

The scientific credibility of anthroposophy

Jost Schieren

*Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences, Germany
Department of Education*

Introduction: The topicality of this theme

In cultural life there are certain contentious issues that seem to be “in the air”, to belong in a special way to the present moment. One such is currently that of the relationship of anthroposophy to science. This is the crucial issue confronting anthroposophy in the 21st century. In the 20th century anthroposophy had a rather different orientation, namely that of achieving social integration for its reformatory approach to a range of different fields of life (medicine, agriculture, education, social structures etc.). In this it was relatively successful, with the result that many things it was responsible for starting, without anyone being very clear about their origin, have now become a natural part of social life in Germany and elsewhere. The price that has been paid for this, however, would appear to be that while these fruits of anthroposophy find ever wider social acceptance and appreciation, the tree itself is generally avoided or ignored. Anthroposophy continues to be regarded as an *obscure body of spiritual teaching*. Apparently what people want – as the magazine *Der Spiegel* said a few years ago – are *Waldorf Schools without Steiner*. And it is in fact the case nowadays that this demand has already become reality in many schools and other anthroposophical institutions. The success anthroposophy has had in many areas of modern life seems to have gone hand in hand with a sell-out of its own basic principles.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that anthroposophy, in spite of the public recognition of anthroposophical initiatives, still has scarcely any standing in universities and academic life generally. It is considered unscientific, and is thus paid no heed in those faculties where it might be of relevance (medicine, agriculture, education). At the door of science anthroposophy has hitherto knocked in vain. This is all the more serious, in that the scientific mentality is the one that sets the tone of our time. The universities, its representatives, are the institutions that determine the values and goals of modern society.

In the last few years, however, this relationship between anthroposophy and science has begun to change. There are certain indicators of this change that are currently making the scientific status of anthroposophy such an urgent question. They are as follows:

- *Developments in the field of higher education:* in the individual fields of medicine, agriculture, education and even eurythmy anthroposophically oriented professorships have been established in recent years. In keeping with the terms of the Bologna process, Waldorf teacher training is beginning to take its rightful academic place. The most eminent scientific body in Germany, the Science Council (“Wissenschaftsrat”), has in recent years been concerned with questions of approval for anthroposophically oriented universities. In the case of the Alanus University at Alfter, near Bonn, the Council granted accreditation at the highest level it had approved in ten years, and recommended in addition that the Educational Science Department be given the right to grant doctorates. This recommendation has since been duly carried out, initially limited to five years’ duration. In connection with the mission statement of the Alanus University, The Science Council’s official assessment comments as follows: A focal point of research which gives the institution its particular identity is the ongoing, discursive concern with the thinking and works of Rudolf Steiner in relation to art and science” (Science Council of Germany, 2010). In the case of the Mannheim Academy accreditation was refused. Even though anthroposophy was not the main reason for this, the assessment nevertheless alluded to the fact that a possible danger lies “in basing the work of a university-level institution on an extra-scientific theory of education involving methodology influenced by a particular worldview” (Science Council of Germany, 2011). With this statement it is made abundantly clear that for the highest body in Germany concerned with such matters the scientific credibility of anthroposophy is a major question. This must be understood, primarily, as an opportunity to address the question. It must be done, however, not in the usual manner of putting forward a vigorous apology for anthroposophy as science, but rather by means of an open discussion, that would at least begin the job of giving anthroposophy its place in the scientific landscape.

- *Scientific publications:* In recent years a growing number of contemporary academics have published extensive criticism on anthroposophy, written from the perspective of “established” science and based upon profound knowledge of Rudolf Steiner’s works. Helmut Zander has produced a comprehensive, two-volume analysis of *Anthroposophy in Germany*. For decades now, Heiner Ullrich, as an education theorist, has been carrying on a critical discussion of Waldorf education and its anthroposophical underpinnings. In autumn of this year (2011) appeared Hartmut Traub’s thousand-page treatise on the basic philosophical writings of Rudolf Steiner. – What is important here is that a serious dialogue with anthroposophy has been opened up by representatives of modern academia. So far such a discussion has only been pursued on a small scale by representatives of anthroposophy.

As regards the scientific status of anthroposophy the answer given by these representatives of the modern scientific mentality is perfectly clear: anthroposophy is not a science. It belongs among the so-called pseudo-sciences. If this verdict holds in the long term, anthroposophy will eventually be hindered from having any essential influence upon social or cultural life. Young people studying at university have no way of gaining proper insight into Rudolf Steiner’s works. In the world of public debate anthroposophy’s voice is not noticed. These are already grounds enough for taking an in depth look at the question of its scientific status.

In connection with such an attempt to place anthroposophy on the scientific map, there are two contrasting problem areas to be considered. The one (going back to the actual works of Rudolf Steiner) is more an *originator* problem, the other (involving the interpretation, representation and dissemination of those works by Steiner’s successors) more an *epigone* problem. Let us begin by considering two facets of the first area.

Esotericism

Most of the arguments criticising anthroposophy for being unscientific do so in connection with its esoteric aspects, which are considered beyond the reach of scientific investigation. The problem is the notion of supersensible knowledge, based solely upon untestable assertions made by Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophists bridge this gap by a gesture of trust, but this cannot be expected of everyone. Even in the long term there is little that can be done to alter this knot of problems. To try and use the esoteric pronouncements of Rudolf Steiner as a basis for justifying the scientific nature of anthroposophy is – for the foreseeable future – not a recipe for success. In such an undertaking it may be sensible, in principle, to demand a different concept of science, centred upon an *inner empiricism* or *inner evidence*; but to do so would necessarily imply a complete paradigm shift of the whole scientific enterprise, and this cannot be managed by anthroposophy alone. It is much more likely that the currently ruling paradigm of science will of itself come to an end, because the technocratic worldview built into it will have caused ever more disasters and destruction (social breakdown, environmental damage, climate change etc.). The increasing tendency to question a materialistic paradigm of science that brings such consequences with it may well then have the side-effect of increasing interest in anthroposophy. These, however, are all long-range perspectives.

Philosophy

Another perhaps more weighty problem area is one that emerges from Steiner’s philosophical works – which form the foundation for his esotericism. One significant feature stands out here particularly clearly: in tune with the predominantly positivist slant of modern philosophy the contemporary epistemology of science has rejected all forms of *essentialism*. By essentialism is meant any form of philosophy that seeks to ground itself upon ultimate truths. This applies to idealist philosophy in general, e.g. it is the case for Plato, and for both Hegel and Schelling. The newer philosophy, especially critical rationalism and the epistemological approach of Karl Popper, involves an incisive and radical rejection of essentialism. This is based upon scientific thinking, which seeks for empirical evidence in support of theories. In the course of this the possibility of current theories being refuted by new evidence must, in principle, be kept open. According to this principle, called by Popper the principle of *falsification*, any theory is only valid insofar as new evidence has not yet brought about its rejection. A significant contrary position to this has been taken up by Paul Feyerabend. But even his demand for *methodological pluralism* has done nothing to change the anti-essentialist stance of modern science. It is interesting that Popper’s argumentation in his book *The open society and its enemies* (Popper, 1992) is much more historical and sociological in tenor than philosophical. In essentialism Popper sees a social danger, for any philosophy claiming the truth automatically defames any approach contrary to it as untrue. Herein lies – as he sees it – the source of tyranny, dogmatism and fanaticism.

Given that this basic attitude will hold sway in most modern university faculties, anthroposophy is virtually designed to be criticised as unscientific. Heiner Ullrich, a professor of education based in Mainz, has done this repeatedly, and always with summary incisiveness. In his professorial thesis *Waldorf education and its occult worldview* he criticises the scientific credentials of anthroposophy on the basis of profound study of the texts behind it. And in spite of having been concerned with anthroposophy

and Waldorf education for decades, in his latest book (on Rudolf Steiner), which appeared this year, he repeats this criticism with equal firmness. In an earlier essay, he states: “In contrast to the conscious detachment, plurality and unresolved openness of scientific method, Steiner and his disciples desire dogmatic knowledge, or visionary experience, of the world as a well-ordered whole resembling an eternal, unchangeable truth. [...] Their way of thinking is degenerate philosophy, mere worldview. [...] With the formulation of the anthroposophical ‘occult science’ Steiner fell prey to all the dangers of such a way of thinking. Here the pre-modern, dogmatic-metaphysical speculation of neo-Platonism is transformed into the contrived, re-mythologised world picture of theosophy” (Ulrich, 1988, p. 174). As profoundly felt as these reproaches are, it would be wrong to suppose – as anthroposophists are sometimes wont to do – that behind them lurk the dark intentions of an “organised enemy”. What we have here is simply a contrary position, which quite naturally has attracted much argumentative attention from the anthroposophical perspective. Among those who might be mentioned are Helmut Kiene (1990), Peter Schneider (1997), and most recently Marek Majorek (2010, 2002). These authors use Steiner’s epistemology as their point of reference. The *empirical method* consisting of the observation of thinking is taken as a secure starting point for *real* spiritual experience. However consistent and fully comprehensible in Steiner’s terms this approach might be, it still does not manage to avoid giving the impression of being based upon *assertion*. At key points Steiner always speaks of the *good will* required in order to follow his argument. This implies that one must be prepared to entertain, or quite simply, assume the validity of an essentialist point of view, in order then to properly appreciate the experiences resulting from the process of inner observation. Furthermore, the empirical data, upon which the essential validity of these experiences is to be based, must be generated in one’s own thinking. By way almost of a confession, Rudolf Steiner himself states in his autobiography, *The course of my life*, that he did not succeed in formulating a scientifically valid method for gaining access to the spiritual world: “Even today I am left with the feeling that if the hindrances here described had not been present, my attempt to provide a path to the spirit world via scientific thinking would have turned out better” (Steiner 1925, p. 283). This means that in his basic writings Steiner had not managed to bring the original impulse he was following to its desired goal. The correctness of this interpretation becomes apparent when we compare the writings Rudolf Steiner published before and after the turn of the century. The publications of a more theosophical nature, especially the later lecture cycles, make less of a claim to being scientific than do his early philosophical works.

As a consequence of this anthroposophists are faced with a clear task, namely, to take Rudolf Steiner’s realist, essentialist position and develop it further in terms of scientific epistemology. As already demonstrated, however, this seems to be something of a long-term project, with little prospect of success. It should also be taken into consideration, that a claim to truth is no explicit feature of Steiner’s works. He himself repeatedly expressed a concept of scientific openness, implying that his books and lectures should meet less with affirmation than with a critical, experimental attitude. It seems, therefore, more appropriate to describe anthroposophy as a path of knowledge that offers a *perspective* on the truth and holds out the possibility of approaching it, rather than reducing it to an ingredient of a particular individual’s store of knowledge. A possible term that suggests itself for this would be *perspective-based essentialism*.

Epigonal problems

Giving anthroposophy its due position in the landscape of science is fraught with other problems of a more epigonal character. In other words they have to do with how it has been received. These are weightier and more dramatic. The problems with its cultural profile that anthroposophy habitually encounters do not normally stem from Steiner’s works; they are “home-made”. They reside with *anthroposophists* not with *anthroposophy*.

A serious problem demanding mention is that of the uncritical use of Steiner’s utterances, with no attempt made on the part of users to test them for themselves or to bring their own observational ability to bear upon them. Here what counts is belief in Rudolf Steiner’s words, rather than any personal striving for knowledge. When this then leads to the issuing of compilations from Steiner’s works embellished with speculations arising from them, the sure ground of scientific rigour has been entirely vacated. A large proportion of the publications of anthroposophical authors treat the utterances of Rudolf Steiner as indubitable facts. There is much musing done upon such subjects as reincarnation sequences and conditions in the so-called spiritual world, with no apparent concern about the obvious lack of any independently thought-out contribution to the content. Even worse: the decades-long habit of studying Steiner leads to the belief that one is completely clued up and in the picture about the things he presented and consequently can (and should) instruct others about them. Through years of reading Rudolf Steiner’s works the individual ability to reserve judgement with regard to their knowledge content is usually undermined. This is rather like spending a lot of time in galleries and as a consequence fancying that one could paint like Raphael. This lack of awareness of the rational detachment necessary in relation to the utterances of Rudolf Steiner is not the source of anthroposophy’s being regarded as unscientific, it is what *actually makes it unscientific*.

There is a still more complex problem. It lies in the misunderstanding that there is a spiritual world which is present *in itself*. Anthroposophy is often misunderstood as a body of teaching about the spiritual world. If this were so, it would not have much

new to offer. It would be truly as eclectic as it is often accused of being; for spiritually oriented systems have always existed. What is special about anthroposophy is the fact that Steiner combined such a body of spiritual teaching with another significant aspect of human nature: freedom. Steiner put forward a completely new concept of spirit. In his early work *A theory of knowledge implicit in Goethe's world conception* he states: "The World-Fundament has poured itself out completely into the world; it has not drawn back from the world in order to control it from without, but impels it from within; it has not withheld itself from the world. The highest form in which it emerges within the reality of ordinary life is that of thought and, with this, human personality. If, then, the World-Fundament has goals, these are identical with the goals which man sets up for himself as he manifests his own being. Man is not behaving in accordance with the purposes of the Guiding Power of the world when he investigates one or other of His commandments, but when he behaves in accordance with his own insight. For in him the Guiding Power of the world manifests Himself. He does not live as Will somewhere outside of man; He has renounced his own will in order that all might depend upon the will of man" (Steiner, 1978, p. 110). The main import here is the implication that from an epistemological perspective there is no self-existent spirituality external to the process of consciousness. It might be objected that although epistemologically speaking this might be correct, from an ontological point of view the spirit exists every bit as much as does the creation around us. This kind of argumentation, however, is exactly where the problem lies. One of Rudolf Steiner's fundamental aims was to overcome such naïve realism, in other words the belief in a reality existing independently of our participation in it through the act of knowing. Reality only exists in that through the activity of individual consciousness the human being constructs it. This act of construction has an ontological as well as an epistemological dimension. Reality has its foundation in the human spirit's capacity for freedom. The crucial element is the free, individual act of thinking. Inner observation of thinking, as a method, therefore, is not merely a species of Kantian enlightenment, but is an ontological process involved in the actual structuring of reality. Epistemology thus becomes ontology. In relation to the natural world – the reality encountered by the senses – anthroposophists usually have no problem concurring with such an argument, and it is not unfamiliar to them. Applied to the spiritual world, however, it will often provoke in them the *naïve realism* that Steiner was so keen on superseding. They persist in believing in a self-existent spiritual world, and thus fall into outworn modes of spirituality. This is a kind of *naïve spirit-realism*, that was actually rendered invalid by the Enlightenment; since then, for the modern human being even spiritual reality has become a conscious event. This falls within the semantic compass of the Christian idea that the Godhead has become human.

Inner observation in the work of Herbert Witzenmann

As already indicated, the inner observation of thinking provides the methodological underpinnings for considering consciousness as autonomously active. The object of this observation is actually what the soul in process of thinking experiences. This is the place where Herbert Witzenmann starts. His work – which is all too little appreciated in anthroposophical circles – is fundamentally concerned with developing a new understanding of the spirit out of Rudolf Steiner's theory of knowledge. A brief outline of his approach now follows.

Witzenmann argues that the crucial thing in anthroposophy is not the *content* but the *form* of consciousness. Speaking of "the overcoming of intellectualism", he says: "The intellect is fond of using thinking in order to satisfy the longings of the soul with information about a spiritual world it actually knows nothing about. In the interests of personal or group advantage it uses 'operating instructions', the origin of which – although they emanate from that same source – is equally beyond its purview." On this basis there can be "neither individual nor cultural progress. New consciousness is not attained by virtue of being told something *about* the spiritual world, but only by information about it gained directly by the observation of one's own thinking" (Witzenmann, 1998, p. 168f.). This demands a degree of individual autonomy in the approach to Rudolf Steiner's words hitherto all too seldom employed within the anthroposophical movement. So far faithful, meditative, textual study has been the accepted paradigm for the reception of Rudolf Steiner's works.

The essential point of departure for Witzenmann in Steiner's work is the latter's productive concept of reality. Reality is ultimately the product of the combination of percept and concept in the process of human cognition, and as such is an event in the objective world. In order for this to happen the ontological sphere of the world has to nullify itself in the human organisation. Witzenmann describes the human neuro-sensory system as an organ for the nullification of the spirit brought about by ontological evolution. It places the human being before the *nothingness* of sensory perception, so that in the free act of knowing he can undertake a re-constitution of reality. It is a kind of *null-point* and as such a point from which human cognition can proceed unconditionally. There are – as Rudolf Steiner points out in *The philosophy of freedom* – two different ways of doing this: on the one hand, through the *percepts* delivered by the sensory organisation; and on the other, through autonomously generated *thinking*. By using meditation to practise inner observation and thus developing his ability to work with these two poles of human cognition – *perception* and *thinking* – the human being takes hold of a new freedom-based mode of constituting both self and world.

The qualitative attributes acting at each pole are different. In the encounter with the world at the pole of perception, according to Witzenmann, *dispositions* are formed. These arise through the participation of human cognition in the lawful construction

of phenomena, a process whereby the concepts and ideas produced by thinking are actualised and individualised by perception. Accordingly Witzmann points out that dispositions are “the result of the individualisation of general concepts (universals) in the course of their metamorphic adaptation to conditions presenting themselves in the form of perceptions with which they interpenetrate.” “Insofar as the spirit individualises itself *in* matter, we individualise ourselves *out of* the spirit as co-producers of its products – thus inwardly giving it a phenomenal form that is not created by nature [“*natur-schaffend*”], but by ourselves” (Witzmann, *ibid.*, p. 11). In the Goethean sense, then, dispositions are formed in every encounter with the world involving cognition. The qualities inherent in the phenomena come to experience. In this connection, the aspect of Goethe’s method known as *intuitive judgement* becomes particularly important, because with this Goethe had developed a very sensitive organ for becoming aware of the spiritual qualities in the individual phenomena of nature (Schieren, 1998). At the same time it is the method whereby the human being can develop his own personal *abilities*.

There is, of course, the other pole – that of *thinking*. This also entails a *null-point*, for it rests upon nothing other than the individual impulse to action of the person doing the thinking. Through encountering self-consistent, self-evident thought-*content*, however, the *activity* of thinking leads to something beyond itself and thus attains its specific signature. Here Witzmann speaks of *conditions*. The insights a human being gains are, on the one hand, individual attainments, and can only come about as a result of the individual’s own thinking. At the same time they make manifest (in the sense of *conditions*) the field of consciousness within which a given individual is carrying out his thought and action. They provide the foundation for the evidential self-consistency intrinsic to every human mind. But this self-consistency is, on the other hand, only arrived at by virtue of the fact that in every thought process the individual *act* of thinking interacts with a universal, likewise self-consistent thought-*content* (herein lies the justification for Steiner’s form of *essentialism*).

Witzmann describes the abilities that arise at each pole as follows: “Our dispositional freedom arises through our participation in the individualisation of Mind in the process of which it is permeated with percepts. It is a “*materialisation*”, a self-forming in the co-forming of thought-*contents*. Our conditional freedom arises through our individual (i.e. conditioned) thought forms working upon the universal Mind in such a way that it receives their influence into its own realm. This freedom is thus a “*spiritualisation*”.

The qualitative features that these two poles – *perception* and *thinking* – develop can be better understood and appreciated in the light of a quotation from Rudolf Steiner’s book “Theosophy”. In the chapter entitled “Re-embodiment of the Spirit and Destiny” he says: “If we want to understand a human spirit we must therefore know two different things about it: first, how much of the eternal has revealed itself to it; second, how much treasure from the past lies stored up within it” (Steiner, 1922, p. 52). There is something very attractive about this quotation because it so convincingly suggests that the whole complexity of the human spirit can be grasped simply from two perspectives. A closer look at these two perspectives, however, reveals that they open up a wide field for observation and careful attention. Accordingly, it is not a question of forming a firm judgement about what man is, but of having a context in which knowledge can grow, constantly drawing inspiration from two directions.

The one points towards the already described realm of perception, towards the shaping of reality. The potential of the world is actualised. Concepts are brought to bear upon percepts and are objectively anchored by *the latter*. Concepts become inherent in percepts. In the process *dispositions* arise in the knower. These are – as previously presented – capacities of understanding and action developed in interaction with a particular body of phenomena. These are the “*treasures from the past*” that we carry within us.

The other pole is that of thinking which leads not into the world, but – in the light of inner observation - into the depths of the human mind. This is where, at an ideal level, the structuring of the self takes place, whereby there is an intuitive interchange with the sphere of self-consistent concepts which are considered to be real. The conditions thus formed are the insights of which a given human being is capable, the ideal impulses and potential for understanding living in a particular individual. These are the *revelations of the eternal*, which form the foundations of the ethical-ideal orientation, the eternal essence of each individual.

The main features of this presentation based on the work of Herbert Witzmann may be clarified in the following table:

Intuitive judgement (Goethe)

Null-point – perception
 Constitutive of phenomenal reality
 Constructivism/inherent concepts
 Disposition
 Treasures of the past

Inner observation (Steiner)

Null-point – act of thinking
 Constitutive of self
 Conceptual realism/intuition
 Condition
 Revelations of the eternal

An interim attempt at a solution

In the foregoing the attempt has just been made to outline a new, epistemologically justified concept of mind, which combines a spiritual view of man and world with the modern claim to complete human autonomy and the perspective of individual growth towards freedom. Outside of anthroposophical circles, however, such an attempt will find little acceptance. However important and decisive this concept may be in the long term, it nevertheless seems more sensible in the meantime to approach the question of the scientific status of anthroposophy by looking at its areas of application with a view to validating these scientifically. A good example of this has very recently been provided by Peter Heusser in the area of medicine (Heusser, 2011). In his professorial thesis he systematically derives the anthroposophical picture of the human being from an understanding of it based squarely upon the epistemology of science. This approach sets the standard that could be followed by all other areas involving the practical application of anthroposophy. A proper discussion of the anthroposophical approach within the context of a particular scientific discipline can really only take place once argumentation is no longer conducted from first principles (thus curtailing the tendency to readily slip beyond the limits of a particular subject area), each case is taken seriously in its own terms and the anthroposophical approach assessed according to its local relevance. Then the difficult and, according to current opinion, well-nigh insoluble problem of whether anthroposophy is science or not will not be in the foreground; rather, there will be a fundamental change of attitude. It is no longer a question of whether anthroposophy is any use as a science, but of how it can be used scientifically. This approach can be outlined as a series of tasks to be accomplished, as follows:

- *Positioning within the history of ideas:* Inside the anthroposophical movement the impression can easily arise that within the context of cultural history Rudolf Steiner and his works represent a solitary phenomenon. The focus upon the person and work of Steiner is so exclusive that the fact that he himself placed his work in a broad, particularly philosophical context is lost from view. He always pointed out its concrete cultural connections. Among anthroposophists this is readily overlooked. Helmut Zander's professorial thesis *Anthroposophie in Deutschland* (Zander, 2008) carries the distinction of having thrown light upon this context by opening up a whole range of particular cases to scrutiny – even if a number of the conclusions he draws from them are somewhat questionable for their one-sidedness. A critical appraisal of anthroposophy's place in the history of philosophy and intellectual culture is fundamental to approaching it scientifically.
- *Participation in the discussion of current scientific issues:* Beyond this task of establishing its appropriate place in history there is that of gaining a voice for anthroposophy in current scientific discourse. If it is to have a meaning in the present then it must be able to find its place as a valid component in a range of scientific disciplines, and to integrate the details of scientific issues currently under discussion into its own argumentation.
- *Critical detachment:* An essential and indispensable prerequisite for a scientific approach to anthroposophy is that Rudolf Steiner's communications not be treated as truths or statements of fact, but as theses subject to critical testing. In science nothing can be taken as given. Helpful here is to use a method that works by contrast. This would involve balancing Steiner's statements by viewing them in relation to diametrically opposed theories.
- *Systematisation:* Every science is characterised by having a systematic, reasonably coherent structure. Any researcher bringing this expectation to Rudolf Steiner's works, which as a whole simply do not present a clear, systematic picture, will find himself before a virtually impossible task. A more pragmatic suggestion as to how to go about this could be to undertake an initial systematisation in relation to the particular discipline, as follows:
 - (a) *Verifiable statements:* What is meant here are statements by Rudolf Steiner that can be substantiated by normal scientific methods. In my estimation, this will apply to a relatively high percentage of them.
 - (b) *Unverifiable, but conceivable statements:* There will also be numerous statements that are not necessarily verifiable (for instance, the idea of reincarnation), but which in the overall context seem plausible and conceivable.
 - (c) *Unverifiable and inconceivable statements:* There will then remain a tiny percentage of statements by Rudolf Steiner, that according to the current climate of thinking will be considered inconceivable.

The advantage in such a systematisation lies in the fact that the whole of Steiner's works can no longer be discredited simply on account of a few incomprehensible passages. Rather it becomes apparent that the proportion of statements that are difficult or totally inconceivable is relatively tiny.

- *Deliberate restraint as regards knowledge:* An essential requirement is that of constantly preserving a deliberate distance between what one knows oneself and the knowledge contained in Steiner's works. This deliberately cultivated restraint must be upheld, especially in publications. Trust in the possibility of an appropriate scientific approach to anthroposophy grows among non-anthroposophists to the extent that anthroposophists throw off the habit of "we know better". For the fact is that they do not know better; they have simply invested their trust in the fact that Rudolf Steiner knows better. This, however, is a personal decision, open to anyone, but obviously possessing no scientific validity.

- *Explicitness*: A large part of the work of Rudolf Steiner exists in the form of *lecture cycles*, each of which was given before a particular audience, in a particular place, at a particular time. Inevitably these lectures are imbued with implicit assumptions which Steiner does not go into in any way. Many misunderstandings arising from the encounter with Steiner's works are the result of the reader being unaware of such implicit assumptions, and of nothing having been done to make him aware of them. Thus if the approach to anthroposophy is to be scientific it must fulfil the requirement of *explicitness*. In other words, the particular context in which lectures were held or writings published must be expressly declared and their relevant circumstances explained. In addition, texts must always be accompanied by notes translating and explaining particular technical terms.
- *Rationalisation*: A common feature of Rudolf Steiner's style of presentation is his pictorial choice of words. It is this that is most often the butt of academic criticism. Steiner himself repeatedly made clear that certain pictorial turns of speech were necessary in order to do full justice to the intimacy of the subject in hand, and to evoke in the listener, or reader, a state of mind appropriate to it. Important as this inner attitude is for meditative training, it is equally important to distinguish it from an attitude of scientific understanding, which approaches its object in a conceptual, rational manner. Here the point is not to play the one approach off against the other, but to become aware of these different forms of approach and ways of working, and apply the appropriate one in a particular context. A jacket is not, *per se*, a better garment than a bathing costume. But if one wishes to go swimming, the jacket is unlikely to fit the bill. By the same token, there must be a clear distinguishing of levels in dealing with the works of Rudolf Steiner.

Strategic advantages and genuine cultural values

Using the scientific approach to anthroposophy presented above generates various, medium-term, strategic advantages. Worthy of mention here is that in its areas of practical application anthroposophy becomes a regular contributor to ongoing scientific discussion within each specific field of competence. For Waldorf education, for instance, this could mean that a pedagogical approach consistently directed towards human development could at least have its existence recognised, and thus provide ballast to an understanding of education geared entirely towards economic goals. Just looking at the literature published last year, it is already apparent that many of the attacks upon anthroposophy – for instance, the longstanding charge of racism – are now sounding hollow. Representatives of science at university level (e.g. Heiner Ullrich) attest to the fact that Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy have nothing to do with racism. A further strategic advantage is that a debate that hitherto has largely been conducted *ideologically* can now proceed as a *factual debate*. Here too in the last ten years there has been a noticeable change in many fields (for instance, Waldorf education) towards a more objective form of critical discussion.

Over and above advantages more to be rated as strategic, however, a scientifically oriented approach to anthroposophy also gives rise to genuine cultural values, which are assuredly of greater significance. The scientific attitude of mind can be regarded as an ideal of modern culture. It is of such a nature that human consciousness has a tendency to become more and more conscious of itself and of its own internal processes. Hand in hand with this goes an expanding faculty for critical self-reflection. The quest for knowledge, that does not rest upon dogmatic articles of faith, but upon the individual's own mental effort, is foremost. Anthroposophists are among those who often tend to *ideologise* topics which could actually be given a thoroughly objective treatment. Occasionally credence is given to an "adversary-myth", which renders all objective debate impossible. A further cultural advance would accrue from the uncompromising rejection of all kinds of esoteric presumptuousness and unjustified uses of esoteric terms. Authentic insights arrived at by the efforts of individuals would then be the hallmark of anthroposophical discourse.

Conclusion

Once such a change to a scientifically oriented approach is consistently implemented, anthroposophy will acquire a new public image. It will be perceived as open to discussion and dialogue. The formulation contained in Karl Popper's book *The open society and its enemies* could then apply to anthroposophy and anthroposophists. The general import of what he says is as follows: "Closed systems, immunised against all criticism, are incapable of progress, smother all intellectual independence and creativity and eventually perish through their own inflexibility. Open systems, by contrast, which are willing to risk the refutation of even the most seemingly indispensable truths are not only more humane, but prove to be more productive and successful. Scientific as well as political systems are not acceptable unless they are capable of learning and self-correction" (Herzinger, 2002, p. 30).

The idea here put forward of a scientific attitude *towards* and a scientific way of working *with* anthroposophy is not the result of opportunism or an attempt to further a career. It springs, rather, from a feeling that one should be contributing to the creation of a new idea of man and ensuring that it gets a hearing in the modern social context. Students should have the opportunity to become aware of this new understanding of the human being cultivated out of anthroposophy. The ideological walls of concrete

that the universities have built around anthroposophy must be breached. Furthermore, this article is based on the conviction that it is precisely through a scientific way of working with anthroposophy that its own wellsprings – always in danger of being lost in everyday practice - will be rediscovered. *Inner observation* can be seen as methodologically central to a scientific attitude of mind. It is the blade capable – in the sense of the Grimms' fairy tale - of cutting through the thorny hedge of materialism and waking the slumbering Brier Rose with a kiss. Thus would end the mental sleep in which our age is caught, and which keeps us from the reality of the spiritual world and of human freedom.

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