by which he defines the terms concept and idea. To maintain that it does places exaggerated demands on the text and misreads the meaning of the tools of knowledge introduced by Steiner himself, namely his understanding of the concept and the idea.

My third example of anthroposophical overelaboration is something that was said at one of our last meetings here – I have no written source for it.

One of the contributions at a recent meeting of our discussion group on *Philosophy and Anthroposophy* was concerned with laying bare the occult sub-structure of the text of *the Philosophy of Freedom*. Material was presented to show that the structure of the previously mentioned chapter called “The Act of Knowing” (chapter V in the second edition), is based, in correspondence to the number five, upon the pentagram. This, it was also maintained, bestowed supersensible confirmation upon the content. Whether there is anything in this piece of esoteric detective work, I will not go into here. I would only point out, however, that the second edition's chapter V appeared originally as chapter VI. This presumably means that its underlying occult structure in the first edition should have been a hexagram.

To sum up:

As I see it, the problems attendant upon an anthroposophical interpretation of Steiner's early philosophical writings are that it

1. does not stand up to critical analysis of the text
2. over-rides the original spiritual substance of the text through anthroposophy-laden impositions, and thus
3. lays itself open to the accusation of implausibility – i.e. damages its claim to the title of serious research.

*The second problem: The demand that interpretation of Steiner texts be auto-referential*

My book has come in for some adverse criticism from the aforementioned David Wood, as well as several others involved in Steiner criticism. They regard its analysis of Steiner texts as misguided, because it judges Steiner from the external perspective of the authors he criticizes, rather than taking him on his own intrinsic terms – the implication being, of course, that such an auto-referential approach is nothing other than anthroposophical interpretation.

In keeping with my original postulate on the need *to avoid anthroposophical overelaboration of Steiner's philosophy and philosophical dilution of anthroposophy*, it would seem to me to be advisable to clearly distinguish just what is involved in the concept of auto-referential interpretation.

In this connection I offer four observations and a possible solution:

1. Auto-referential reconstructions of texts are necessary to do justice to an author and his work. My intention in saying this is to support critics in their efforts to deal respectfully with the structure and content of an author's works, and to encourage them to analyse texts right down to their fine details

---

4. To convince oneself of this, a glance into Steiner's “Remarks and Amendments” to pages 36-60 of “Theosophy” (Steiner, 2003, p. 196 et seq.) will suffice. The seven-fold “anatomy” of the soul based upon the theory of the prismatic colours to be found there has very little to do with what Steiner writes about soul or feeling in “The Philosophy of Freedom”.

before bringing in any interpretive models foreign to the text. This does not preclude taking a critical stance in relation to the text's factual accuracy and contextual coherence, for texts are not always free of contradiction nor are arguments always watertight.<sup>5</sup>

2. Auto-referential interpretation in the case of Steiner's early philosophical writings for me implies treating the texts in terms of their own intrinsic argumentative structure with no recourse to any external interpretive models – later anthroposophy, for instance. They have a “unique distinguishing feature” to which we should strive to do justice. Thus interpreting Steiner's pre-theosophical phase in anthroposophical terms is an approach that brings in elements foreign to the text, and as such it is not auto-referential. Its legitimation cannot be taken for granted. Whether bringing anthroposophical insights into play in the analysis of a pre-anthroposophical text is appropriate or not is something that must be decided in each individual case through critical experience of the original text. In this connection I would like to call to mind once again that Steiner characterised *Theosophy* and *The Philosophy of Freedom* as two different and independent paths of knowledge.

3. Auto-referential interpretation, however, has one glaring shortcoming. If it is the only permissible form of interpretation, this feeds the fully justified suspicion that a strategy of immunisation against all external criticism is being pursued. Even the world of Baron von Münchhausen is a self-consistent system, and the same goes for many mythologies, political ideologies and other worldviews. While viewing these solely in terms of their own principles of validity might increase our understanding, it robs us of the possibility of open, scientific discussion.

4. To take a meta-contextual approach to a text is appropriate when an author – in our case, Steiner – is engaged in assessing the relative merits of various philosophical positions in the history of thought and consciousness and, through criticising them, is seeking to advance his own cause. In such a case to keep to purely auto-referential interpretation and uncritically accept Steiner's assessments, both true and false, is to abandon any chance of entering into the spirit of the discussion and of forming one's own judgment in relation to it.

To sum up:

Steiner criticism is called upon not only to deal with issues intrinsic to a particular text, such as its freedom from contradiction and the consistency or inconsistency of its philosophical and anthroposophical thinking, but also to take things from a more extrinsic perspective, critically assessing the factual accuracy of his treatment of various philosophical positions, both those he approves and those he rejects – say, his “Spinozism”, “Goetheanism”, “Kantianism” or “Stirnian Anarchism”. Such an attitude – rooted in facts but at the same time open in its interpretations and evaluations – is just what Steiner criticism needs, especially if it is to make a fair showing beyond the inner circle of “initiates” and succeed in disseminating Steiner's insights and ideas.<sup>6</sup>

To conclude this section, a suggested solution:

The question of the auto-referential interpretation of Steiner's writings requires, *particularly in his case*, special critical attention. The sensitive issue here has to do with what I have elsewhere called “interpretive elitism”. If anthroposophists did not so stubbornly insist upon their claim to be the exclusive arbiters of anthroposophical Steiner interpretation, we would not need to waste any words on this subject. If, in connection with this problem, we take other philosophers into consideration, applying in the process a principle of extrinsic interpretation, we quickly establish that critics dealing, say, with Plato, Fichte, Heidegger or Wittgenstein have no problem distinguishing between the styles of thinking found in their early and late works, nor in registering significant processes of transformation and recognising the intellectual originality of each phase. Such critics have even been known to uphold such distinctions in the face of an author's own assertions concerning the “philosophical unity” of his works.

5. By the same token, criterion of auto-referential interpretation is also a rejection of constructivism, a currently very virulent mode of criticism which advocates piecing together philosophical and literary texts to form arbitrary theories.

6. This open and critical attitude also implies circumspection in the matter of holding up Steiner as the precursor of a whole range of scientific innovations. The “cloaks” that have been draped around him – that of Heisenberg or Husserl, say – seem to me to be a couple of sizes too large. This comes across as funny, odd, rather than plausible.

No Plato critic would “bend over backwards” to prove that the doctrine of ideas in Plato’s late work is contained in the early dialogues. Nor would there be any desire to confound Fichte’s early “philosophy of the absolute ‘I’” with the “theory of being and life” of his later works, or the existential analysis in Heidegger’s “Being and Time” with his philosophy of “*Seinslichtung*”, or indeed Wittgenstein’s early linguistic analysis with his later approach based on speech therapy.

Why cannot Steiner criticism also follow the sensible and fruitful principle of such a distinction-making procedure in its textual analysis. That there are connections between developmental phases, that it makes sense to compare them, that a philosopher’s thinking – Steiner’s as well – has its origins and growth, I will not dispute, no less than I would the fact that there are also discontinuities and incompatibilities.

## Part II Three possible ways of reconciling philosophy and anthroposophy in the works of Rudolf Steiner

### 1. *Philosophy and anthroposophy as empirical sciences of spiritual liberation*

In his essay, “Special encouragement through a single well-chosen word”, Goethe expresses his pleasure that his “way of working”, in other words his scientific method, is characterized in such well-chosen terms as “concrete thinking” in one of the key works on *human natural science*<sup>7</sup> by the Leipzig Prof. of “psychic therapy”, Johann Christian August Heinroth (1773-1843). According to Goethe, Heinroth’s intention in describing the Goethean “way of working” in these terms was to say: “that my thinking does not separate itself from objects, that the elements of the objects of my perception penetrate the same [i.e. his thinking] and are in turn completely permeated by it; that my perceiving is itself a thinking, and my thinking a perceiving; from such a method my esteemed friend (Dr. Heinroth) is disinclined to withhold his approval” (ibid. p. 31).

As is well known, this is one of the key texts through which Steiner felt justified in imputing to Goethe a consciously worked out epistemological methodology; a text which also had a definitive influence on the development of Steiner’s own theory of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

What Steiner did was to extend this method of “concrete thinking”, which Goethe applied to natural phenomena, to processes and structures of human cognition in general. Herein lies the origin of his empirical phenomenology of consciousness, of a mode of analysis which Steiner, in his theosophical and anthroposophical investigations – for instance, in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* or *Theosophy* – developed into a practical path for the discovery and training of the inherent capacities of the human soul and spirit.<sup>9</sup>

However much my book might have been criticised, the critics are all united on one point: it convincingly demonstrated that Rudolf Steiner’s philosophical worldview is firmly rooted in the spirit of classical German philosophy.

On the one hand, then, we have Steiner’s universal strain of experience-based “concrete thinking”, which he derived from Goethe; on the other, the axiom of the individual “cogito”, reaching back to Descartes and from there continuing on into the philosophy of German idealism. In these two I see the first major opportunity for anthroposophy, in combination with the idealist roots of Steiner’s philosophical thinking, to take its place as an attractive alternative to the ruling analytical and neuro-biological philosophy of mind and consciousness.

7. Goethe (n.d., p. 31 et seqq.). Translator’s note: the German word here is *Anthropologie*, and although this is actually an English word, it is not used in German in the same way as the equivalent term in English, so to put *anthropology* here would be seriously misleading. There is actually no precise equivalent for this German use of the term – hence my “human natural science”.

8. Cf. for instance: Goethe (n.d., p. 31 et seqq.), Fn. p. 8, and Traub (2013, p. 139-151).

9. The question is whether Goethe’s “sociological” studies – “Elective Affinities”, say – do not also follow the same “natural scientific” principle of analysis and synthesis of phenomenon and structure. Cf. Horst Günther (ed. 1981, p. 329): However that may be, it should be noted that Goethe had strong reservations about seeking self-knowledge through pure introspection. Against the maxim “Know thyself”, which he criticised as an invitation to “inner navel-gazing”, he set this: “The human being only knows himself insofar as he knows the world, by becoming aware of her only in himself and himself only in her.” In pursuance of this “the most useful” are the things our “fellow human beings” know about us (ibid. p.164). Cf. here also Fichte’s critique of the “mood of speculation” in: “Ascetik als Anhang zur Moral”, Fichte (1834-46, XI, p. 139 et seqq.) and Kant’s “criterium veritas externum”, in: Kant (1964, V, p. 409).

The fact is that both these strains of philosophical tradition have always tended towards the emancipation of mind. The thinker, as subject involved in an active process is, insofar as his thinking lives in his perception, considered as an emancipated entity, rather than left to wither into a passive object of external analysis. It is precisely this tendency towards emancipation and liberation, in opposition to all theoretical and ideological dogmas, together with the intention to strengthen the individual's capacity to find things out for himself, that makes both the young and the anthroposophical Steiner such an interesting ally of classical idealism (Steiner, 2003, p. 172). Conversely, this connection guarantees anthroposophy, in large part, a firm position within the history of European philosophy. This productive complementarity between anthroposophy and idealism, as construed in Steiner's early works, is no abstract postulate. Far rather, a host of parallels and continuities clamour for attention, especially on the level of practical application, i.e. in the theory and practice of spiritual training. Their central point of agreement is in regarding the self as a field of experiment. This is the be-all and end-all of epistemology. The intention in following this principle is to arrive at directly experienced, secure knowledge of one's own capacities of soul and spirit, and through such investigation to develop and deepen them. Here anthroposophy (Steiner, 2003, p. 172 et seqq.) finds itself in a productive relationship both to Steiner's early philosophical experiments in *Truth and Science* (Steiner, 1980, 64 et seqq.)<sup>10</sup> and to the idealist tradition behind them, especially Hegel and Fichte. In this connection I would like to draw attention to an interesting overlap between the work of the former general secretary of the *Anthroposophical Society in America*, Arthur Zajonc, and that of Fichte. On the one hand we have Zajonc's practical re-interpretation of Steiner's *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, and on the other Fichte's presentation of his lectures and seminars, as re-constructed by the Swiss philosopher, Joseph Beeler-Port, in his book *Verklärung des Auges*.<sup>11</sup> In what follows I will have occasion to use Zajonc's *Meditation as Contemplative Enquiry* as an anthroposophical reference point in my analysis. For Fichte and Steiner, as for Hegel, as regards spiritual practice it was not – as is shown by their *pragmatic* examples of such processes – simply a matter of providing an introduction to the *subject* of philosophy, but a user's guide to its practice. They were concerned with living construction, not static reproduction, with the *medicinam mentis* (Fichte), with contemplative health (Steiner, 2003, p. 194), not with outward descriptions of mental phenomena. What was important was the schooling of attention, not terminology, the practice of letting go, not getting stuck in ideology. Above all, it was a question of the experimental process of living, spiritual experience, and not of a catalogue of known outcomes of thinking.

Unfortunately I can do no more here, and in what follows, than draw attention to the kinship between anthroposophy and idealism, especially on the practical level. It would be fascinating to make a detailed comparison between Zajonc's seminars on Steiner's path of training in spiritual science and Fichte's pragmatic guide to working out for oneself *the nature of scientific thinking*. Here it would be far less a matter of demonstrating a strict parallelism as of making clear their common basic existential concern with emancipation, which the young Steiner also shared with the master thinkers of idealism. In this I perceive a productive – if not always entirely clear – continuity between the philosophical and anthroposophical Steiner. This also represents an especially interesting point of departure for the anthroposophical interpretation of Steiner. In the following section – my second suggestion as to how Steiner's early philosophical writings might be interpreted in anthroposophical terms – I will explore this connection in more detail.

## 2. Rational spirituality Beyond vacuous esotericism

Self-knowledge, in eastern as in western thinking, entails stepping out of the ceaseless flow of the inner and outer events of daily life. A turning away from the haste of the busy world towards the stillness of a detached inner calm (Steiner, 2003, p. 180).<sup>12</sup> Taking our lead from Plato's "cave analogy" we may call this gesture the "periagogic transition". The entity I thus perceive as my own "state of calm" (Heidegger) is called the

10. Traub, 2011, p. 922 et seqq.

11. Beeler-Port, 1979.

12. Certain thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Schlegel for instance, called this gesture *irony*. The use of this as an opportunity to come to the reality of the self by one's own efforts has most recently been dealt with by P. L. Oesterreich, 2011.

“silent self” or “not-I” by anthroposophists,<sup>13</sup> because it is essential to distinguish it from the everyday self. Guidance in how to open up this spiritual “inner space” is intended to give the disciple the contemplative tools required to pacify the wayward,<sup>14</sup> uncontrolled stream of thoughts and images and thus bring about the “birth of the silent self”<sup>15</sup>; in other words, lucid, conscious experience of the Self as the original and authentic source of vitality.

At the core of the richly associative, anthroposophical picture-language concerning the “new field of inner awareness”, the “birth of the silent self”, the “new-born vitality of thinking”<sup>16</sup> etc. is the starting point of modern philosophy: Descartes’ *cogito*, i.e. the activity – executed or experienced in full self-awareness – of my affective, voluntary and intellectual being. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner explicitly refers to Descartes’ *cogito* both as the *systematic* basis of the experience of thinking and as the origin of *individual* consciousness.

A pre-destined access to European mysticism, or mysticism in general, is not the only thing that emerges for anthroposophy out of this context, but also something which, in my opinion, is much more significant. The close kinship between the anthroposophical version of spiritual training and the pragmatic training of thought that has come down to us through classical, modern philosophy bestows upon anthroposophy its valid claim to being scientific in principle. In other words, it is aligned with that very style of thinking which distinguishes modern philosophy from various strains of mysticism, romantic fantasising and other forms of irrationalism.<sup>17</sup>

The opening of this “inner field of awareness” in its specifically *philosophical* form qualifies the “birth” of the “silent self”, which lights up at this “periagogic transition”, as the “birth” of a *genuinely thinking being*, i.e. one in tune with concepts and ideas in general. Here, of course, it goes without saying that concepts are much more than just agreed linguistic signs that ease the process of scientific discourse.<sup>18</sup> Defining the Self (the “I”) as *cogito* permits us to establish a secure line of demarcation between the philosophical and anthroposophical experience of the reality of self and mere inward “brooding upon pleasant feelings”<sup>19</sup> – an attitude criticised by Steiner in his early and late works in equal measure (Steiner, 2003, p. 174). Here, in this realisation of the Self as the competent vehicle of concepts and ideas, lies the opportunity of moving beyond subjectivity to an objective experience of reality, which permits access, *in thinking* (i.e. philosophically in the widest sense of the term), not only to the ontological and metaphysical structures of the phenomena of inner experience, but also the deep structure of the phenomena of objective spirit in nature and culture, intersubjectivity, society and history. In its thematic breadth and depth *The Philosophy of Freedom*, particularly, has much to offer in this regard.

### 3. Rudolf Steiner’s discovery of the fundamentally ethical nature of all thought

It is abundantly clear to me that with my criticism of Steiner’s failure to complete the basic moral-ethical structure behind his theory of knowledge and of the supposedly rigorous “epistemological foundations of the *science of freedom*” (Zajonc) I am walking over a minefield. Within this circle here we have already had heated discussions on certain aspects of this subject – for instance, the meaning of the “moral labels” attached to certain things and their possible correspondence to moral intuitions. For me it is significant, that my fundamental moral-philosophical interpretation of Steiner’s early philosophical writings receives anthroposophical support from the previously mentioned Arthur Zajonc. I would, therefore, like to consider briefly the moral-philosophical, and, in a narrower sense, ethical aspect of Steiner’s thinking as providing the basis for an especially fruitful relationship between anthroposophy and philosophy. This

13. Zajonc, 2012, p. 42.

14. Word as used by Rudolf Steiner (2003, p. 183), taken from J. W. Goethe, *Faust I*, Vs.1915.

15. Zajonc, 2012, p. 42.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 43. See also Steiner on “life-filled thinking”, (Steiner, 2003, p. 175).

17. Cf Hegel, 1973, p. 159

18. Cf. Heidegger, 1984, p. 91 et seqq.

19. Cf. Fichte, 1834-46, XI, pp. 139 and Steiner, 2003, p. 174 et seqq.



represents a third way of taking an anthroposophical approach to Steiner's early writings.<sup>20</sup>

If we take Goethe's practice of "concrete thinking" seriously and expand his scientific method – which the young Steiner fully intended – into a model for a culture of participatory knowledge, then what we end up with is not only an original – and nowadays largely forgotten – epistemological method, but above all the principle of a *universal culture of participatory knowledge* grounded in a fundamentally ethical attitude to life as a whole.

The central axioms of such a culture are that it involves: observation, not explanation; thinking, not judging; description, not interpretation; detachment and respect, not self-assertion and egotism; curiosity and openness, not complacency and omniscience.<sup>21</sup>

Steiner himself tested this postulate of taking an open, intuitive approach and "letting the phenomena speak for themselves" in various contexts in his early philosophy. According to *the Philosophy of Freedom* it is in the spiritual inner space created by the *freely intentional cogito* that intuitive thinking, in other words thinking that is open to ideas, can occur. Thus *intuition* and *emancipation* – according to *The Philosophy of Freedom* – belong together. For *the Philosophy of Freedom* emancipation means – in full agreement with Kant – "stepping out of self-induced immaturity (i.e. the onset of a spiritual coming-of-age)", particularly in the sense of abandoning all uncritically accepted views and ready-made patterns of thought (Steiner, 2003, p. 176). For us to be able to meet the Other in a completely unprejudiced way requires what Edmund Husserl called *epoché*, the withholding of judgment, an attitude which Steiner, in especially dramatic words, described as the "extinguishing" (Steiner, 1995, p. 260; 2003, p. 177) of our own thoughts for the sake of experiencing the thought-content of the Other. It is not through spiritual efforts, but precisely through the withdrawal of our own premature thinking that the door is opened to genuine understanding and empathy. And this especially applies to the potential for discovering and developing our own capacities of soul and spirit, in the anthroposophical sense (Steiner, 2003, p. 172).<sup>22</sup> That what we have here is not an epistemological problem, but a question of cultivating a comprehensive ethical attitude, is shown with great lucidity by Arthur Zajonc in his anthroposophical investigations on meditation. The practice of meditation – according to the Steinerian path of training – can only succeed if one begins by adopting a certain attitude, or ethos, namely that of humility and reverence.<sup>23</sup> Careful use of the mind's inner capacity for self-healing; respect for the "moral warning sign" guarding against any premature or over-rash entry into this landscape. Humility and reverence – "poverty of spirit".<sup>24</sup> The whole field where the "birth of the silent self" slowly begins to unfold is, according to Zajonc, "ethical ground", indeed "a sacred space". And, of course, the central concerns here are not epistemological problems, but self-exploration, inner experience, the strengthening and healing of one's own thinking, feeling and willing.<sup>25</sup> "Humility" and "reverence" are then joined by "gratitude" for the discovery of the inner sources of healing. "In giving thanks" as Heidegger so beautifully says, "the heart takes stock of what it has and is."<sup>26</sup>

For Zajonc, however, the main thing about anthroposophical meditation is the "integration" into everyday life of what has been experienced and gratefully received in the "sacred space". It is about the ethical and spiritual enrichment of daily living, i.e. the creation of an ethos. In other words, it is about the affective

20. Steiner set great store by this subject. This is especially evident in what he says about inter-subjective thinking in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *the Philosophy of Freedom*. Here it is a question of the correct way to arrive at a culture of participatory knowledge. Traub, 2011, p. 888 et seqq. Cf. also Steiner, 2003, p. 262 et seqq., where Steiner defines that which we encounter in the world as "having the quality of self" as the consequence of action, as something that has been "waiting" there to be "re-vitalised" by our actions. Cf. in the same text the "theory of karma" and the account of "moral goodness", which Steiner, in addition to knowledge and truth, established as the second, equally valuable aim of human striving.

21. Albert Schweitzer's word for this attitude was "resignation". Schweitzer, 1923, p. 244.

22. "In assimilating the utterances of others lies the first step towards self-knowledge". The positive response of one's own "rational nature" (healthy human reason) then initiates "one's own spiritual development". Cf. P.L. Oesterreich/H. Traub, 2006, p. 90 et seqq. That is possibly an adaptation of Goethe. Cf. Fn. 8.

23. Cf. Heidegger, 1984, p. 92.

24. Zajonc, 2012, p. 39/42. Cf. Steiner, 2003, p. 49 and p. 178.

25. It is worth pointing out that Zajonc's account of meditation follows a path rising from *sense perception*, objects of reverence – for instance, the contemplation of a sunset – via *thinking*, its symbols and inner pictures, via *feeling*, the sphere of inspiration and formative activity, to *will*, the level of intuition and being. Not thinking, but feeling and will are the higher levels of meditation.

26. Heidegger, 1984, p. 92 et seqq.

framework within which the young Steiner formulated his theory of science and to which, in *Theosophy*, he applied the comprehensive term “moral goodness”. Evidently Steiner did not want his philosophy to be yet another contribution to the flood of theories of knowledge then appearing. In his early writings he is already looking far beyond the confines of epistemology towards much broader considerations to do with human nature in general.<sup>27</sup> They are studies in cultural criticism directed towards giving an account of *the nature of human identity*. With his eye squarely on “the big picture” Steiner’s provision of a framework for “raising the existential value of the human personality” took its place as a philosophically valid alternative to the tendencies towards mediocrity and alienation evident in individual, cultural and social life. The basic tenor in the thinking of the philosophical Steiner – and this applies also to the later theosophical and anthroposophical Steiner – was towards emancipation. His interest was in creating a worldview, a “way of thinking”, an ethos.<sup>28</sup> Within this context Steiner’s reflections on the nature of science are concerned less with a theory than with an ethics of science. The “value and meaning of science” – as he says in the “practical conclusion” to *Truth and Science* – are not legitimated by aimless research guided by a postulate of technical and economic pragmatism. Rather they are founded upon the “idea of moral goodness” in general, and in particular upon applying the principle of “raising the existential value of the human personality”.<sup>29</sup> Both these, however, can only be realised in harmony with the knowledge, experience and living expression of the structures and laws of what the young Steiner – following Eduard von Hartmann – called the “All-one” and – to express it theosophically – “divine Being”.

To finish:

If we wish to grasp the full breadth and depth of Rudolf Steiner’s work as a whole, then we must respect the specific character intrinsic to each individual work. Only in this way can its particular contribution to the whole of Steiner’s achievement be appreciated and made productively useful. In bringing anthroposophical perspectives to bear upon pre-anthroposophical writings we run the risk of losing sight of precisely this intrinsic character – the fact that the material in question has been the subject of *philosophical* treatment. In the first part of my article I have given examples of the questionable outcomes that arise from subjecting the early philosophical works to such retrospective interpretation, whether it work on the assumption that their intrinsic character *is* anthroposophical, or be esoterically based in some way. Conversely, pursuing the various ways in which the precepts Steiner laid down in his early philosophical thinking have set their stamp upon his further theosophical and anthroposophical development is a fruitful exercise. In the second part of my lecture, under the keywords of emancipation, science and ethos creation, I hope to have shown – at least in a rudimentary way – that this is indeed the case.

---

27. Christoph Lindenberg makes the same point in “Wissen worum es geht oder: die Philosophie der Freiheit als philosophische Anthropologie gelesen” in *RSPF*, p.14-41.

28. Cf. Steiner’s concept of “worldview” in relation to Dilthey and Fichte in: Traub 2011, p. 148 et seqq.

29. “Eine Betrachtung zu Steiners Wissenschaftstheorie und Wissenschaftsethik”, in: H. Traub, 2011, p. 204 et seqq.

## References

- Die Drei (2013). *Zeitschrift für Anthroposophie in Wissenschaft, Kunst und sozialem Leben*, Vol 83, Frankfurt am Main, p. 52 et seqq.
- Fichte, J. G. (1834-46). *Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte 1834-46, XI p. 139 et seqq.
- Goethe, J. W. *Werke XXXIV/III*, ed. Rudolf Steiner, Deutsche National-Litteratur, Vol. 115, ed. Joseph Kürschner, Berlin/Stuttgart, n.d., p. 31 et seqq. (Title in “official translation – Goethe’s Botanical Writings, Ox Bow Press 1989 – is “Considerable Assistance from one Ingeniously Chosen Word”).
- Günther, H. (ed. 1981). *Goethe. Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, p. 329.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1973). *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt, p. 15.
- Heidegger, M. (1984). *Was heisst Denken?* Tübingen, p. 91 et seqq.
- Kant, I. (1964). *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. W. Windelband, Darmstadt, Bd. V, p. 409.
- Oesterreich, P. L. (2011). *Spielarten der Selbsterfindung*, Berlin.
- Ders./Traub, H. (2006). *Der ganze Fichte*, Stuttgart, p. 90 et seqq.
- Rapp, D. (1994). „Von der Intuition zur Erfahrung. Denkbeobachtungen in ihrem inneren Zusammenhang“. (No English version of this exists, so I have given the title in German – translated it could perhaps be rendered as: “From intuition to experience. Observations of thinking in their inner context” [translator’s note]. In: Dietz, K.-M. *Rudolf Steiners Philosophie der Freiheit Eine Menschenkunde des höheren Selbst*, Stuttgart, pp. 223-256.
- Steiner, R. (1980). *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*, Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 3, Dornach (Schweiz).
- Ders. (1995): *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 4, Dornach (Schweiz).
- Ders. (2003). *Theosophie*, Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 9, Dornach (Schweiz).
- Schweitzer, A. (1923). *Kultur und Ethik*, München, p. 244.
- Traub, Hartmut (2011): *Philosophie und Anthroposophie. Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners. Grundlegung und Kritik*, Stuttgart.
- Ders. (2013). “Denkende Betrachtung” and “Ojektiver Idealismus” in RoSE, Vol 3 Nr 2, Mar. 2013, [www.rosejournal.com](http://www.rosejournal.com), p.p. 139-151.
- Zajonc, A. (2012). „We need a phenomenology of inner experience“, conversation with Arthur Zajonc, in: *Lebendiges Denken Von der Philosophie zur Anthroposophie; Info 3, Anthroposophie im Dialog*, vol. 37, p. 42.