



The Current Debate about Temperaments

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The basic tenets of anthroposophy determine what happens on a day-to-day basis in the schools. An example of this is the assumptions about reincarnation and life before birth, which is reflected in an education which “conforms to karma” . . . ; on the basis of half-baked ideas about the temperaments which are scientifically untenable, children are divided into four categories. Then there are the ideas concerning a so-called seven-year rhythm of human development which result in no intellectual stimuli being offered during the first seven years, among other things. This is done because children are being protected during that phase of their development by an “astral sheath,” according to Steiner, which does not allow certain impressions to get through.¹

This quote from a present-day popular scientific treatise once again conveys the fatal impression that Waldorf pedagogy is simply behind the times as far as present-day educational research is concerned and works with obsolete concepts and worn-out esoteric views. It is a remarkable fact that when arguments against Waldorf pedagogy must be found, the temperaments are once again used as an easy target for attack, even though this topic represents only one of many topics which Waldorf pedagogy aims to work with during the first years of elementary school. It seems as if “the doctrine of the temperaments” is eminently suited to be pegged as a typical shortcoming of Waldorf education as a

whole, which allegedly clings to outdated concepts that are scientifically untenable; the idea of the temperaments, it is argued, is one which is inimical to the unique individuality of each child in that it divides children into distinct categories. As if the tough discussion about the theme of the temperaments which took place 20 years ago had never taken place!

A dissertation by H. Ullrich (originally published in 1986)² received much attention at the time. It sharply criticized Steiner’s ideas about the temperaments, which gave rise to a no-less-pointed counterargument by E.M. Kranich and L. Ravagli defending the Waldorf point of view.³ This publication, *Erziehungskunst*, drew attention to fundamental difficulties which arise when dealing with Steiner’s way of thinking—an unprejudiced attitude is apparently something which can no longer be taken for granted. Being unprejudiced does not, after all, mean that one should not have any criticism; one should rather strive to understand Steiner’s methodology as one which is developed strictly from observation of phenomena. To be sure: this methodology is something one has to get used to. When no attempt is made in this direction, however, the fatal consequence is that the vital point is missed. People usually end up misunderstanding Steiner altogether because his approach is different from traditional ways of thinking. What is taken for a traditional concept is in fact something radically different. This mistake and its conse-

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quences were painstakingly revealed in Ravagli's arguments, but they apparently went unnoticed by the critics. The anthroposophical literature dealing with this theme that has been published during the past decade and a half,⁴ especially the extensive practice book by Peter Lipps,⁵ has apparently gone unnoticed; much of what comes from Waldorf circles still remains an internal affair and receives no attention beyond the Waldorf schools. This is not so much owing to the fact that the possibility to take notice is not available, but because people prefer to avoid the substantial fundamental confrontation with the impulse which Steiner has given. A beginning has been made by having scientific discussions between academic educational circles and teachers at the Waldorf seminars and by the regular publications of research findings, but these are only beginnings.⁶

An exception to this is the publication by M. R. Zentner which discreetly fits into Steiner's view of the temperaments in the discourse which took place around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century in the field of developmental child psychology. Directly before the chapter on the beginnings of scientific research concerning the temperaments, Zentner offers a terse but appreciative acknowledgment of the impulse towards an understanding of the temperaments which Steiner worked on for Waldorf pedagogy. His conclusion that "the concept of the temperaments was nowhere as central in German-speaking countries as in the Waldorf schools" may be justified in as far as it makes a comparison with other school systems; formulated with this focus, however, it neither corresponds with the pedagogical practice in the Waldorf schools nor with Steiner's intentions. Nevertheless, Zentner does not place Steiner outside the domain of science, but close to it.⁷

I will now proceed to present Steiner's approach to the temperaments here once again, necessarily in brief form.⁸

Everyday Phenomena: Inklings

Every Waldorf teacher is familiar with the uncertainties that arise in the first meeting with the class that one will be teaching for many years. Perhaps some of the children are visually familiar, from hav-

ing seen them on the school grounds or on the way to school; one may even have had typical first impressions or noticed characteristic traits. Some children are striking in size. Others are noteworthy because of the way they walk; their walk can be heavy, light and dancing, restless, collected, slow and deliberate, or hesitant and loose. Then there is clothing and the way they wear it; some children, for example, never tuck their shirts in, some always hide their hands in their sleeves, others wear kerchiefs or a baseball cap. Maybe there are recollections of the way a particular child speaks or calls out. So one usually has a multitude of impressions which will primarily be of outer appearances. These impressions are connected to specific children and one can notice how different one child is from the other; why one child acts a certain way and another one acts completely differently under similar circumstances. One may even make distinctions and try to bring a certain order to the differences, delineating what can be attributed to physical causes, such as marked bodyshapes, and contrasting them with what seems to be more of an inner disposition. In doing so one notices similarities and makes groups accordingly. After these thoughts come questions as to the why of certain phenomena; why a certain child is or acts a certain way. In many cases, short-term answers do not help very much, and these will be corrected by new and surprising encounters in the day-to-day contact with the children. One is likely to see both familiar and totally new ways of behaving.

By observing the way children join in with the class, the way they react to certain questions, their behavior within the group, and so forth, one will discover more and more characteristic traits such as talents for math, for music, for movement; one will also notice specific dispositions and habits, or motives and interests, which distinguish one child from another. In short: a richness of impressions occurs which one needs to organize for the sake of orientation; this one simply has to do in order to be able to cope with everyday life in the classroom.

Reflecting on these impressions further, the teacher will form a comprehensive picture of a child out of the different details; one experiences how the different parts of the mosaic gradually reveal a pattern. One begins to get a sense of the true being of the

child; an inkling arises of what it is that gives each child a particular stamp.

Individuality Comes More and More into Focus

In the course of weeks or months, perhaps even years, one notices a certain stability in certain ways of behaving which weaves itself into a pattern. In other cases, perhaps, change is more apparent. Thus one witnesses a process of development in which two orientations can be distinguished: one is based on comparison with other children in the class, the other signals the changes within personal development.

A prerequisite for such a procedure of observation is unconditional openness, not to be confused with naiveté. It goes without saying that individual perceptions will group themselves into definite categories: for example, habits, intelligence, memory, reactivity, stamina, and so forth. In the process, definite groupings emerge: some phenomena belong to the category of things which belong to the moment, such as reactivity; some phenomena belong to more permanent soul qualities, such as basic moods which color each experience; other phenomena belong in the category of things which manifest practically on a physical level, such as specific habits, inclinations, memory, intelligence, or the temperament.

A disciplined method of observation such as this one is far removed from stereotyping. (“That is so typical for him/her.”) Seeing typical traits is only justified in certain cases, for example in zoology. Applied to children, seeing only what is typical distorts the image and precludes the possibility of seeing changes. Stereotyping is a procedure that is deeply inimical to seeing the true individuality of the child. It may even prevent it, because it precludes an open, unprejudiced, and approving way of looking at the child. When one looks for the unique individuality in a child, appreciates what is arising in the child in the way of capacities, possibilities, and characteristics, one has a healthy starting point for one’s pedagogical actions. Seeing what is typical only leads to noticing one-sidedness, reduces the fullness of phenomena to easy slogans, and tends to focus on deficiencies; for this way of seeing

tends to register deviations from the norm and leaves no room for individual “aberrations.”

Steiner’s View: Classical or New?

Just before the Waldorf school was founded in August/September of 1919, Steiner gave detailed indications on how to take the temperaments into account in one’s day-to-day work with children in school. Before that, he had spoken about the temperaments in a number of lectures, but had not written things down, and this can be a source of difficulties. He had developed his ideas about the temperaments from the year 1909 onwards, and kept adding new aspects.¹⁰ One cannot quite take his ideas as a firmly developed system, but rather as differentiated observations of the myriad facets of a theme.¹¹ It is problematical that he used the terms which were current at the time, terms which have often deteriorated into caricatures: choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholic (as used in a very popular 19th-century play “Haus der Temperamente” [House of the Temperaments] by Johann Nestroy). However, he did not apply the words in the same way as they had been first used in antiquity in the pathology of the humors (juices). Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) had given the initial extensive medical explanation of the terms and they were developed further by Galen (129-199 A.D.). Neither did Steiner patch together the pedagogical and psychological terms in use at the time into some sort of anthroposophical quilt, which might have served to cover all manner of obscure and contrived concepts. On the contrary, he developed something genuinely new. The newness of this approach, which implied a complete turning away from what was generally understood by the terms at the time, has still not been fully appreciated to this day; whereas Steiner’s approach is taken to be traditional, people generally take their own approach to these concepts to be non-traditional. Apart from being loath to enter into unusual “thought patterns,” people generally raise the objection that the anthroposophical ideas about the temperaments are unfounded and, what is more, not sufficiently underpinned by scientific research. Steiner’s viewpoint, one hears time and again, is applied as a worldview and missing in it are sufficient quantitative and qualitative empirical data to support his views.

Unique Traits of Waldorf Pedagogy

What is special about Steiner's approach to the temperaments? He begins by describing the way a human being incarnates, that is to say, the way the human being finds his or her way into life!¹² When a human being is born, the eternal individuality, the inner essence of the human being, with all the talents, character traits, and gifts particular to that individuality, connects to the hereditary stream formed by the inherited body and the characteristic traits coming from the parents. This takes place in a thoroughly dramatic way: "When the two streams [individual and hereditary] come together, the one stream will color the other. This coloring comes from both sides. Just as a blue and a yellow color, for example, connect to form green, the two streams in a human being combine and become the so-called temperament. . . . Both the soul qualities and the natural inherited traits of a human being appear. The temperament is right in the middle. It mediates between what comes from one's forefathers and what one brings out of former incarnations. The temperament reconciles the eternal with the temporal."¹³ This reconciliation, however, does not mean harmony, but, rather, dominance. This manifests in what is called in anthroposophical terminology the different members of the human being. At the base of this lies an understanding of the human being as an equilibrium of forces. There are four primary sources of these forces:

- the physical body which comprises material, physical nature and can be perceived in external space;
- life-giving forces which build up this body; they form the foundation for life processes, but also for more permanent soul components such as memory, habits, and so forth; the so-called "formative force," life, or "ether" body;
- qualities of the present moment which live in the soul, such as inner activities, mental pictures, thoughts, sensations, feelings and impulses of the will; these constitute the so-called "astral body";
- in addition to these there is the inner core of the human being; the "I."

When one of these members dominates in the course of the incarnation-process, it will color the

habitual soul disposition of a person. But this also means that the temperament is "located" where the life processes meet the more permanent soul components, namely in the ether body. Therefore the temperaments may have a certain stability; they can change in the course of life, but it is also possible for them to remain stable.¹⁴ Here are the resulting qualities to which Steiner gives the classical names:

- melancholy predominates when the qualities of the physical body—heavy physicality with its chemical and physical processes—are noticeable in the soul as a ponderous basic mood;
- phlegma is dominant when physical processes such as the rhythmical life-processes, growth, and organ formation express themselves in the soul as prevailing qualities of comfort, regularity, peace, and perseverance;
- sanguinity expresses itself when the qualities of the astral body show themselves in the soul as wakefulness, mobility, spontaneity, but also as a generally cheerful and light mood in life;
- cholera expresses itself in the soul as consciousness of one's own strength, decisiveness, and ability to act, connected with unwillingness to compromise.

When one contrasts this with the classical conception of the temperaments, such as the one which can be found in the writings of Hippocrates (in choleric, the yellow bile predominates; in sanguine, the blood; in phlegmatic, the phlegm; and in melancholic, the black bile), one can make the following observation. One will find that the classical conception deals with the human being from the point of view of the balance of the humors (the "juices") at a specific moment in time; this is what determines the state of health of a human being. For that reason Hippocrates takes into account the influence of the surroundings on the way these bodily fluids are balanced. He develops a kind of "constitutional doctrine" on this basis. Steiner, however, has never developed anything of the kind.

Pedagogical "Aims"

The rudimentary dispositions of all four qualities are in all of us; nobody has one pure temperament. (It is interesting to notice the different ways in

which the temperaments can manifest in human beings.) Only in pathological cases does one find one basic tendency dominating in a very one-sided way. Steiner recommends that teachers study such one-sided cases, because it is easier to observe the characteristic traits that constitute a particular temperament when it is dominant. Steiner sees a danger in too strong a dominance; he does not recommend driving the temperament out or even resisting it; such pedagogical advice was propagated in his time in the widely read books of Hellwig.¹⁵ On the contrary, he recommends channeling such a dominant temperament and giving it the right direction so that the specific gifts inherent in the temperaments can unfold their positive qualities. This principle stands in sharp contrast to the prevalent methods applied at the time. According to Steiner, one should take into account what is *there* and recognize the positive qualities of a particular temperament. Such a method is far more fruitful than taking measures to awaken something which is not present in the child, for example, by attempting to counter a melancholy disposition by exaggerated outward cheerfulness. This principle, by the way, the practice of starting from the talents, gifts, and dispositions which the child actually has, is a basic principle of the Waldorf school, and it is applied from early childhood on. In our prevailing, non-Waldorf pedagogical atmosphere of determining deficits, a trend which remains a dominant tendency in many schools to this day, this approach is still a breath of fresh air.

The aim of all striving in the work with temperaments is easy to formulate: the human being should not be at the mercy of soul forces, but be a master in his or her own house!

To begin with, one usually deals with groups of children in schools. First, one observes the children's behavior, and takes into account the criteria Steiner suggests, noticing tendencies with respect to sensitivity to external stimuli and the way they are digested internally, a method which we also find in psychology.¹⁶ Through such observations the teacher will find helpful pointers for the pedagogical methods to be applied in school: she will need to alternate between different modes and know when to bring in variety and stimulus, evenness and quiet, concentrated activity or impressive thoughtfulness.

In so doing, one is in line with the different soul moods of the children and not one's own (i.e. the personal moods of the teacher). In order to do that, the teacher needs to know her own temperaments and be in command of possible one-sidedness in herself. When one has this in hand, one draws from the spectrum of all the temperaments, making everyday pedagogical practice considerably easier. Especially in the lower grades, a seating order according to the temperaments has also proven to be a great help in teaching, and not only on practical grounds.¹⁷

This is the tenor of Steiner's recommendations—which are not prescriptions! For child observation and reflection on the many impressions received, it can also be helpful to take into account the qualities of “fire, air, water, and earth.” This may be reminiscent of the ancient Greek thinking about the elements as taught by Empedocles (around 490–425 B.C.); there are many facets to this way of thinking, however, which allow us to catch a glimpse of the particular riddles which each child poses. Rather than seeing things primarily under four blanket categories, our eyes are opened to see the particular, and in no way would we want to exclude differentiated observation. From its inception, Steiner's way of thinking is fundamentally the opposite of a blanket approach:

Our practical orientation will become ever more individual when we don't feel it is necessary to apply general recipes such as ‘you should not drive out the desire to flatter by seriousness,’ but we should try to look for qualities in the human being which must be stimulated. . . . Not only is the human being in general a riddle for us, but every individual person we meet, every new individuality poses a new riddle to us. . . .¹⁸

It should be stressed once again: occupying oneself with temperaments is a particular means of bringing us closer to individual capacities of the children and meeting their expectations in everyday pedagogical practice, to do justice to them, in fact. We should remember that temperaments are only *one* aspect of the personality which needs special care and attention in elementary school (grades 1-8). In addition to them, Steiner names five more: disposition, talent, memory, character, and habits.¹⁹ Later, in a

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different context, he mentions in addition: the forces of intellect.²⁰ This opens up a field of tasks and research which precludes a one-sided fixation on temperaments. Temperaments do have a justified place in Waldorf pedagogy; however, one should not value them one-sidedly or overemphasize them. Otherwise one would lose sight of the many other indications Steiner gave.

The Psychological Point of View

Psychology²¹ distinguishes various traits of the personality: children are distinguished for example “according to their capacities (e.g. intelligence, musicality, achievement in sports), their motives and interests (e.g. aggression, willingness to be helpful or companionable, musical interests) and their *temperaments*.”²² This last category may seem surprising because there is so much criticism of Waldorf pedagogy on this score, but it becomes readily understandable when one considers that a renaissance of this psychological concept has occurred, especially since the seventies of the last century. Looking back, we can even conclude that there has been an almost inflationary preoccupation with this theme in recent times, especially coming from empirical research by psychologists and child psychologists.²³ For example, in 1989, a publication appeared entitled “Return to Distinguishing Temperaments,”²⁴ and in 1994 there was even one entitled “Rediscovery of the Temperaments.”²⁵ Of course there also has been discussion about the meaning of the concept and about its practical application.²⁶

The question to consider here is how this recent psychological treatment compares with Steiner’s approach. The way temperaments are understood in Waldorf schools, grounded in the differentiated pedagogical applications and experiences that have been built up over the years, differs radically from the treatment of the temperaments in recent psychological research. Recent research occupies itself with the following areas: clarifying where the difference lies between temperaments and other traits of the personality; developing appropriate measuring tools; tracing temperaments in their temporal development in the course of a biography; clarifying their genesis; discovering psychological parallels in temperamental differences; distinguishing how constant

the temperaments might be; determining the genetic influence on temperaments, distinguishing environmental influences, and researching consequences of the temperaments in childhood.

All these areas of research aim to achieve certainty in prognoses for the development of the personality. Many papers have been written in all these various fields. Apart from the presentation by Zentner, which is no longer in print, there is the research by Jens B. Asendorpf, a professor of psychology at the Humboldt University in Berlin. His work gives an excellent and easily accessible overview of the whole theme.²⁷ In the third edition of his book he continues and completes what he had published a few years before in the second edition of the same handbook; the literature he quotes gives an impression of the varied research which has been carried out during the seventies and eighties, mainly in England and America, but in the meantime, also in other countries. Asendorpf’s overview is at present unique in the scientific community of German-speaking countries. The chapter on the temperaments by R. Oerter, in the widely disseminated standard-work *Entwicklungspsychologie* [Developmental Psychology],²⁸ does not enter into a detailed analysis of present day research. In his short overview, Oerter relies on the definition of the temperaments which was formulated by Rothbart and Bates in 1998, which probably must be regarded as the generally accepted current definition (see below for more specifics).

Just the fact that so many papers have been published is itself an indicator that an understanding of what the temperaments are is in flux: the concept is substantially changing and developing. A commonly accepted definition only holds good for a specific period of time and is linked to the state the research is at; a conclusive definition has not been found as yet.²⁹ It is remarkable, in view of such a tenuous and uncomfortable position, that people generally believe they have to denigrate the anthroposophical understanding of the matter.³⁰

The Temperament: Present Day Definitions

Let us take the above-mentioned definition by Rothbart and Bates as our starting point: “By tem-

perament one understands constitutionally based roots of emotional, motor, and attentiveness-related reactivity and self-regulation”³¹—a description which comprises a wide spectrum of visible behavior—revealing individual particularities, “for example in sensitivity to stimuli, in the intensity of reactions, or in the regulation of internal circumstances such as phases of waking and sleeping, attentiveness, mood....”³² So we have to do here, on the one hand, with behavioral phenomena which can be observed only once or twice, but which occur under certain circumstances with a measure of regularity and grow into dispositions, and, on the other hand, we have to do with basic moods or with symptoms of rhythmically recurring life processes. To place these in the realm of internal physiological processes prompts an obvious comparison with what is called the ether body in anthroposophical terminology; yet the biological parallel meant here primarily applies to processes of the nervous system.³³ This comes close to the traditional system of the Soviet researcher I. P. Pavlov, who in his time—the 1930s—found the temperaments in four types of nervous system (weak: melancholic; strong and unbalanced: choleric; balanced and slow: phlegmatic; mobile: sanguine). There is little reference today to the approach of H. J. Eysenck,³⁴ who uses the extremes of emotionally stable/unstable and extrovert/introvert and places a multitude of characteristics specific to character and temperaments within that framework.³⁵ One finds a similar multitude of characteristics in the work of H. Rempelin,³⁶ grouped, by the way, in accordance with the traditional concepts as we know them from antiquity!

Reduction to Types

This reduction to certain well known basic types—for this is what we’re dealing with when we want to bring some degree of order to a multitude of phenomena and subdivide them into categories—has long been superseded; it was replaced by the procedure which the New York child psychologists A. Thomas and S. Chess chose. This couple began an empirical, longitudinal study in 1956, for which they chose 138 children from 87 predominantly Jewish, middle-class families which they observed and interviewed at regular intervals. They started

at the age of three months—operating under the assumption that a certain stability in behavior had been established by that age—and continued until the children were between 18 and 22 years old, observing them at intervals that grew longer as the children grew older. They distilled nine categories of temperaments, each of which could express itself either strongly, moderately, or weakly. The nine traits they distinguished were: distractibility, activity level, adaptability, attention span and persistence, approach or withdrawal (inhibition), intensity of reaction, rhythmicity (regularity), threshold of responsiveness, and quality of mood.³⁷ The delineation between temperaments and other realms of the personality, such as motives, proved to be extremely difficult, as did the exact classification of data. In the end the scheme was reduced to three general temperamental constellations:³⁸ 1) positive approach responses to most stimuli—involving adaptable, moderately intense moods; 2) negative withdrawal responses to many new stimuli—involving intense and often negative mood expressions; 3) slow adaptability after repeated contact.

In short: we are dealing with an easy, a moderate, and a difficult disposition; Rothbart and Bates (1998) added a fourth: social orientation,³⁹ which is even based in neurology.⁴⁰ It goes without saying that we have a reduction to types in the procedure applied here, for without such a procedure one would have only data, but would not be able to make any interpretive judgments, which actually also enable one to discern individual characteristics by making comparisons! Even though it is based on a relatively small amount of data, the publication of this study by Thomas and Chess in 1977 (published in German in 1980) had an enormous influence on all subsequent research. But on the whole it remained unsatisfactory and Buss and Plomin (1984), who sharply criticized the Thomas/Chess concept, made an attempt to define temperament as “the totality of those traits of the personality, which 1) can already be observed in the first year of life; 2) are strongly genetically determined, and; 3)

Translator’s note: In their original American terminology, Thomas and Chess called type No. 1 the “easy child,” No. 2 “the difficult child,” and No. 3 the “slow-to-warm-up child.”

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show a high degree of stability.”⁴¹ This definition was also very influential (the Polish psychologist Jan Strelau adopted it in 1987), but it still left a lot of room for interpretation: it did not comprise all of the characteristics of temperaments, nor was there in it a clear differentiation of the temperaments from other character traits. Moreover, the assertion that characteristics of temperaments are generally more strongly genetically determined than other character traits has not yet been proven either.⁴²

Asendorpf offered a counter-thesis, which also is of little help. It says that “all characteristics of the personality are constitutionally determined—but each in a different way.”⁴³ It seems obvious that a different basis from what is generally assumed must be looked for: “Especially when we view the human being as a physiological/psychological unity, it makes no sense to talk about components of the personality that are biological in origin when we are referring to a character trait. It may make sense to delineate temperamental qualities by tying them to specific physiological systems, for example by contrasting the autonomic nervous system or the hormonal system to the central nervous system.”⁴⁴ Obviously this is an open question for present-day researchers, and it demonstrates how original Steiner’s approach was and still is. He places the temperaments within the totality of the “life body” (the “ether body,” see explanation above), which comprises in its functions both the hormonal and the autonomic nervous system, including the metabolic processes within the central nervous system. Instead of a sharp delineation, Steiner gives us observation of the multiplicity of mutually interpenetrating functional realms! This method may be hard to accept for present-day science which tends to dissect things; people are likely to be suspicious of ending up with an unclear mixture and no conceptual clarity.

It has also been found that the stability of the temperament in early childhood is not very consistent: “Taken altogether . . . temperamental characteristics after age three (approximately) show a certain measure of stability, which allows predictions into adulthood without too large a degree of chance.”⁴⁵ The strength of this observation is doubtful, however, for other traits of the personality have proven

themselves to be equally stable for the same time span. “Temperamental characteristics from early childhood on, therefore, do not appear to remain highly stable; their stability is not higher than other traits of the personality such as intelligence or aggression.”⁴⁶ Yet it seems possible to find evidence for certain traits of stability; the problem lies in the difficulty of carrying out a research project of sufficient length and in the choice of parameters. Certain traits can be measured in the same way for different ages, yet different parameters for measuring the same traits should be applied as well.⁴⁷ Meaningful predictions can therefore not be given in individual situations, which obviously limits the meaning of the concept of “temperament” considerably.⁴⁸

The question as to the origin of the temperament, especially when compared with differences within families (between siblings and twins) has not been answered either. Genetic research recently opened up a new area, but this research is still in its infancy and the results do not necessarily point to anything radically new. That is to say, the outcome is not necessarily new, inasmuch as certain explanations or predictions are comfortably explainable by the laws of hereditary. At least Asendorpf signals a variable portion in childhood of 40-60 percent, which can equally well be “attributed to test-smarts and personality traits like compatibility, conscientiousness, or aggression, characteristics which are usually not viewed as temperamental characteristics.”⁴⁹ He concludes: “The widespread assumption, that temperamental characteristics are more strongly genetically determined than other personality characteristics, can *not* be confirmed,”⁵⁰ and, “concerning the causes of the temperaments nothing more is currently known than that there are both genetic causes (the alleles—specific gene variations that differ for different people—which determine this are unknown) and environmental causes, which make siblings different in temperament (the environmental factors determining this are unknown).”⁵¹ For older children and adults, additional aspects must be factored in. They learn to handle their temperaments, and, as a consequence, the temperament is filtered by various styles of coping mechanisms.⁵² Apparently, the dynamic relationships between environment and temperaments exert more influence

than can be attributed to heredity. Here the so-called “goodness of fit” concept offers a fruitful methodological approach in research. Thomas and Chess already called attention to the consequences of this. They drew preliminary conclusions from their research “that a difficult temperament alone does not determine later development, but rather the “goodness-of-fit” between temperaments and environment,”⁵³ that is to say, they worked on the hypothesis that children are less likely to develop problems when the expectations of their environment are in harmony with their temperaments than when this is not the case. Such a thesis, hardly covered sufficiently with empirical evidence to begin with, probably does not have sufficient cross-cultural relevance, since the expectation patterns of each different culture show too many variations.⁵⁴

Temperament and Pedagogy: Irrelevant?

The study of temperaments with an eye to their relevance to school practice is certainly not off topic; there clearly is a relationship between the temperaments and academic results: grades are definitely influenced by the way the teacher assesses children and their behavior in school. Thomas and Chess noticed early on that teachers tended to underestimate the intelligence of “slow-to-warm-up” children—a temperament characterization—whereas the intelligence of children who are easy to approach and adaptable was systematically overestimated, which in turn influenced the expectations of teachers and made a measurable difference in the children’s performances. An extensive research project even came to the astonishing conclusion that specific variables in temperaments such as level of activity, stamina, and distractibility were better predictors for grades 1-5 than intelligence. In fact, they turned out to be five times more accurate than the intelligence quotient!⁵⁵ It should also engage our attention to hear that teachers, when asked what would constitute a “dream student,” enumerate characteristics which belong in the temperament category: high stamina and being on task. Hyperactive and distractible students are considered less preferable. When children possess these particular traits—distractibility, (hyper) activity, and short attention span—these traits will have a measurably

negative impact on “absorbing information and classroom productivity.” The productivity of the entire school is affected.⁵⁶ It should be noted that Zentner draws conclusions from these facts and holds out a challenge. According to him, it would be important “that teachers learn to distinguish temperamental differences in their pupils, that they develop differentiated forms of instruction and treatment of children in accordance with the temperaments, and that they avoid erroneous assessments resulting from a disregard of the temperaments. The three temperamental characteristics, hyperactivity, distractibility, and low stamina are the most likely to lead to poor performance in school. This fact makes it seem sensible to spot these temperamental characteristics early, so that specialized, preventative instruction can be offered during the first school year.”⁵⁷ This is a challenge which, to my knowledge, has only been heeded in Waldorf schools up to now!

What’s Next?

This short survey brings us to the obvious conclusion that research in the field of the temperaments is inconclusive and that much remains rather vague. The research done up to now allows us to make few general pronouncements or predictions about the personality. There are, after all, no firm and stable data distinguishing psychological and physiological characteristics from other personality traits. True, distinctions are made, shifts are recognized, hereditary components are signaled, but so, too, are environmental factors. Does the concept of temperaments make sense at all, given the fact that there is all this uncertainty with regard to distinguishing characteristics of temperaments from character traits?⁵⁸

Please remember that Steiner identifies seven characteristics of the etheric body, which frees itself around age seven. Of those seven, the temperament is only one (see list given above). The distinctions between them are subtle, but they can be made.⁵⁹ With regard to the temperaments, Waldorf pedagogy focuses especially on what happens when individuality comes up against those influences which stem from heredity or the environment. Methods have been developed to observe where those factors meet and shift, and to understand

what is going on there. It is interesting to note that Steiner does not pay attention at all to stability as something in and of itself. It is not one of his aims to gather data in order to make biographical prognoses on how the temperament will persist. Nor does he look for a single determinant in a realm where, according to his conception, there are multiple factors at work. He is especially interested in the way things change in the course of a biography; the single outstanding fact for him is the mixture of several factors of temperament, something which psychology cannot see because its premise is so different: it asks a different question to begin with. That different children cope differently is not a problem for Steiner either, because here, once again, individuality shows itself in a special way, namely in the way an individual handles his or her own temperament and works on it! Steiner's approach does not focus on single factors. Especially with regard to the question of the origin of temperaments, the polarity between the gene and the course a specific incarnation takes is, in fact, breathtaking!

As long as Steiner's ideas are thought to be "unfounded," not holding up to "scientific scrutiny," and are "reduced to four categories," it cannot be expected that psychology will recognize Steiner's approach, especially because there are no concrete empirical methods to demonstrate the presence of the four temperaments. Psychology would do well to look critically at its own viewpoints. Apart from having a completely different approach to this question, the fundamental difference lies especially in the practical consequences. Psychology is looking for empirical data that make a systematic categorization possible. Waldorf pedagogy uses the observation of the temperaments in conjunction with other categories as a method that allows the educator a multifaceted entry into the basic soul-dispositions of children. Determining the temperaments is, therefore, not an aim in itself, but has a practical function: it offers a possibility to approach children differently within a classroom setting. In this sense, knowledge of the temperaments can become a fruitful tool, but only when it goes beyond mere type-casting.

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4. S. Leber, *Die Menschenkunde der Waldorfpädagogik* [The Human Being As Viewed by Waldorf Pedagogy]; Gerda Scheer-Krüger, *Das Offenbare Geheimnis der Temperamente. Studien zu einem vertieften Verständnis der Temperamentskunde Rudolf Steiners* [The Open Secret of the Temperaments. Towards a deeper understanding of Rudolf Steiner's teachings on the temperaments] (Dornach, 1996); D. Sixel, *Rudolf Steiner über die Temperamente* [Rudolf Steiner on the temperaments] (Dornach, 1990).
5. P. Lipps, *Temperamente und Pädagogik. Eine Darstellung für den Unterricht an der Waldorfschule* [Temperaments and Pedagogy. Written for teachers in Waldorf schools] (Stuttgart, 1998).
6. The dialogue resulted in the following article: F. Bohnsack and E. M. Kranich, eds., *Erziehungswissenschaft und Waldorfpädagogik. Beginn eines notwendigen Dialogs* [Academic Research and Waldorf Pedagogy. Start of a much-needed dialogue] (Weinheim, Basel, 1990).
7. M. R. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Temperaments* [The Rediscovery of the Temperament] (Frankfurt a. M. 1998), pp. 20–22, specific reference to p. 20.
8. Compare especially Leber, *Die Menschenkunde* (see reference 4), pp. 308–331; also, more recently, P. Loebel, *Ich bin, der ich werde. Individualisierung in der Waldorfpädagogik* [I am who I am becoming. Individualization in Waldorf pedagogy] (Stuttgart, 2004), pp. 45–54.
9. Zentner deals at great length with this theme (pp.

32ff.); as his starting point, he takes the well-known constitutional types of Kretschmer (1921), who concluded from his clinical observations that there was a connection between psychological illnesses and body types, which in turn led him to connect psychological traits and even temperaments with bodily characteristics. This impulse had many followers. But it has nothing to do with Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy!

10. Rudolf Steiner, *Das Geheimnis der Menschlichen Temperamente* [The Secret of the Human Temperaments] (Basel, 1975) (a compilation of several lectures).

11. Compare especially the last two books in reference 4.

12. V. Wember, "Reinkarnation und Pädagogik" [Reincarnation and Pedagogy], *Erziehungskunst* [The Art of Education] 4 (2004):402–409.

13. Steiner, *Das Geheimnis*, pp. 16–17.

14. With reference to this metamorphosis, see also Loebel's summary in Loebel, *Ich bin, der ich werde* (see reference 8), pp. 50–51.

15. G. A. Kohnstamm, *Die Rückkehr zu Temperamentsunterschiede* [A Return to Distinguishing Temperaments] in H. Keller, ed., *Handbuch der Kleinkindforschung* [Handbook of Infant Research] (Berlin, 1989), pp. 381–400, specifically p. 383ff.

16. M. K. Rothbart and J. E. Bates, "Temperament," in Eisenberg, ed., *Handbook of Child Psychology* Vol. 3 (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998), pp. 105–176; A. Thomas and S. Chess, *Temperament und Entwicklung* [Temperament and Development] (Stuttgart, 1980).

17. For classroom practice, see the valuable book by Peter Lipps which contains stimulating suggestions. Lipps, *Temperamente* (see reference 5).

18. Steiner, *Das Geheimnis* (see reference 10), p. 42.

19. Rudolf Steiner, *Die Erziehung des Kindes vom Gesichtspunkt der Geisteswissenschaft* [The Education of the Child from the Viewpoint of Spiritual Science] (Dornach, 1992).

20. Leber, *Die Menschenkunde* (see reference 4), p. 254.

21. G. Kniebe wrote a first survey about research done up to 1990, "Die Temperamente in der Modernen Psychologie" [Temperaments in Modern Psychology] *Erziehungskunst* 11 (1991):1040–1056.

22. J. B. Asendorpf, "Temperament," in Keller, *Handbuch* (see reference 15), pp. 775–814, specifically p. 775.

23. A. Thomas and S. Chess, *Temperament and Development* (New York, 1977); A. H. Buss and R. Plomin, *Temperament: Early Developing Personality Traits* (Hillsdale, NJ, 1984).

24. See reference 15.

25. Zentner (see reference 7) gives a picture of the remarkable rise in scientific literature about the concept of temperaments as an expression of the increased importance of this theme. His conclusion is that ever since the boom of the 1980s, research into the temperaments of children has established itself as an integral part of developmental psychology in the English speaking world.

26. Asendorpf, 2003, p. 810.

27. See reference 22.

28. R. Oerter, "Temperament und Persönlichkeit" [Temperament and Personality] in R. Oerter and L. Montada, *Entwicklungspsychologie* [Developmental Psychology] 5 (Berlin, 2002), pp. 210–212.

29. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 56.

30. Of course Asendorpf does not mention anthroposophical pedagogical literature, because that is not within the scope of his research.

31. See Rothbart and Bates, "Temperament" (see reference 16); compare Oerter, "Temperament" (see reference 28), p. 210.

32. Asendorpf, 1997, p. 481.

33. "There is a basic assumption in all temperament concepts that temperaments are closely linked to our biological basis, and this is understood to be closest to processes of the nervous system" (Asendorpf, 1997, p. 457).

34. H. J. Eysenck, *The Biological Basis of Personality* (Springfield, Illinois, 1967).

35. Loebell, *Ich bin, der ich werde* (see reference 8) pp. 47–49; Eysenck's conclusions are based on questionnaires—this was something new—not on theoretical assumptions.

36. H. Rempelin, *Psychologie der Persönlichkeit* [Psychology of the Personality] (Basel, 1975); Leber, *Die Menschenkunde* (see reference 4), pp. 313–315.

37. See Thomas and Chess, *Temperament* (see reference 23).

38. Compare Oerter, *Temperament* (see reference 28), p. 211.

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39. Ibid., p. 210.
40. When the hypothalamus is damaged, aggressive behavior increases dramatically, *ibid.*, p. 211.
41. Compare Asendorpf, 1997, p. 481.
42. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 106. Zentner concludes from the research that many temperamental characteristics are largely genetically determined, but points out that the database isn't reliable and that there are still many open questions.
43. Asendorpf, 1997, p. 456.
44. Ibid. p. 462; Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 95: "High correlations between psychophysiological parameters and temperament dimensions have remained the exception rather than the rule up to now."
45. Asendorpf, 1997, p. 465.
46. Ibid.
47. Zentner draws attention to research on this which has been done by the American team of Kagan, LaGasse, Bell, and others, first results of which have been published; he stresses the enormous effort which this work entails. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 120.
48. This is how Asendorpf judges it. Zentner's opinion is more optimistic: "Many interesting discoveries are probably still to be made here." Ibid., p. 120.
49. Asendorpf, 1997, p. 469.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 471.
52. Ibid., p. 477.
53. Ibid., p. 479.
54. Shyness, for example, can be judged negatively or positively depending on one's value system. In this context Asendorpf, 1997, p. 480, gives a dramatic example of Massai children; five out of six infants who had a difficult temperament survived three months of hunger, but only two out of seven who had an uncomplicated temperament survived: probably because the difficult temperament put up more resistance, and those children drew attention more strongly to their hunger by crying. Even though this was only a small sample, it might "possibly be an explanation for genetically determined variations in temperament, which do not seem particularly well adapt-

ed either to their actual environment or to the environment typical for their evolutionary stage, but can nevertheless maintain themselves because they have great advantages under environmental circumstances which may be rare but recur frequently."

55. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 122. He bases this on R. P. Martin, R. Neagle, and K. Paget, "Relationships between temperament and classroom behavior, teacher attitudes, and academic achievement" *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 39 (1983):2013–2020.
56. Zentner, *Die Wiederentdeckung* (see reference 7), p. 123.
57. Ibid., p. 124–125.
58. Asendorpf, 1997, p. 481–482.
59. Compare Leber, *Die Menschenkunde* (see reference 4), pp. 251–333.

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