

Herbert Witzmann's Path to the Philosophical Sources of Anthroposophy

Part II

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3.2 The trinitarian principle and human consciousness

By following his own path of introspective observation Witzmann not only opened up a new perspective for independent and systematic further development within anthroposophy, but at the same time rendered it accessible to outside scholars (for instance, in connection with phenomenology). His desire to shift anthroposophy out of its insularity, in contrast to the norm among leading anthroposophists, he had expressed in various forms in a wider public context; for instance, through his participation at the Philosophical Congress in Mexico in 1963, or his being asked to submit an article on “Anthroposophy” for the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1966)¹ and the *Lexikon des Deutschen Brockhaus* (1970). The more diverse Witzmann's publications – both inside and outside anthroposophy – become, the more conspicuous it is, on closer examination, that they all ultimately turn upon one fundamental idea, which for Witzmann was the main thread running through all of Steiner's works – but which he himself always presented in his own, original way. Accordingly, for his short lecture in Mexico (which later became an essay) he took up certain motifs from contemporary anthropological philosophy (e.g. Nicolai Hartmann), using them to sketch the dynamics of diversity and unity among human beings, out of which he then, without reference to Steiner, logically derived the idea of the human constitution as a threefold structure consisting of spirit, soul and body (Witzmann 1963). Even when Witzmann, as in this case, presented his findings in an extremely condensed form, he still always managed to make them logically coherent and open to observation for anyone following them with suitably active attention: “I wish to emphasise that for anyone active in presenting anthroposophy to a wider public (or involved in it in any way at all, for that matter) it is important not to say anything that you do not understand yourself, and, even at the risk seeming incomprehensible, only to address the understanding of the listener” (Hartmann, 2013, p. 67). In their first encounters with Witzmann's writings many readers find them hard to understand, for they demand a high degree of logical discernment, concentration and creative thinking geared towards introspective observation.

A further example of his always being capable of putting his finger on the crucial point is provided by a conversation he had with the leader of the branch of the Anthroposophical Society in Mexico City: “Garcia was deeply concerned with cosmological problems. He wanted to know about the nature of the Trinity, and whether there may be several trinities. The latter question may well stem from Rudolf Steiner's indication that every world-system has its own trinity. I replied that with things about which we have no observations

1. Currently accessible at: https://www.schwabeonline.ch/schwabe-xaveropp/elibrary/start.xav?start=%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27verw.anthroposophie%27%5D#__elibrary__%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27verw.anthroposophie%27%5D__1515403513044

we should refrain from speculation. Nonetheless, we can see from the nature of creativity, that any system is formed upon a trinitarian pattern. Every creative act involves the creative impulse reaching beyond itself, while at the same time requiring a mediating element that enables it to preserve its identity. Thus creation is ultimately trinitarian. As this occurs outside space and time, however, it is probably not appropriate to speak of many Trinities. While the fundamental trinitarian principle multiplies itself within every creative act, it nonetheless remains one and the same" (Hartmann 2013, p. 68). Behind this logically consistent, strikingly simple piece of philosophical insight, of course, lies an urgent plea for introspective observation: in the last sentence Wittenmann speaks of "every creative act". Among these, of course, he is including the process involved in the mind's conscious activity, a process which, in turn, is open to individual observation. The degree of certainty needed to understand the greatest (cosmological) questions Wittenmann seeks and finds in what can be observed of his own mental life, and in permeating it with clear concepts. This makes him a pioneer of undogmatic anthroposophy, emancipated from spiritual authorities, as Steiner intended.

3.3 Basic structure and structural memory

Later, in his book "Structure Phenomenology", Wittenmann designated the basic creative process, indicated here in connection with the Trinity and observable in certain characteristic forms, as the basic structure:

"The basic structure can be detected in all phenomena insofar as we become conscious of them. It results from the unification of percept and concept in the relationship characteristic of the unification process." (Wittenmann, 1983, p. 13).

Whereas in the trinity example the process of mediation between the one (the creative, the concept) and the other (the created, percept) relates to an ontological or cosmological question, in his Structure Phenomenology Wittenmann employs the same motif in relation to human consciousness, in other words, with epistemological focus. In the subtitle of his book he sums up its subject as "Preconscious formation in the epistemic disclosure of reality". The human mind is not given reality ready-made, but is actively involved in the structuring of everything it becomes conscious of. This creative act, not unlike most artistic processes, occurs pre-consciously, but it can be also revealed in occurrent thought and perception as an integral process in the formation of reality. Here Wittenmann goes further than constructivist approaches, in that he not only lays emphasis on the productive role human minds have in the construction of their conception of reality, but also lays down the possibility of becoming meditatively aware of this activity, and thus of awakening to our full participation in reality. For him (as for Steiner 1924/2003) only thus do we have full reality, because the process of its coming-into-being is thereby illuminated and the full dimensions of our humanity realised.²

Until we grasp this possibility and put it into action our relationship to reality is indirect – we are aware only of the results of this process, and mainly concerned as to whether it meets our needs.³ In "Structure Phenomenology" Wittenmann goes on to show that the hidden participation of every-day consciousness in the creation of reality has the structural quality of a memory image. This means that in assuming we are living in the present world of objects we are actually in the presence of memories of our previous activations of the basic structure (the union of concept and percept). Wittenmann designates this memory-oriented structural relation to the process of reality as a "deposited memorative layer", the phenomenological analysis of which shows that it bears the traces of previous mediation between concept and percept (Wittenmann 1983, p. 59 f.).

If in the mode of normal consciousness we consider, for instance, an apple, it appears to us right from the start as this particular apple, present at this particular time and this particular place, with a series of specific properties (e.g. size, shape, surface texture, colour etc.). What matters to us here is not the pure universal

2. This constructive process is something that the formative powers of thinking are constantly involved in without our being aware of it. It is only by introspective observation of the process of cognition that we become fully aware of our participatory contribution to reality. In thus being co-creators of the reality around us, we are at the same time at work on the reality of our own spiritual being" (Wittenmann 1988a, p. 40).

3. Wittenmann designates normal consciousness as "cognition-like behaviour" (1983, p. 49)

concept “apple” (the apple-like, that permits us – as it were, deductively – to distinguish it from a pear), but the individualised concept, focused on and applied directly to this particular case. On the other hand, as we gradually become aware of other individual details of this apple, they appear to us as distinguishing marks belonging to its overall presence as an object. Even the missing stalk and the slightly discoloured patch indicating a bruise have an inseparable integral relationship to the conceptual context of the apple. In our consideration of the apple there are no fragmentary details (as it were, inductively) in play (pure percepts, proximal stimuli), but the already universalised percept embedded in a conceptual horizon.

Starting from the fact that these features of conceptual ‘this-ness’ and perceptual integration can be tested upon the observation of any object, it is clear that this state always marks the end-point of a structurally active mental process. We are certainly capable of surveying the apple as a whole, paying particular attention to its details or even viewing it in relation to its wider context. In this way, however, we cannot get at the actual process of the perceptual structuring of the object – the apple appears to us as simply present, without any contribution on our part. Following Steiner’s epistemology, Witzenmann shows that the normal mode of consciousness just characterised can be expanded in an exceptional state of introspective observation to encompass its own coming-into-being (cf. Steiner 1918/1958). His crucial discovery here rests upon insight gained from meditative observation. Namely, that the process of object structuring (the creative, epistemic process) and the structural memorative layer (resulting from every-day subject-object consciousness), by which it is concealed, together entail, through their common features (the above-mentioned relationship between individualised concepts and universalised percepts) a connection to the original creative process (the basic structure). It is precisely the inhibitory factor itself – the pre-determined representation – which, by virtue of its severance from the actual creative process, lends itself to dynamic transformation in the course of introspective observation, thus opening the process to empirical observation.

In principle, consciousness is capable at any moment in our waking lives of explaining itself in terms of structure phenomenology. With this Witzenmann dispenses with the cliché that meditation can only be done in certain ways, e.g. by excluding all sensory content (Witzenmann 1989). In actual fact, the dynamics of the basic structure – the union of concept and percept – can be observed particularly well in the dramas of every-day life, such as perceptual irritations, social misunderstandings, states of shock, responses to art, and experiences of hard-won insight (e.g. Wagemann 2017).

3.4 Stratification and Uniformity in the Structure of Knowledge and Being

Through his explicit formulation of the merging of epistemology and ontology that had been foreshadowed in Steiner’s fundamental works (1924/2003, 1918/1958), Witzenmann provided a way of understanding the anthroposophical worldview as panpsychism or pantheism, geared towards gradual development – a philosophical position to which there are a number of modern approaches (e.g. Nagasava & Wager 2017; Skrbina 2007). The observation of transitions in the ongoing activity of the basic structure in the processes of consciousness shows that they are not abrupt, but occur in four characteristic stages, which Witzenmann names actuality, intentionality, metamorphosis and inherence (Witzenmann 1983). These qualitative stages or phases present themselves as dynamic gestures of conceptual coherence within the transition to a perceptual stimulus. Actuality designates the stage of full self-referential universality, streaming and coming to rest within itself, and constituting evidence of conceptual autonomy, while intentionality is already directed towards a perceptual field. If actuality means the highest, self-sufficient insight into something, intentionality turns it into a search for corresponding perceptual material. Unless the intentionalised concept is attuned to an existing perceptual field, the latter will not become fully perceptible. Errors of judgment are possible when the transition to one or other of these stages breaks off or is interrupted on purpose. From the metamorphic adaptation of a concept to its complete interpenetration with the perceptual stimulus the transitional, conceptual movement goes through an vast number of more or less possible variants, until, if successful, it arrives at the point of inherence in the single phenomenon and comes to a standstill. Only then

has an instance of every-day, representational consciousness (subject-object relation) come about, while the transitional stages and movements just sketched normally occur pre-reflexively (Wagemann 2017b).

The structural process of cognition just described, is demonstrable, by means of meditation, in relation to any recognizable object, and Witzmann goes on to couple this with an ontological perspective. The issue is to establish a criterion for assigning an object of cognition to a particular level of being (inorganic – organic – sentient – self-conscious). He does this according to the highest level of the dynamics of cognition with which the given object observably resonates. In other words, while all four transitional stages will be gone through in every process of cognition or perception, not every stage will be experienced as matching the perceived state of the particular phenomenon or entity concerned. This forms the basis of our instinctive ability to make distinctions among stones, plants, animals and human beings. In the case of a pebble or a plastic lid the phases of actuality, intentionality and metamorphosis remain “outside” the object of perception and mark it as a thing to be grasped by purely mechanical laws, whereas a daisy is capable, in addition, of integrating the phase of metamorphosis as an immanent structural principle. Accordingly, intentionality is what sets the tone in the animal kingdom as its highest structural principle, whereas conceptual actuality, the unrestricted universality and thus ready availability of cognitive coherence and self-reference can only correspond to the activity of human selfhood (Witzmann, 1983; Wagemann 2010).

The world appears to us as qualitatively structured because within the process of cognition we move among corresponding qualitative levels. And our mental behaviour occurs in this way precisely because our own four-layered organisation facilitates this form and scope of participation in the world. And the fact that the scope of our epistemic-ontic participation in the world reaches the highest level means that it is possible for us to develop ourselves further by making conscious and transforming the natural conditions of our existence and our cognitive capacities: “The preceding is an outline of the metamorphosis of the phenomena (if only in broad strokes). Goethe strove for a presentation of this universal metamorphosis, but could only complete it in certain fields. It is evident from the outline given here that it is the same archetypal form whose metamorphoses appear as the structure of the world, the structure of the beings or objects, and the structure of human cognition. Further, this outline shows that the human being, based on participation in the basic structure, grants this archetype a new mode of efficacy in his own being” (Witzmann 1983, p. 49/50).

4. Summary and outlook

To sum up the foregoing, Witzmann's philosophical works can be regarded as an extremely successful, albeit largely unrecognised, attempt to formulate the essence of anthroposophy in a language compatible with the modern scientific mentality. Witzmann achieves this by following on from the works of Steiner and Goethe and extracting the basic motifs they contain. In doing so he is not simply re-iterating and interpreting; rather, he sees his work as productive. The thing is “to engage – within the works of Rudolf Steiner – in the further construction of areas of his stupendous architecture that hitherto exist only in blueprint” (Witzmann 1988a, p. 14). Some of the central rooms of this building that Witzmann worked on have been detailed here; others, for lack of space, can only be mentioned briefly. The main thread he pursues in these areas too is the basic structure as the basis of human cognition and of conscious participation in the world.

In connection with a motif that appeared early in his biography, Witzmann develops the previously-mentioned idea of the “ego-morphosis of language”. This entails tracing all forms of individual linguistic utterance back to a universal formative principle which, although it does not itself appear on the level of language, nevertheless permeates all aspects of the latter, such as literature, spoken and written texts, sentence structure, and parts of speech right down to their constituent vowels and consonants. Insofar in all of these forms our mental agency within the intertwinings of conceptual coherence and perceptual fragmentation comes to an expression, they can be conceived as being ‘ego-shaped’ or formed by the human ‘I’. Similarly, language has an imitative, world-oriented aspect, and one directed more towards inner experience; the former he calls “frame” (German: Fassung), associating its mode of expression with consonants; the latter he

calls “attitude” (German: Haltung), its expression coming more through vowels (Witzenmann 1978). From the specific reciprocal effects of (consonantal) formulation and (vocalic) disposition Witzenmann explains all forms of human utterance.

Witzenmann approaches artistic expression and aesthetics in a similar way, in that he identifies universal and individual components within the processes of artistic creation and illustrates them with examples from the history of art:

“The union and interpenetration of self-portrait and still-life processes lead [...] to truly modern forms of artistic study and production” (Witzenmann 1987, p. 288).

Witzenmann’s (1988a) book “Die Philosophie der Freiheit als Grundlage künstlerischen Schaffens” (“The Philosophy of Freedom as a basis for artistic creation”) can be seen as a breakthrough in the combining of this aesthetic conception with the ego-morphosis of language. Here he takes Steiner’s book as a manual for practising the art of thinking, and shows how its composition can be seen on various levels as motivated by a comprehensive conception of the nature of the human being. With this he draws our attention at the same time to the unity of conception that pervades Steiner’s works and goes through various transformations, the diversity of which he describes as “essentially as one of representational accentuation” (Witzenmann 1993, p. 148). In particular, Witzenmann investigates the epistemological and anthropological correspondences between different works, as, for instance, between “The Philosophy of Freedom” and “Theosophy”. Viewed in this way, Steiner’s works do not fall apart into incommensurable phases, but await their eventual explication in terms of the basic structure, which encompasses epistemology and ontology, evolution and ethics, meditation and social interaction.

Since space forbids consideration of any further aspects of Witzenmann’s work, it must suffice to reiterate its two most important features: 1) First, the methodologically founded research attitude based on the readiness of logical understanding and active introspective-meditative observation is to be named.. This research attitude enables one to initially study anthroposophy by understanding its general concepts which can then serve as eye-opening tools for one’s own consciousness-phenomenological observation and spiritual development. 2) The *delineation of the basic structure* (the dynamic unity of the components of reality, percept and concept, that appear separate to the human mind) as a *leitmotiv* in Steiner’s works, and its innovative contributions to philosophy (philosophy of science, phenomenology, philosophy of mind), psychology (perception, cognition, memory), aesthetics and social sciences. Thus Witzenmann, although productive within the context of Steiner’s works, clearly extends their range and demonstrates that their further extension in modern terms is both possible and necessary. The old hermeneutic rule that an author must be understood better than he understood himself proves true here, albeit not in any know-it-all fashion or sentimental empathy, but rather as a “process of creative continuation” – such that, in other words, a truly new understanding “would intrinsically be a better understanding” Bollnow 1940, p. 134/132). Since Witzenmann’s works themselves exhibit a tension between thematic breadth and methodological complexity, on the one hand, and an often provisional sketchiness on the other, and are thus in need of further explication in this same sense, they are an invitation to continue the work of independent study of anthroposophy and of building bridges to modern scientific culture.

Looking at Witzenmann’s biography, his philosophical works can be seen as the result of his constant struggles with personal crises. At the same time, upon the background of his casting himself in the role of continuing Steiner’s scientific work, the amount of energy he invested in the major disputes of his life – the “books dispute” at the Goetheanum and the wrangles over his position in the family firm – may seem hard to understand. In particular, given the current availability of Steiner’s complete works (including the “class lessons”) on the internet, his position on the books dispute and his defence of it might appear antiquated. It must be borne in mind, however, that in Witzenmann’s time and after his painful experience it was scarcely possible to envisage an academic career built explicitly on Steiner’s anthroposophy. There was little else he could do, therefore, than engage his aspirations entirely within the institutional framework of the Anthroposophical Society, and to support and shape its destiny in some way. Witzenmann’s students have followed his lead in taking things beyond this Society framework, and are currently involved in

further pursuing his research work in an academic context (da Veiga 1989, Ross 1995, Schieren 1998, Wagemann 2017a). With the founding of accredited universities open to anthroposophical perspectives (e.g. the University of Witten-Herdecke, the Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences) much more favourable conditions now exist for Wittenmann's research project – the scientific investigation and further development of anthroposophy (da Veiga 2017). Since the decisive thing for Wittenmann was not the external institution, but the “Free University” lodged within every human mind, these developments can be seen as a continuation of his work (Wittenmann 1984a, 1988b). Thus, he was a pioneer of an existential anthroposophy that emerges from the individual human being and is able to raise human culture to new levels.

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