Painting from a Palette Entirely Different

A New Hermeneutic Approach to Steiner's Esoteric Courses for Teachers

Johannes Kiersch

Introduction: A Central Dilemma of Research on Steiner Education

Within the context of Waldorf education, Rudolf Steiner's Stuttgart lectures for teachers have traditionally been regarded as centrally important contributions to a pedagogical understanding of the human being. As such they provide the scientific basis and theoretical principles for a whole variety of innovative approaches to the business of teaching. It is often assumed that Steiner hereby brought to light a solidly reliable body of knowledge concerning the nature of the human being and the laws of human development. This knowledge was partly the fruit of his extensive studies of Goethe and early epistemological works, but was mostly based upon his "anthroposophical" research. The Waldorf schools and their related organizations represent, it is felt, the precise, practical application of this knowledge.

Equally traditional is the summary rejection of this view by mainstream educational theorists. Either doubt is expressed as to the extent to which Steiner's utterances can be accessible to inter-subjective validation and critical analysis, or they are simply assumed to be fantastical nonsense. Anthroposophy and, with it, the principles of Waldorf education, are—according to their most prominent pedagogical critic—"built on sand." (Prange 1986, p. 551)

The contradiction between these two views becomes even sharper when the historical context of these lectures is taken into consideration. In 1919 Steiner, fresh from the failure of his strenuously pursued campaign for a Threefold Social Order in Württemberg, was faced with the necessity of rescuing his school project, so that at least a pointer towards a "free cultural-spiritual social sphere," independent of the power of the state and the economy, could be realized. All those involved in the project felt they were party to a unique moment in history. It was entirely fitting, therefore, that the preparatory course took place in the rooms of the local branch of the Anthroposophical Society. (Hahn, 1969, pp. 656 and 686) It had been hastily convened by Steiner in the late summer of 1919, just before the opening of the first Waldorf school. Apart from a few guests, the participants—the future teachers—were all more or less convinced anthroposophists. Some of them were personal pupils of Steiner's, undergoing esoteric training with him. All were familiar with the basic concepts of anthroposophy and with Steiner's meditation exercises. They were twelve in number. Steiner began his first lecture in a tone of ceremonial solemnity that can only be described as religious. After a few introductory sentences he asked the stenographer to stop writing. Then, as is known from notes made later by some of the participants, he spoke of how the work of the future college of teachers would be directly affected by the spiritual beings of the third hierarchy: the angels, archangels, and archai. In this he was using the terminology of Dionysius the Areopagite's teaching on angels, in other words, a motif taken from the canon of medieval mysticism, upon which he had expounded in detail some years previously in his *Occult Science* (Steiner, 1989a) and in lectures for members of what was then still the Theosophical Society.

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For many years afterwards access to the textual versions of this utterance was stringently restricted, while the first edition of the lectures to openly publish it chose not to reveal the circumstances in which the utterance was made. Not until the new, carefully annotated edition of 1992 did it become clear that Steiner's first lecture course for teachers had not been academic, but esoteric in character. The same goes for the subsequent courses held between 1920 and 1923. (Steiner, 1986 and 1993c)

As a Waldorf practitioner you accept the fact that you are working with artistic imaginations.

The initial effect of this is to place Waldorf education's claim that its theoretical underpinnings are "scientific" in a still more questionable light and to add weight to the misgivings of its critics and opponents. It is clear that the founding of the Waldorf school was intended as a universal cultural impulse, and that it was primarily inspired by anthroposophical esotericism. Historians of education regard this state of affairs with suspicion, whether they are inclined to write Waldorf education off as a sect, or to grant its significance as a broad-based, socio-cultural movement. The obvious conclusion, which recently figured large in some European media, would be that it is high time the Waldorf schools parted company with their "guru" and carried on with their proven methodology without the trappings of the outdated anthroposophical worldview. Strangely enough, among academics such a view is met with skepticism. Würzburg professor of education, Walter Müller, puts the case as follows:

> If it is true that anthroposophy is to be regarded—not in terms of content, but in a functional sense—as the guarantor for the widely acknowledged high quality of teaching in Waldorf schools, then its absence in the future would seem to be unthinkable. The fact is that, upon closer scrutiny, it clearly constitutes the gravitational center of the whole enterprise. It is a reservoir from which teachers and many parents draw their motivation and strength of purpose, while at the same time being the main (and often overlooked) source of the spirit of community for which Waldorf schools are renowned. Without this body of ideas acting as a central focus of meaning, the Waldorf school's days would, in all likelihood, be numbered. (Müller, 1999, p. 124f)

To what extent, however, this "central focus of meaning"—assuming that it still plays a central role at all—determines the details of pedagogical practice, remains unclear.

First attempts at a solution—in relation to Steiner's long-neglected approach

A thorough discussion of Helmut Zander's monumental work on the genesis and practical consequences of Steiner's anthroposophy in Germany has shown just how essential contextual interpretations are for a proper understanding of controversial historical phenomena. (On this see also Rittelmeyer & Parmentier, 2001). Zander has chiefly been criticized for excluding the worldview of Steiner and his pupils from serious consideration by treating it a priori as nothing more than an ideological "super-structure." Thus the material he presents consists largely of contrived caricatures, isolated from their true context, that correspond more to his own hasty assumptions than anything else. (Ravagli 2009) Anyone wishing to avoid such a state of affairs would do well to take account of a simple fact: namely, that the body of Steiner's basic epistemological thinking—which pre-dates, and is implicit in, the esoteric courses for teachers —has been seriously neglected by proponents and critics of Waldorf education alike. Two texts in particular are being referred to here: Steiner's lecture of 1911 to the international Philosophical Congress in Bologna on "the

psychological foundations and epistemological framework of theosophy" (currently in Steiner, 1984, and Steiner, 2007), and his book *Riddles of the Soul* of 1917. (Steiner, 1983) In the "Bologna lecture," Steiner gives an introduction —in abstract, but clearer terms than on any previous occasion—to the psychological theory behind the anthroposophical path of meditation. Six years later, in *Riddles of the Soul*, he addresses this topic in more depth, taking as his starting point the question of the relationship between his own anthroposophical research ("anthroposophy") and ordinary empirical research (which he here designates as "anthropology"). While he emphatically affirms the compatibility of these two lines of research, he also rigidly distinguishes between them as fields of discourse. "Anthropology" is based upon sense data, "anthroposophy" upon "super-sensible" experience. The one cannot take the place of the other, but if approached in a spirit of impartiality there would be no contradiction between them, and within the context of an integrated and comprehensive "philosophy of human nature," they could mutually enhance each other.

The philosophy of the human being derived from anthroposophy presents a picture painted from a palette entirely different to that derived from anthropology; but the cognitive experience of viewers of the two pictures will be found to correspond rather in the way that the photographer's negative plate corresponds to the eventual processed photograph. (Steiner, 1983, p. 32)

Through the special mental climate surrounding the initial reception of Steiner's works, the lines of demarcation, so clearly stressed here, were erased from the scene. In Steiner's integrated "philosophy of the human being"—according to his own stated understanding—images of human nature derived from different methods of research impinge upon each other. They emanate, on the one hand, from ordinary empirical research, and, on the other, from anthroposophically based "spiritual research." In other words, each one is "painted from a palette entirely different." This being the case, there has not been sufficient awareness of the fact that applying elements of one image to those of the other is a matter of considerable delicacy.

Anthroposophy employs heuristic concepts

The first person to draw attention to this problem, albeit without reference to *Riddles of the Soul*, was probably Christian Rittelmeyer, when he wrote: "Could it not be that the recurrent confusions and anachronisms within the anthroposophical movement and—more particularly—in Waldorf education rest upon the fact that things articulated by Steiner are construed in terms of empirical fact rather than in terms of heuristic principles?" (Rittelmeyer, 1990, p. 64) This question draws attention to a crucial demarcation criterion. "Anthropology" in the sense in which the word is used in *Riddles of the Soul* is grounded upon sense data and seeks, by defining them according to inter-subjective consensus, to consolidate the data as scientific fact. "Anthroposophy" does not deal in such fixed and clearly defined "facts." It restricts itself to descriptions of methods, suggesting ways of approaching your own observations, to evidence which is (at least initially) thoroughly subjective, to the weighing up of possibilities. As a Waldorf practitioner, therefore, you accept the fact that you are working with artistic imagination, with rituals, images and myths, with devotion and reverence, with hopes and inklings, intuition and presence of mind. These are an array of motifs, habits, attitudes by which action might be guided. And while even the empiricist who sees objectivity, clear planning and proof of efficacy as the main aims of teaching would not be able to dismiss their pedagogical value out of hand, it would

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scarcely be possible for him to account for them in rational terms using current research methods.

Anyone trying to get to the bottom of such diffuse and conceptually difficult sources of motivation, which play a decisive role in Waldorf education, will sooner or later come up against Steiner's repeated reference to the pedagogical value of "living concepts." This term already finds clearly emphatic expression in his book on *Goethe's Conception of the World* of 1897. (Steiner, 1990, p. 66) Scattered through the recorded texts of his subsequent lectures, it regularly recurs in polemical contexts where he takes issue with the fixed definitions of modern scientific language. Speaking in October 1905 about the "flexibility of concepts," for instance, Steiner said (it is here already evident that this theme has pedagogical implications):

> The concepts absorbed at university produce rigidly fixed mental structures, which are not easy to loosen up. Brimful of such structures, the academic comes to a theosophical lecture and is thus incapable of coming to terms with the living concreteness of the theosophical thought world. How different it would have been if he had been brought up to treat any given concept as if it could turn out to be otherwise; for we have, after all, only a slender amount of experience and much that we now consider accurate will have to be corrected in future. (Steiner, 1991, p. 247f)

The 1919 courses for teachers revolve around this motif with particular thoroughness. In the lecture on logic in *Study of Man*, which deals with the relationship between concept, judgment and conclusion in connection with teaching method, the abstract concept appears in the picture of a lion in a cage: the free-roaming king of the savannah in miserable captivity and separated from life. (Steiner, 1992, p. 135 f.) "Living" concepts have much of the unregulated mobility of the thought-life of young children. From the psychological perspective developed in *Riddles of the Soul* two years before the opening of the Waldorf School, they are not yet "lamed." They are closely akin to the plasticity and vibrancy of the "imagination," the first level of super-sensible perception. (Steiner, 1983, p. 26 ff.; for what is meant here by "imagination" see Steiner, 1993b.)

The meditation motifs in Steiner's esoteric courses for teachers encourage us to make our own observations in concrete teaching situations.

Upon closer scrutiny, these concepts reveal three main characteristics: the unfinished nature of the process of knowledge acquisition concerned, its undisguised subjectivity, and immediacy—the direct relation to experience unencumbered by abstractions. (Kiersch, 1990, p. 80) A kinship to Goethe's insights on the nature of the symbol, with which Steiner was intimately acquainted (ibid. p. 80 ff.), is also evident. In terms of the well-known aphorism from "Maxims and Reflections," in which Goethe—deviating from former usage—employs the word "allegory" in a special sense, setting his own concept of the symbol in direct polarity to it: According to Goethe, "Symbolism transforms phenomenon into idea, idea into image, in such a way that the idea in the image retains an ever-renewable aptness and infinite scope of meaning, and even if it were uttered in every possible language would still remain ineffable. Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, the concept into an image, in such a way that the concept is demarcated clearly within the confines of the image, is always available in this fixed form, and always carries the same meaning. (1981, pp. 470–471). Steiner's "living concepts" can be seen in the same light as thought forms designated by Goethe as "symbolic," while the rigid concepts

"Symbolic" forms	"Allegorical" forms
Favor descriptive characterization and variable perspectives	Favor definition and unified perspective
Are multi-referential and provisional "approximations"	Are monoreferential and final "eqivalents"
Are capable of "growth"	Stay as they are
Are "subjectively" valid, i.e., are conscious of a participatory relationship between knower and known	Are "objectively" valid; i.e., their relationship to the perceiving subject is not taken into account
Relate to all the sensory modalities as a whole ("concrete" concepts)	Relate primarily to a limited field of sensory modality—that of the senses of touch, movement and balance (mere "labels")
Imply thinking in terms of whole forms as expressions of polarity and intensification, arrange phenomena in systematically related series, as "illustrative concepts"	Imply thinking in the abstract conceptual forms of mathematical logic
Favor metaphors of harmony, of balance, of "health"	Favor metaphors of cause and effect, purpose and utility

of the exact sciences correspond to "allegorical" forms. The characteristics are summarized in the table above. (after Kiersch, 1990, p. 83)

In what way and to what degree Steiner made conscious use of this Goethean mode of expression—which from his youth onwards had been very familiar to him—as an aid to presenting the special content of anthroposophy can be left open here. What is certain is that, through his constant and ever-deepening preoccupation with Goethe's language and world of ideas, he had become very well versed in the use of a highly productive and original heuristic principle. This becomes even clearer when the work of the German scholar Uwe Poerksen on Goethe's scientific language is taken into account. The particular qualities of Goethe's use of language, as described by Poerksen, recur in the most extensive way in Steiner's coining of "anthroposophical" concepts. Here we find him working with polarities and paradoxes, phenomenological series, with "semantic fields," conceptual formulations, the meaning of which discloses itself within the dynamic interaction of the parts with the whole (Poerksen, 1994 and 2008). (The two "conceptual systems" contained in the second lecture of *Study of Man* are a case in point. Cf. Steiner, 1992, p.30 ff.). Recent anthroposophical investigations of Steiner's style of language are also illuminating in this connection (Lissau, 2001; Sam, 2004; Zimmermann, 2000). The dynamic changes of perspective, the struggle to find appropriate expressions for that which is hard to define, are demonstrated in an abundance of examples from the texts that have come down to us.

The process of clarification attempted here was greatly enhanced by the unexpected discovery of a large collection of virtually forgotten blackboard drawings with which

Steiner illustrated his lectures. These improvised sketches show how Steiner—especially in his "anthroposophical" lectures—in addition to verbal language, "discursive" symbolism, as it is called in Ernst Cassirer's and Susanne Langer's theory of symbols (Langer, 1965), constantly used "presentational" symbolism: graphic gestures which express more, in terms of both form and content, than can the one-dimensional word. (Bockemühl/Kugler, 1993; Sam, 2000) To elucidate the contribution such means of expression would make to unraveling the full meaning of the esoteric courses for teachers would be a tremendous challenge.

Such an undertaking would in all likelihood uncover much common ground with Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The spark of inspiration for this fundamental, epoch-making work (epoch-making also in a pedagogical sense, cf. Niesseler, 2003) came to Cassirer just at the time when Steiner was working on his book *Riddles of the Soul* (1917), and at the same place—Berlin. Subsequently this took shape as the key sentence: "'Understanding expression' significantly predates 'knowledge of objects.'" (Cassirer, 1982, p. 74) With this Cassirer comes into territory very close to Steiner's psychology, and to the latter's conception of the history of human consciousness and its relationship to child development. In both cases the idea is that an archaic stage of direct apprehension of form (expression) precedes the development of the theoretically oriented object-consciousness of the modern adult. (Kiersch, 2004) Cassirer's concept of the "symbolic form" could well serve, upon closer scrutiny, as a hermeneutic key to the whole of Steiner's works—especially those of an esoteric nature.

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Esoteric exercise and pedagogical practice

These assembled observations also throw light upon the core material of the esoteric courses for teachers: the guidance they provide for the practice of meditation. In *Riddles of the Soul* Steiner describes the central characteristic of the "anthroposophical" approach to knowledge as proceeding from "experience the soul has with the ideas it forms at the boundaries of cognition." These are images or ideas that arise wherever sensory observation and the logical conclusions derived from them reach their limits. This is a reference, in very generalized form, to exercises presented years before in his basic anthroposophical works (Steiner, 1989a, 1993a, 1993b, 2003) and summarized in the "Bologna lecture" of 1911. Anthroposophy does not back away from the cul-de-sacs of the knowledge process, as do other methods of research, either resignedly accepting the inexplicable or devising hypotheses to get round it. The idea is that, out of the impotence experienced by sense-bound perception at the boundaries of cognition, the meditation practitioner gains new inner experiences, which, initially a sort of "groping forwards," develop in time into "super-sensible" perceptions. Out of such "experience the soul has with the ideas it forms at the boundaries of cognition" there grows the ability to distinguish the features of what anthroposophy refers to as a "spiritual world." (Steiner, 1983. p. 20 ff.) As a follow-up to what has been presented here, the next step would be a close look at what Steiner has to say elsewhere about the specific uses of particular exercises: their pictorial or verbal character, their practical sequence, the inner states and outward conditions that make for success. (A striking example here is Steiner's introduction of the rose-cross meditation in his 1910 book *Occult Science*, cf. Steiner, 1989a. Zajonc, 2009, gives a more recent summary based on his own meditative practice.) On such a basis the meditation motifs of the esoteric courses for teachers could be

more clearly identified, seen in relationship to each other, and understood in their own terms. This would, for instance, make clear the connection between the second and tenth lectures of *Study of Man*. In the former an initial orientation is given, through the introduction of two "conceptual systems," which are in effect two series of concepts. In keeping with the Goethean method described by Poerksen, they are set in polarity to each other and each shows a process of "intensification." The culmination of this process then comes in the tenth lecture in the form of the centrally important "sphere meditation." (Steiner, 1992, pp. 30 ff. and 146 ff.) One year later, this then becomes what Steiner called the "panacea" motif. This was a sequence of three gestures, which he said could be realized as a sculpture, consisting of three figures representing movements expressive of essential pedagogical attitudes.

Reverence, enthusiasm and protective care—these three are the panacea for the teacher's inner health. And if we wished to create an artwork, a group sculpture, say, representing the embodiment of art and education, we would have to fashion the following:

> Reverence for that which precedes the child's existence. Enthusiastic gesture towards that which will succeed the child. Protective movement around that which the child experiences. (Steiner, 1993, p. 39)

Here again it is clear how Steiner endeavors to enhance the brittle medium of word and text by means of presentational symbolism in the form of art. His later discovery of three "pedagogical arts" [sculpture, music and creative speech, ed.] by means of which an intuitive understanding of the various levels of the child's being could be acquired, must also be seen in this light (indications on this in Husemann, 2007).

The meditation motifs in Steiner's esoteric courses for teachers do not primarily deliver knowledge in terms of "anthropological" research. They encourage us to make our own observations in concrete teaching situations. As provisionally formulated conceptual structures, they dissolve, as it were, into intuitive courses of action. Steiner describes their function in one of the most beautiful formulations we have from him: "The mind imbued with living knowledge of the human being apprehends the child's being as the eye does color." (Steiner, 1961, p. 289) The "esoterically" formulated content of the courses for teachers does not determine, but facilitates pedagogical action. At the first further training course for the teaching body of the new school in autumn 1920, Steiner uses a very matter-of-fact comparison to clarify the relationship between the theoretical formulation of concepts and meditative practice according to his pedagogical esotericism. He compares it to the difference between the eating and subsequent digesting of, say, a sandwich. (Steiner, 1993c, p. 51) This is an implicit reference to the anthroposophical idea of intuition, which he described three years before in *Riddles of the Soul*, and dealt with in further detail, just before the inauguration of the school, in the sixth lecture of *Study of Man*. (Steiner, 1992, p. 91ff) This idea already appears in Steiner's early philosophical works and gradually takes on more concrete contours through being considered from many different perspectives during the subsequent unfolding of anthroposophy. A closer investigation of it could greatly enhance our understanding of the Stuttgart courses for teachers. (This has been done to some extent by Gut, 1990, and Schieren, 2008. On the hitherto unappreciated significance of the idea of intuition in education

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see Noddings & Shore, 1984; and Eggenberger, 1998.)

According to Steiner, the process of meditative digestion, through which working with the "living concepts" of anthroposophy is transformed into pedagogical practice, also has beneficial effects upon the teachers' ability to work together productively. In this connection, Kevin Avison, the founder of the Steiner Waldorf Advisory Service in Great Britain, writes: "Steiner frequently gives detailed exposition at higher or contextual levels of a question and sample propositions for practical application. Indications remain fragmentary until united with relevant concepts through meditation. (Avison, 2009, p. 23) Such a "process of contemplatively informed action research" (ibid., p. 25) is a decisive factor in promoting cohesion in a college of teachers and in maintaining its power of renewal.

The tendency in the initial phase in the reception of Steiner's works to misinterpret the anthroposophical courses for teachers as containing 'anthropological' knowledge has not been entirely without consequence. In the style of instruction carried on within some Waldorf training centers—and from there permeating the day-to-day practice in schools —a false picture of Steiner's educational teachings took shape. They came to be viewed as an eternally valid corpus of scientifically anchored truths, which have increasingly, and quite rightly, been felt to be dogmatic. That this picture, roughly since the 1980s, has provoked strong criticism from the educational academia, is understandable. Moreover, into this picture certain ideas of order were incorporated, especially in Germany, adopted from the "values of duty and conformity" which held unquestioned sway over public life in Germany right into the 1950s. With the—extraordinarily quick—establishment of the new "self-realization values" (from the 1960s onwards) (Klages, 1985; Bohnsack, 1996), which are generally congenial to the forms of thinking in Steiner's esoteric courses for teachers, Waldorf education's adopted "picture of man" found itself sidelined—a tragedy of the first order. An interested public, for whom independence, spontaneity, self-realization, freedom from convention and personal creativity have become natural ideals, has no time for dogmas when it comes to education. With this in mind, an attempt to re-interpret the fundamental texts of Waldorf education in heuristic terms could greatly assist its further development.

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Johannes Kiersch *was a teacher at Bochum (Germany) Rudolf Steiner School for twelve years and has been engaged since 1973 in Waldorf teacher training at the Institut für Waldorfpädagogik in Witten/Ruhr. He has published a number of books on Waldorf education and a history of Steiner's School of Spiritual Science.*