

A critical view of Heiner Ullrich's critique of Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of knowledge

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In his book about Rudolf Steiner, Heiner Ullrich (2008) discusses – among other things – Steiner's philosophy of knowledge. Reading this part of the book, encompassing pp. 123 – 135, I was astonished to find so many claims about what Steiner means *almost without a single reference to – let alone a quote from – Steiner's work*. I am surprised that such a text can be published with the implicit claims of being a scholarly and academic book (it is published as volume 11 of the Continuum Library of Educational Thought). In these 12 pages (and also in the rest of the book) one finds one conclusive judgment after another about Steiner's philosophy without any arguments, demonstrations or clear references to Steiner's texts,¹ as if it was not at all a question of Ullrich *interpreting* Steiner's work, but as if he is merely *recounting* what Steiner himself has said or written. And yet, having studied Steiner's work for over 20 years, I for one can hardly recognize a single idea from Steiner in Ullrich's presentation of him. Almost all of it consists of distortions and misconceptions piled up, one upon another. Ullrich's account of Steiner's philosophy seems to be based on secondary and mainly critical sources, he seems not to have taken the trouble to read Steiner himself.

In the following I will try to justify this highly critical view of Ullrich's presentation. I will limit myself however to the pages 123 – 127 of the book, comprising a section called "Anthroposophy as a philosophy without boundaries". I think a thorough discussion of these pages is enough to give an impression of how Ullrich (mis) treats Steiner's ideas. At some points I will bring in references and a quote from Steiner's work, but I will also allow myself the same liberty as Ullrich and simply state my interpretation of Steiner, in opposition to his. I do this because this is not a peer-reviewed academic article and finding all the relevant references is a time-consuming work. Those who know Steiner's work may judge for themselves whether my interpretations accord with Steiner and with their own. If we disagree, the discussion about this issue can continue.

Ullrich's claims about anthroposophy as "a philosophy without boundaries"

Steiner is known to have made many critical remarks about Kant's philosophy. Ullrich says critics of Steiner conclude that he misreads Kant's epistemology in a psychological way and that this leads him to "a pre-critical, naively realistic position in the justification of his own theory of knowledge" (Ullrich, p. 123). Many dogs are buried in these simple statements; one is almost overwhelmed by the work that would be needed to unearth them all. I have to limit myself to a few of them. Steiner is indeed questioning the epistemological boundaries that Kant proclaimed, but he is no more "psychological" in his reading than many other philosophers after Kant, who also questioned these boundaries (Schelling, Hegel, and others). Hegel for instance, in his typically dialectical fashion, said that if one is aware of a limit, a border, one is implicitly also aware of *what is on the other side* of the border – this is inherent in the very concept of a border.

1. There are other references, but they are to *critics* of Steiner, and their conclusions.

Admittedly, Steiner adheres to the longstanding esoteric tradition that the limits of knowledge are relative to the individual's conscious cognitive capacity, and that such capacities can be developed beyond the normal. This may sound "psychological", but taking it as a fact that such capacities can be developed does not mean that all epistemological issues are suddenly transformed into psychological ones. It does, however, eliminate the grounds for taking Kant's notion of epistemological boundaries as a given, even if Kant's reasoning in this respect is purely epistemological and untouched by any empirical-psychological dust.

As for Steiner's philosophy being pre-critical and naively realistic, this too is an obvious misunderstanding. By "pre-critical" Ullrich presumably means pre-Kantian, i.e., a stance that has not realized the boundaries of knowledge; that we cannot know the thing-in-itself; that our knowing is subjectively conditioned in a general way by the very nature of our consciousness, which is conditioned by the categories of understanding that are either inherent (Kant's view) or acquired in one way or another (post-Kantian views). But it is precisely the impossibility or incoherence of Kant's view that is the object of Steiner's critique. For one thing, he points out that Kant starts from the assumption that we already know *what knowledge is*: Newtonian natural science. (This is hardly an example of self-reflective critique on Kant's part!) Steiner assimilated Kant's views but went beyond them by showing that they do not hold. Regarding the post-Kantian views, which implies that any striving for knowledge must be self-reflective and self-critical, Steiner did many times 1) praise the objectivity and constant effort to transcend mere subjective perceptions and opinions so characteristic of modern scientific research methods, and 2) repeatedly warned against the dangers of deceptions and illusions inherent in the path towards higher, spiritual knowledge or cognition. Hence, to call Steiner's philosophy pre-critical is simply absurd.

Only at one point does Steiner say that naïve realism is *almost* a correct position, and that concerns the experience of our own thoughts. If I think for instance of a geometrical problem, I cannot but take it for granted that the thoughts I develop mean what I think they mean. I could not arrive at any conclusion at all if I did not take this stance. This of course does not exclude the possibility that I may not be aware of all the *implications* of a particular thought at a particular moment in time.

Ullrich goes on to say that Steiner "affords the individual [...] an ultimately unlimited capability for acquiring knowledge", and that he does this by "transfiguring the thought process into the supposedly objective mirror of being" (ibid.). The "ultimately unlimited" capacity for knowledge comes from the belief in the possibility to develop – by very stringent and demanding work on oneself – organs of perception and cognition beyond the normal, which has already been mentioned. It can be said to be ultimately unlimited because there is simply *no point* in establishing a *theoretical* limit for this capacity, although in practical life there is always such a limit, contingent upon personal capacity and other circumstances. Steiner himself sometimes admitted that there were things he did not know, but sometimes they became known to him later on – just as it happens in normal research. Ullrich, however, prefers not to point these things out, making Steiner's ideas seem fantastic and unrealistic. He even accuses Steiner of discounting "the critical question of the correlation between human imperfection and the limits of cognition" (ibid.), when it is precisely these imperfections that the work to develop both conventional scientific and higher spiritual cognition has to overcome, which Steiner often points out in the texts dealing with how to gain knowledge of "higher worlds".

The statement that Steiner transfigures the thought process into an objective mirror of being is even more preposterous. As far as I know, Steiner never talks about genuine knowledge as a "mirror of reality" or that thinking can become a mirror of being (taking being and reality as synonyms). Quite the opposite; in the preface to his dissertation he explicitly rejects a so-called reproductive view of knowledge; i.e., the notion that knowledge is a kind of mirror image – a re-presentation – of a reality that is pre-given and independent of human consciousness:

Die Aufgabe der Erkenntnis ist *nicht*: etwas schon anderwärts Vorhandenes in begrifflicher Form *zu wiederholen*, sondern die: *ein ganz neues Gebiet zu schaffen*, das mit der sinnenfällig gegebenen Welt zusammen erst die volle Wirklichkeit ergibt. (Steiner, 1980, p. 11; my italics)

Erkenntnis, that is knowledge or cognition, takes place in consciousness as a *creative event*, in which perceptions from the "external world" – external in relation to the *subjective consciousness*, not merely to the

body – flows together with concepts perceived from within the subjective stream of thoughts. This is how Steiner develops this basic idea. Hence, the thought process is far from a mirror of being.

Next, Ullrich goes on to say that Steiner “disregards the historical dimension of human understanding of self” (p. 124). This claim is inconceivable for anyone familiar with Steiner's descriptions of the historical development of human consciousness; which implies precisely successive changes in the understanding of both self and world. The acute awareness of subjectivity, of being a “self” separate from the world, is a quality of consciousness characteristic of modernity – of what Steiner calls the epoch of the consciousness soul – developing in the 16th century and provoking new ideas in both science and epistemology. In earlier epochs people did not feel as distinctly separate from the world and therefore epistemological issues were discussed in another mode.

Similarly, further down on the same page, Ullrich says that Steiner's concept of the human being “leaves no room for the idea of a historically unique person who exists in order to achieve self-determination in liberty and to seek solidarity with the other”. The fact is that one could claim exactly the opposite, with a certain reservation for the fact that Steiner in his early philosophical period rejected the idea of a universal and objective “meaning of life” for human beings: hence human beings would not exist “in order to” something. Anthroposophy, like most esoteric teachings about reincarnation and karma, make a clear distinction between the historical personality and the “higher Self”. Even though the higher Self in a certain sense exists beyond time and space, the historical personality to which it is related is certainly unique in each particular incarnation. This personality also has the possibility to work for self-determination, although in its true sense such self-determination cannot take place without a deeper connection to the higher Self. It is this connection that gives the basis for “liberty” in the sense of inner freedom; as well as for solidarity with others. Furthermore, solidarity (“brotherhood”) – together with equality and freedom (in the social sense) – was one of the basic values in the movement for social renewal that Steiner inaugurated after WWI, the so-called social three-foldness. To say that Steiner's philosophy leaves no room for solidarity with other people is an outright lie.

But Ullrich does not pay attention to any of this. Instead he talks about how for Steiner human understanding is “of a divine nature” (ibid.) – hence, presumably, eternal and unchanging, as divinity is usually conceived. The reason that Steiner thinks so is, according to Ullrich, because he believes that “thought is fundamentally capable of recognizing the absolute in the form of recognizing the essence of phenomena” (ibid.). It is true that Steiner says we can grasp the essence of things in thought, but where on earth does he link the essence of phenomena to *the absolute*? It seems to me that Ullrich's reasoning builds on the conventional assumption that “the divine” is linked with eternity and therefore with “no-change”, and furthermore with “essence” and with “the absolute”. The latter at least is definitely not changing. But Steiner's view is not as simple as this kind of classical and rigid Platonism. First of all, what is “divine”? In traditional esoteric thinking, to which Steiner adheres, the divine in its proper sense refers to the highest level of the spiritual world (this is not the conventional sense of “divine”). In Christian terms this would be the Trinity. Below that there are many kinds of spiritual beings of which the so-called angels are the ones closest to the human being. These spiritual beings *take part in history and undergo change and development*, just as humans do. They are active in the life of knowledge as well as in other spheres, but this is not a reason to call human understanding *divine*. As for “essence”, Steiner had no static or rigid view of essence. For instance, he praised Goethe's optics for the way it uncovers the essence of the optical colours (Steiner, 1987), but he himself also held lectures about “the essence of colours”, in which he described these essences in ways completely different from Goethe (Steiner, 1991). In another lecture series (Steiner, 1990) he describes conceptual essences as *dynamic and moving*, linking them to the spiritual hierarchy that in the tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite was called *Dynamis*. Now these beings may be called “divine” in a loose sense, but they are far from “the absolute”.

Next Ullrich considers Steiner's philosophical ethics and says that his ethical individualism “envisions a self-aware individual human being that searches for the source of his or her morality purely by pondering and establishing a link to the totality of the world” (ibid.). That we have to do with self-aware individuals goes without saying, all ethics presuppose this, to the extent that it is the conscious reflection on issues of

goodness and rightness. The search for the source or the basis of morality is also implicit in all such reflections. The specific trait of Steiner's ethics should then be that this search is carried out "purely by pondering and establishing a link to the totality of the world". There is a linguistic ambiguity here: the sentence can mean 1) first "purely pondering" and then "establishing a link"; or 2) both "pondering a link" and "establishing a link". To me, the first alternative seems most reasonable. The first question that then arises is the meaning of "purely by pondering"? Does "purely" here imply the sense of *merely*? One gets the impression that it does. It can hardly mean "pure pondering", although Steiner certainly talks about pure *thinking*. But that is something else. As far as I know, Steiner never talks about "pondering" in connection with such serious issues as the basis of my own morality; but he does talk about *thinking*.² He also talks about *moral intuition*. For Steiner "thinking" and (moral) "intuition" are very specific terms, with specific meanings; and their meaning is far from "purely pondering". Admittedly, Ullrich also mentions "moral intuition", but he does not go into the meanings of these terms and his presentation of Steiner is therefore again distorted.

As for "establishing a link to the totality of the world", the absence of any reference or quote makes the reader again lost as to what is the basis of this description. The only association I personally get is where Steiner, in his "philosophy of freedom" (1977) writes the following:

In dem Denken haben wir das Element gegeben, das unsere besondere Individualität mit dem Kosmos zu einen Ganzen zusammenschließt. Indem wir empfinden und fühlen (auch wahrnehmen), sind wir einzelne, indem wir denken, sind wir das all-eine Wesen, das alles durchdringt. (p. 72-73)

For Steiner, thinking in its genuine and deep sense is part of the world process and therefore becomes a link between the inner life of the mind and the external world. This is not an arbitrary belief but based on the fact that the human organism is a product of natural evolution, and this evolution has provided us with the thinking faculty.

Ullrich now goes on to claim that for Steiner the ethical individual – that is, the individual engaged in this pondering and link establishment – is not at all free, although Steiner says so. "Steiner's concept of liberty represents, strictly speaking, a state of determination based upon the world of ideas" (p. 125). The moral intuition makes him or her "behave according to the timeless order of the world of ideas" (*ibid.*). This is also a misunderstanding, but of a more subtle kind. Steiner never said that moral action is – or should be – based on a *complete* grasp of the *totality* of the world of ideas. But this is how Ullrich describes it: "having attained *the highest level of knowledge*, [the human being] *merges* with the grand scheme of things" (p. 124) and "[i]t is only on the basis of the metaphysical prerequisite of *the oneness of individual nature and ideality* that the individual can follow his or her moral intuition..." (p. 124-125). But such a human being is no longer an *individual*, a concrete historical person; his individuality is dissolved. However, in the lines following the quote above, Steiner makes it clear that the individuality is not dissolved in such a way:

Wir sehen in uns eine schlechthin absolute Kraft zum Dasein kommen, eine Kraft, die universell ist, aber wir lernen sie nicht bei ihrem Ausströmen aus dem Zentrum der Welt kennen, sondern *in einem Punkte der Peripherie*. Wäre das erste der Fall, dann wüßten wir in dem Augenblicke, in dem wir zum Bewußtsein kommen, das ganze Welträtsel. Da wir aber in einem Punkte der Peripherie stehen und *unser eigenes Dasein in bestimmte Grenzen eingeschlossen finden*, müssen wir das außerhalb unseres eigenen Wesens gelegene Gebiet mit Hilfe des aus dem allgemeinen Weltensein in uns hereinragenden Denkens kennen lernen. (p. 73; my italics)

It is clear from this quote that Steiner does not talk about the oneness of individual nature and ideality, because the individual is still "a point at the periphery" of the universal power of thinking, and also finds his/her own being enclosed within certain limits. What Ullrich does not see is that for Steiner, an individual is precisely someone who is limited and has his own perspective on things. An individual cannot see, let alone become identical with, the *totality* of the world of ideas.³ But he can see *some of it*, and he can let himself

2. One could suspect a problem of translation here, since Ullrich originally wrote in German. In English, "to ponder" has however a range of different meanings, translatable to German as everything between *grübeln* and *nachdenken* or *erwägen*. Whatever Ullrich's original term was, the text has no indication that he considered the special meanings that Steiner attaches to thinking and intuition.

3. It should also be noted that Steiner does not talk about a "zusammenschließen" with the world of ideas, but with "das all-eine Wesen" and "eine Kraft": the universal power of thinking activity.

be inspired to act by what he sees – or to not act. He can also trust that what he does *not* see nevertheless is in harmony with what he does see. If ethical action was possible only to the kind of cosmic individual that Ullrich describes, Steiner's ethical individualism would be pointless, because such people do not exist.

What is said above also shows that Ullrich is wrong when he says that Steiner's idea of freedom actually represents "a state of determination based upon the world of ideas" (p. 125). It is true that for Steiner (moral) ideas play a central role in the realization of free action. But Ullrich forgets, or does not see, that it is the *personal experience* of such ideas that is of greatest significance. That is, there is no direct process of causal determination going from the idea to the personal action. The influence of the idea is mediated by subjective experience. In order for the idea to work as an inspiration for action *I* must *love* it. Steiner is clear about this. In a way, his ethical individualism is a further development of the old Augustinian dictum: love, and do what thou wilt. True love has no cause; it is spontaneous. Ideas cannot *cause* love in us. The same idea can represent the angels to one person and the devil to another. The personal *interpretation* of the idea is part of the mediation between the idea and the action. The interpretation has a formative influence on the action and in it all kinds of subjective, more or less idiosyncratic factors come into play.

Finally Ullrich discusses Steiner's ideas of ethical individualism in relation to his later talks about reincarnation and karma. The problem here is that the notion of karma seems to contradict the possibility of freedom and self-determination. Ullrich is probably not alone in thinking so. "If formative processes in the development of the self occur not in the human world but rather beyond it, then the individual is, during his or her earthly lifespan, precisely not master of his time and himself" (p. 126). However, Ullrich fails to consider that the formative process taking place "beyond the human world" is nevertheless determined by the very actions that the human being herself has carried out in her previous "earthly lifespan[s]". Of course, it means that I am not master of my time (whatever that would mean), nor of myself, in *this* lifespan. But my impediments to such mastery are the results of my own (now forgotten) actions. There is admittedly a certain ambiguity here, since the personality that carried out these actions no longer exists and "I" as a personal ego no longer feel any connection to them. But to the degree that I wake up to my higher Self of which both the previous and the present personality is an instance as it were – or at least accept the possibility of the existence of such a Self – I realize that I am also responsible for what I have done in previous incarnations. I then see that I am indeed a being who determines myself through my actions. However, a *complete* mastery of myself and my life (time?) is hardly possible, and Steiner never said that it was. The realization of freedom is a gradual and slow process, starting as if from an infinitesimally small point: our *active thinking*. This inner spiritual activity is necessary in order to understand Steiner's philosophy, which he himself often pointed out. It seems to me that unfortunately Ullrich has not taken up this challenge.

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