

Anthroposophy and Waldorf Education – a dynamic relationship

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Among educational academics Waldorf education tends to be viewed with a considerable degree of critical scepticism. Their criticism is not focused on the education as such, but upon the worldview behind it, namely, anthroposophy. Klaus Prange (Prange, 1985, 2005), Ehrenhard Skiera (Skiera, 2009), not to speak of Heiner Ullrich (Ullrich, 1986, 1988, 2015), all incisively stress the fact that Waldorf education's dependence on anthroposophy renders it unacceptably "worldview-laden". In his latest publication (Ullrich, 2015) Heiner Ullrich lays out the details occasioned by this basic critical stance. He singles out Waldorf education as having an ideological bias unique among the various forms of progressive education: "It is founded entirely upon the view of the human being and of the world contained in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. This determines not only teaching methods, but also, in diversely inter-related ways, the content of the curriculum and the subjects taught. No other type of school from among the classical canon of progressive education has a culture moulded by a single worldview to the extent that the Waldorf school has been." (Ullrich, 2015, p.173) Ullrich is concerned to show not only that anthroposophy underlies an otherwise positive educational movement, but that it also dominates the latter in every facet of its operation. The critical verdict upon this ideology problem is expressed with considerable vehemence, a clear impression of which is conveyed by the following lengthy quotation: "In the account of the specifics of what goes on in a typical Waldorf school the immense significance of the anthroposophical worldview has become clear in many respects. Recall particularly the architectural form of the school buildings, styled according to the essential nature of the human being, the collegial style of governance organised in accordance with the idea of the threefold social order, the doctrines of seven-year developmental periods and the temperaments (in relation to the four basic soul-forces) that guide the work of the class-teacher, the main lesson methodology that encompasses nocturnal processes of excarnation and incarnation, the curriculum based upon cultural epochs that follow the progressive history of consciousness, and goetheanistic, alchemistic science teaching resting upon the notion of essential correspondences between the human being and nature. In the face of all this the conclusion is inescapable that anthroposophy (anthroposophical spiritual science) provides the master key to understanding the whole gamut of Waldorf education from its curriculum to its classroom practice. The founder of anthroposophy is Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who remains to this day the exclusive figurehead¹ for the disciples of his worldview." (Ullrich, 2015, p. 91).

According to this view, then, Waldorf education is thoroughly determined by anthroposophical ideology. With this Ullrich is following on from his own dissertation of 1986 as well as Klaus Prange's influential book "Erziehung zur Anthroposophie"² (Prange, 1985). With this book the educational theorist, Klaus Prange,

1. Translator's note: the word used in German here is "Führer".

2. Loosely translated this could be rendered as "Schools for Anthroposophy".

set the prevailing tone of academic opinion concerning Waldorf education. While Ullrich follows this tradition, he does so without falling into the aggressive note of outright rejection and the missionary zeal of warnings about covert indoctrination which many parts of Prange's book are prey to. What Ullrich does is to characterise Waldorf education as suffering from the massive influence of a particular worldview on several levels: of personnel (teacher mentality), of content (curriculum) and of the didactics of methodological practice (image of the human being).

Compared to Prange, Ullrich is somewhat ambivalent: He sees Waldorf education's whole aesthetic and humanistic approach as positive – the fact that it is experiential, and based on personal commitment to a high pedagogical ideal. He accords due recognition to aspects such as holding back on the pace of development, the cherishing of each pupil's individual personality and the personal closeness of teacher-pupil relationships. On the other hand, however, he assiduously applies himself to the task of clearly delineating how anthroposophy acts as the ideological determinant of Waldorf education. In contrast to Prange, his intention is not to sound a voice of warning, but simply one of clarification. This is evident, for example, in the fact that he very fairly rejects the charge of racism levelled at anthroposophy: "That Steiner was not *the* typical, anti-Semitic racist his polemical critics are very happy to see him as, is documented at the very least by the fact that many Jews were members of the Anthroposophical Society and were able to retain their membership right up to the time when the society was banned by the Nazis (Ullrich, 2015, p.147)". Nonetheless, anthroposophy is Waldorf education's problem. His criticism of it may be summarised in the following points (Ullrich, 2015, p. 143f):

- It is mystical and in essence unscientific
- It uncritically oversteps the bounds of reason
- It is a form of gnosis which undermines the distinction between knowledge and belief
- It is driven by the desire for a "unified totality of knowledge"
- Further critical aspects are the removal of limits to knowledge and to the scope of the human personality in place of modest self-restraint
- He is emphatic that the acquisition of knowledge is not based on freedom, since human thinking in the process of what Steiner proclaims as intuition means submission to cosmic thinking, or, in the practice of ethical individualism, to the cosmic *plan* (Ullrich, 2015, p. 129f)
- Contrived notions of causality in connection with the ideas of karma and reincarnation are stressed (Ullrich, 2015, p. 110)

Thus, according to Ullrich, it is anthroposophy and not Waldorf education that is the focus of academic criticism. Anthroposophy is seen as an antiquated system of dogmas, based around teachings about a so-called spiritual world; these teachings, springing from the mystical visions (or delusions)³ of *one* man, are therefore untestable, and establish a form of metaphysical determinism which flies in the face of the modern principle of individual freedom. This is a thoroughly devastating view. Judged in this way Waldorf education is genuinely flawed. It is incapable of development, since it is so evidently dependent upon, influenced and contaminated by a mere metaphysical construct, which runs counter to the modern principles of scientific consensus. Moreover, not only is it thus vulnerable in theoretical terms, but is also exposed to far-reaching political, legal and economic consequences (accreditation for courses and tertiary institutions, approval of teachers, access to funding etc.).

All this raises the question of how, given the charge of its being scientifically beyond the pale, anthroposophy's relationship to Waldorf education can be defined at all. What role does anthroposophy actually play in Waldorf education? Is there a viable and scientifically acceptable way of dealing with this question?

3. Cf. Helmut Zander (Zander, 2007), who repeatedly states that visions of Rudolf Steiner's claimed as original are nothing more than disguised quotations from other sources.

The Worldview Problem

The first thing that must be said here is that Waldorf education's scientific deficiency is not merely a demarcation problem of the scientific establishment associated with its narrow concept of science, as eager defenders of the Waldorf position are fond of asserting, but is also to some extent self-inflicted. Anthroposophy has been and is treated by its adherents and propagated by them as if it were a path to salvation. For a long time the only approved way to receive the works of Rudolf Steiner was in a meditatively cultivated spirit of uncritical devotion. This involved an exclusive system of communication among insiders carried on in hermetic forms of speech and thought with a complete lack of conceptual clarity or critical detachment. Rudolf Steiner's so-called esoteric knowledge was accorded the status of unquestioned truth under the rubric of an expanded (in other words, not materialistically restricted) concept of science and thus given the seal of approval as a valid theoretical basis for Waldorf education. That this truth claim was simply a band of disciples defending their interpretation of, and loyalty to, the words of their great model is something that was scarcely noticed by both advocates and critics of Waldorf education until relatively recently. As a matter of fact Rudolf Steiner himself was certainly aware of Waldorf education's "worldview" problem, and emphatically warned that anthroposophy should not flow directly into the schools. The point arises repeatedly in his works and there are many passages where he clearly demands quite a different approach to receiving and working with anthroposophy based on individual critical awareness. In a lecture he gave on 15th August 1923 in Ilkley (Yorkshire, England), four years after the founding of the first Waldorf school, he said: "This general human principle within the process of education, the workings of which I was obliged to characterise for the full range of classes, must express itself in a Waldorf school in such a way that the school does not represent any particular religious or philosophical affiliation, nor any particular worldview. And, of course, it was especially necessary for a system of schooling which has developed out of anthroposophy, as the Waldorf school has [...], to work towards strict avoidance of either becoming a school of anthroposophists or being an anthroposophical school. This is completely out of the question. We could also put it like this: every day must involve striving anew [...] to avoid falling into anthroposophical one-sidedness [...], through the misplaced zeal of one teacher, say, or through the general sympathy for anthroposophy which exists among Waldorf teachers as a matter of course. The idea of man per se, not man as seen by a particular worldview, must be the sole guiding principle as regards pedagogical method in the Waldorf school." (Steiner 1986, p. 203f) This shows that Steiner was fully aware of the problem of anthroposophy's being seen as dogmatic and accused of being a sect, and had quite consciously sought to distance Waldorf education from such a possibility. In this connection, in a public talk, this time given in Penmaenmawr in Wales on 19th August 1923, he said: "Our approach to pedagogical method is to develop it in the most appropriate way from the anthroposophical movement. The Waldorf school in Stuttgart, where this methodology is applied, has no hint of a sect about it, nor of anything dogmatic, nothing, indeed, of what the world is fond of calling an anthroposophical school. For we do not bring anthroposophical dogmatism into the life of the school, rather we seek to develop methods that are in keeping with general human principles." (Steiner, 1991, p.172) This commitment to a striving towards neutrality as regards worldview affiliation, even though it is something that is not fully achievable in any system, and the establishing of suitable distance between anthroposophy and the practice of Waldorf education is something that its advocates are generally in favour of. Although this attitude to the incursion of anthroposophy into Waldorf schools is widely held, within Waldorf education itself, and especially in the realm of teacher training, commitment to such a neutrality and distancing is seldom recommended.

Anthroposophy and Science

Is there, perhaps, an adequate way of describing the ambivalent relationship between anthroposophy and science? Rudolf Steiner employed the concept *spiritual science* (*Geisteswissenschaft*), and with this term intended something fundamentally different from the normal usage, for with him it was not just a way of distinguishing the natural sciences from those dealing with culture (fields such as philosophy, history, literature – what in English would be called the humanities), but claimed to be a science *of* the spirit. This semantic difference in itself creates problems of understanding. Added to this is Steiner's insistence that

his form of spiritual science is carried out according to the strict criteria of modern science. Essentially this means that all its published utterances should be based on empirical observation. Since, however, his object of observation is super-sensible, Steiner steps outside the normal scientific framework. Steiner's claim to a scientifically tenable form of knowledge that satisfies the modern conditions of rationality founders upon the demarcation criteria of knowledge postulated by science.

This dilemma has still to be resolved. Anthroposophy is considered simply as a belief system rather than a body of knowledge. On the anthroposophical side various attempts have been made to come to terms with this problem:

(a) Rejection of modern science and a closing of anthroposophical ranks

This tends to be the position of anthroposophical traditionalists. They regard dialogue between anthroposophy and science as impossible. They feel that the narrow materialism of science as it is pursued in the universities is in principle incapable of coming to terms with the actual scope of Steiner's works. As a consequence they hold themselves apart from any efforts at rapprochement with the world of science, seeing it even as a kind of ingratiating that can only be to the detriment of anthroposophy. From among the members of this inner circle come works of secondary anthroposophical literature, some of which follow anthroposophical paths of thought in a spirit of subtle, self-critical reflection, while others are much less critical, treating utterances of Steiner as truth and building meditations of their own upon them. The latter, without any attempt on the author's part to ascertain whether his disquisitions are in need of correction, are very likely to range over esoteric terrain.

(b) Expanded concept of science

A further approach seeks to bring arguments for paring away the current limits of science in order to establish a new expanded conception of it. The prominent names here are Helmut Kiene with his book, "Grundlagen einer essentialen Wissenschaftstheorie" (Kiene 1984), and Marek Majorek with his dissertation, "Objektivität. Ein Erkenntnisideal auf dem Prüfstand" (Majorek, 2002) and his latest publication "Rudolf Steiners Geisteswissenschaft: Mythisches Denken oder Wissenschaft" (Majorek, 2015). Undoubtedly it takes an immense amount of effort to attempt to introduce and defend a new epistemological paradigm. So far such efforts have found no recognition among the figures of the scientific establishment. The problem lies in the fact that such works affirm essentialist forms of thinking with a claim to either truth or objectivity. In this they stand counter not only to current basic epistemological assumptions, but also to the mentality of the modern human being, which is not concerned with fixed truths and unassailable objectivity, but rather has a concept of knowledge as open-ended process, working tentatively, by trial and error, and at all events approaching the features of the object of study with due approximating caution. However strong the inner evidence-based conviction of having found something out might be, it cannot be used in any valid sense as an external argument, but only as an integral source of transformational energy in the subject's relationship with the world. For the asserted truth, advanced with however much conviction, is always the "false" truth. There is little hope of anthroposophy hitting the mark in this way.

(c) Research into the Esoteric

A further attempt to smooth the relationship between anthroposophy and science consists in grafting the two together by appealing to modern esoterics research. The publications of Wouter J. Hanegraaf (Hanegraaf, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2012) and Antoine Faivre (Faivre, 2001) are regarded by Johannes Kiersch (Kiersch, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015), Karl-Martin Dietz (Dietz, 2008) and Lorenzo Ravagli (Ravagli, 2014) as providing a timely opportunity for rehabilitating anthroposophy within the context of science. Hanegraaf and Faivre discuss, from a cultural-historical perspective, a variety of esoteric movements which are either ignored or disapproved of by the positivistic mainstream. Their intention in doing so is to describe, in a way untinged by any feeling of distaste, the specific forms taken by gnosis and esoteric knowledge, and to assign each one its appropriate place in the history of culture. In this way old esoteric forms of knowledge have been subjected to a modern rational treatment. As important, worthy and interesting an undertaking this is, to subsume anthroposophy within the framework of such studies with a view to thus relieving its scientific isolation raises the question of whether underlining anthroposophy's

kinship to other gnostic streams such as medieval mysticism, theosophy and Rosicrucianism does justice to its own special qualities and intentions. It goes without saying that from a historical perspective anthroposophy has many elements in common with other esoteric streams, but it also has clear distinguishing features. What it shares with them is that it is centred upon a spiritual understanding of the human being and the world. But equally central is the fact that Steiner intended anthroposophy as a way of going beyond old forms of consciousness based on approaching spiritual phenomena in a more passive, feeling-oriented way, and of arriving at a spiritual worldview on the basis of a modern concept of knowledge. Neither the historical forms of gnosis nor the popular New Age expressions of modern spiritual needs can be squared with anthroposophy. It upholds the free, subjective individualism of the Enlightenment, which is the signature of the modern human being, and is not about to sidestep this through the metaphysical determinism of an *ersatz* spirit-world.

With the attempt to encompass anthroposophy within the framework of modern esoterics research goes the danger of its being reduced to one more esoteric stream among many others, without its main modern distinguishing feature – namely, its orientation towards knowledge grounded in freedom – having been made clear enough. In keeping with this general approach, Johannes Kiersch stresses the fact that Waldorf education is characterised by its *esoteric* pedagogy, while at the same time putting forward the concept of a *profession-specific esoteric background*. The danger here is that the supposed benefit of scientific recognition of anthroposophy (and it must be said in this connection that the work of Hanegraaf and Faivre does not emanate from the field of education) comes at a cost. This is that its prime feature, namely the task of developing a *modern* form of spiritual consciousness, will not be sufficiently apparent.

(d) *Applying scientific criteria to the works of Rudolf Steiner*

Yet another way of dealing with the relationship between anthroposophy and science has recently become more and more prevalent. The point here is not to argue for (see para. (b)) or against (see para. (a)) the reconcilability of the two, but to treat anthroposophy itself scientifically, rendering it the object of scientific discussion. The main proponent of this approach, from a variety of perspectives, is Christian Clement, who has laid the foundations of a new academic profile for anthroposophy with his critically annotated editions of Steiner's works. Anthroposophy has thus been turned into a regular research object, and the critical detachment that this necessitates means that Steiner's words are not regarded as self-evident truth. This basic scientific attitude to anthroposophy with the healthy detachment it involves, is not prey to the often unconscious presumption that the reader is free to extract whatever he wishes from the esoteric contents of Steiner's works.

The above-presented approaches show how the problematical relationship between anthroposophy and science can be "tuned" in various ways. There are no doubt other possibilities that could be mentioned, nor is it the case that authors can be clearly singled out as belonging purely to one approach or the other. According to authorial inclinations there will, as a matter of course, be overlaps.

A modern and defensible approach (as described, for instance, under (d)) will of necessity develop a different understanding of anthroposophy. One that is not marred by narrow dogmatism and metaphysical credulity, but instead has a basic phenomenological ductus through recourse to Steiner's early works.

Steiner's early epistemological works (see Steiner 1886/1979 and 1918/2005) are concerned with the phenomenology of consciousness based upon a method designated by him as *inner observation* (cf. Witzmann, 1985). Here Steiner is following on from Goethe's research method of imaginal judgement (cf. Schieren 1997), transferring its application from natural to mental phenomena. The crucial thing here is that this philosophical approach does not entail any pre-critical claim to the status of truth, but in the sense of a modern epistemological theory endows human cognition with the ability only to arrive at ontological approximations. In subsequent works Steiner was able to pursue this approach only to a limited extent, and laments this fact at one point in his autobiography, "The Course of My Life"

It is significant that in certain lectures given later (1920/21) he returns to this philosophical position by stressing the phenomenological aspect of anthroposophy: "Phenomenology, that is the scientific ideal expressed in anthroposophy." (Steiner, 2005, p. 318). And on another occasion he maintains that *spiritual*

science “is nothing other than phenomenology [...], which does not stop at setting single phenomena side by side, but tries to read them in context. It is phenomenology, and we do not offend against it by going speculatively beyond the phenomena. Rather, in so doing we are quizzing them – not merely in terms of parts, but of whole contexts – as to whether they express something of relevance for a certain inner activity.” (Steiner, 2005, p. 419)

To construe anthroposophy as phenomenology, and as such to treat it critically and scientifically as regards its knowledge value, is to accord it a completely different mode of reception than that which has held sway in the last hundred years over proponents as well as critics, and has led to the formation of the familiar ideological fronts. Here it is a question of creating a whole different culture of interpretation. In keeping with this, there is currently no doubt among official representatives of Waldorf education that, on the one hand, now and in the future a completely different tone needs to be adopted and, on the other, a readiness to engage in critical discussion of its theoretical foundations. This is in no way contrary to anthroposophy. It's own claim to the status of knowledge is responsible for the fact that it finds itself the object of epistemological and self-critical debate within a rational continuum.

Anthroposophy in the context of Waldorf education

What does this imply for Waldorf education? Quite naturally, in the context of Waldorf education anthroposophy has to come out of its “inner closet”. It takes on a social aspect, and thus must orientate itself to society's criteria and standards. According to the laws of different countries it must satisfy regulations of variable strictness involving varying degrees of compromise. In many of them a more or less *pure* form of Waldorf education is possible. In others – as, for instance, in Germany – the state regulations in relation to the licensing of teachers and to curriculum requirements are clearly prescribed. Things are somewhat different in medicine which, like Waldorf education, is also a field of anthroposophical practice. Here it is subject world-wide to a set of stringent, scientifically defined criteria. Thus anthroposophical medicine was treated right from the start as complementary to rather than as a substitute for regular medicine. The upshot of this is that every anthroposophical doctor has to have gone through a normal medical training. In comparison to this Waldorf education has much more freedom of manoeuvre. There are teacher training centres which have traditionally worked more or less independently of state requirements and scientific standards. This is why the question of scientific status is more controversial and receives more academic attention within the ranks of Waldorf education than it does within those of anthroposophical medicine, which has more natural affinity with science.

What role, then, do the contents of anthroposophy play in Waldorf education? It would be easy to come to the conclusion that the more scientific orientation and accommodation to external requirements there is, the less anthroposophy there can be. This would make it more difficult to practise genuine Waldorf education. It would in effect become the victim of the academic educational mainstream. Tried and tested aspects of Waldorf education, such as early language teaching, better teacher-student relationships, experiential teaching etc. would, of course be adapted and kept. The incomprehensible anthroposophical ballast, however, would be jettisoned. Within Waldorf circles this is widely seen as a real danger. In addition there is the fact that Waldorf education as it actually exists in Germany is in a considerably “secularised” state. About 50% of its teachers have had no Waldorf training and consequently have only a rudimentary acquaintance with the principles behind the type of school they are already teaching at. This is why there are regular calls within the Waldorf movement for a deepening of the work on the fundamental principles, so that the genuine core of Waldorf education may not be lost.

There is no easy solution here. On the one hand we have central anthroposophical elements such as reincarnation, the structuring of the human being into a series of “bodies”, development in phases, the doctrine of the temperaments and the path of spiritual training, all of which are non-starters in both scientific and social contexts, and are scarcely capable of communication. Thus Waldorf education remains offensive and vulnerable to attack. It appears to be permeated by anthroposophical dogma. And on the other hand the loss of anthroposophy means the dilution of Waldorf education and the technocratic appropriation of some of its traditional elements. How can this dilemma be avoided?

Epoché or suspended Anthroposophy

The question of the relationship between anthroposophy and Waldorf education is often considered in *absolute* terms. The thing here is that the one should make its mark upon the other in a *one to one* fashion. Another approach is to weigh up the extent to which it is appropriate for anthroposophy to exert an influence upon Waldorf education. As previously mentioned, Rudolf Steiner had explicitly warned about the problem of anthroposophical dogma having too far a reach in this context, and thus stipulated that Waldorf schools should not be the vehicles of any particular worldview. This implies not only that anthroposophy should not be any part of what is taught in Waldorf schools, but also that it should not be allowed to determine the structure of school-life. Thus where scale of influence is concerned we are talking more about restraint than anything else. We could also speak of a *suspension of anthroposophy*. This has methodological implications.

The central characteristic of phenomenological awareness is that it refrains from applying pre-conceived ideas to a given field of experience. It schools our awareness when in the act of attention to some object we are seeking to know we critically reflect upon the many ways in which we are predisposed to view it. And it does not matter, initially, where these predispositions come from. Goethe, for instance, writes in his famous essay “Der Versuch als Vermittler von Subjekt und Objekt” (“The experiment as mediator between subject and object”): “The human being takes more delight in the mental notion of a thing than in the thing itself; or more correctly, we take joy in something only insofar as we can form some idea of it. It must fit in with our mental habits, and however we might try to elevate our way of thinking above the common level and to purify it, it still remains simply that – a way of thinking; [...]” The basic stance of phenomenology is to submit received and pre-formed ideas to critical reflection. Edmund Husserl speaks in this connection of *epoché*, the methodological relinquishment of fixed ideas.

Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy belong – as already mentioned – to the tradition of this phenomenological method. Steiner’s understanding of art and his aesthetics are also marked by this restraint motif. For him the point here is not that anthroposophical subject matter is presented figuratively in works of art. In his aesthetics Steiner strongly opposes the idealist principle – for holding which he reproaches the idealist thinkers of the Goethean era, especially Schelling and Hegel – that beauty is the sensory manifestation of the Idea. Rather his view is that beauty, and therefore art, is the ideal expression of the sensory world itself. (Steiner, 1985, p. 27f) His actual words are: “And this is something totally different from the idealising tendencies of German aesthetics. It’s not ‘the idea in the form of a sensory phenomenon’, but exactly the opposite, ‘a sensory phenomenon in the form of the idea’. The content of beauty, its underlying substance, is always something real, something immediately actual, and the form of its manifestation is the ideal. The correct view, then, is precisely the opposite of what German aesthetics maintains; the latter has simply turned things upside down.” (Steiner, 1985, p. 32) In Steiner’s sense art is not about the transmission of particular subject matter. It is not a vehicle for any kind of ideal, but must be effective and convincing in itself, out of its own aesthetic, sensory power.

With his concept of art, developed primarily in the period from 1914 to 1918, Steiner could be said to have finally separated himself from the ideological “baggage” of the Theosophical Society. As he then began – in 1918 – to develop the practical work in a variety of fields (anthroposophical medicine, bio-dynamic agriculture, Waldorf education), it was the requirements and laws of each particular area of practice that stood in the foreground. Accordingly, the point of Waldorf education is not to be a vehicle for the practical realisation of anthroposophical teachings on the nature of the human being, but much more to create the best possible conditions for the development of children and adolescents. It is all about the child. Just as art must do its work on its own terms and not through imported subject matter, so Waldorf education has to prove its effectiveness through its pedagogical successes in kindergartens, schools and other associated training institutions, and not through its advocacy of certain dogmatic, ideological precepts. Within the context of Waldorf education anthroposophy does not have a *pure status*, but only an *applied status*; it serves the development of a good form of schooling.

To clarify what is meant here let us call to mind Lessing’s “Parable of the Rings”. It is concerned with the central question of the value of religion. The answer the parable gives is that religions have no absolute value

in themselves, but only a developmental value. They show their value by helping the individual to become a good or a better person. By the same token, anthroposophy within the context of Waldorf education only has value insofar as it provides help for the teachers in their efforts to improve their understanding of the students, and to create a better match between the pedagogical profile of the school and the developmental requirements of its students. Should this not succeed on account of anthroposophy being used merely as a dogmatic conceptual framework, then it will have lost its value.

Worldview as a challenge to develop situational awareness

Anthroposophy can be an acceptable presence within Waldorf education as a form of consciousness in keeping with phenomenology. The method of “inner observation” developed by Rudolf Steiner is a phenomenology of consciousness by means of which human cognition becomes aware of its participation in the construction of reality and encounters its various levels out of an exalted ethic of knowledge. This does not involve the use of any kind of pre-formed (or even anthroposophical) concepts, but rather the actualisation, through intense creative activity, of concepts that penetrate ever more deeply and authentically into the area of reality of current concern. The actual value of anthroposophy lies in the fact that it does not operate in terms of narrow, fixed conceptual schemata, but strives to engender the broadest and most flexible forms of thinking possible. Anthroposophy is best understood as method. It does not represent a fixed worldview, and thus avoids the narrowness of one such as materialist reductionism, but without degenerating into a tissue of metaphysical phantasms or resorting to spiritual determinism. It is a method of self-critical, productive knowledge acquisition, employing flexible concepts and thought-forms in an effort to effect an accommodation, in the goetheanistic sense, between the conditions of the object of knowledge and the act of knowing. A worldview – if anthroposophy is taken as the model – is not a rigid conceptual construct, but an extension of cognitive capacity, it is a challenge to develop situational awareness. Faced with the riddle of an individual student or a whole class it would be best for the college of a Waldorf school not to act in strict accordance with so-called models of human nature (seven-year developmental phases, temperaments and the like), but simply to use such concepts heuristically in order to see if they give a deeper insight into how to meet a specific pedagogical situation.

Personal development of the individual teacher

A further aspect, which can also be regarded as an influence upon Waldorf education, lies in the many ways anthroposophy provides an impulse towards meditative personal development in the individual teacher. Qualities such as patience, emotional equanimity, good powers of (as far as possible) unbiased observation, imagination and a rich ability to generate ideas, not to speak of a sense of humour and a cheerful, enthusiastic disposition are all character traits which make a good teacher. How such qualities are acquired, if they are not present by nature or have not been gradually developed out of the every-day challenges of the teaching profession, is hardly a central topic of teacher training at universities. For Waldorf education such qualities are the heart of the matter. This is where anthroposophy has an important role to play, but again not in dogmatic, ideological form, but as a store of practical activities, artistic processes and meditative exercises geared towards personal development. Here it has simply an applied – or, in terms of the “Parable of the Rings” – a developmental value. In this connection the significance of anthroposophy lies solely in the transformational power it possesses for the personal development of the individual teacher. If a teacher succeeds, by means of anthroposophy, in improving those personal qualities mentioned above as of key importance to the teaching profession, then it will have proved its worth. In his study “Ich bin Waldorflehrer” (Randoll, 2012) Dirk Randoll has shown that many teachers value anthroposophy for just this reason. Admittedly there is a narrow distinction here between the *methodological* value of anthroposophy and the associated, hasty, uncritical acceptance of its *contents*. This demands a high degree of vigilance and the ability to effect the *suspension* previously described.

Conclusion

To conclude, the above-described dynamics of the relationship between anthroposophy and Waldorf education could be summed up in an image: the Greek hero, Admetos, upon asking for the hand of the princess Alcestis, was given, by her father the king, the task of harnessing a lion and a wild boar together to one chariot. If he succeeded he would win Alcestis as his wife. Admetos accomplished the deed.

Pairing anthroposophy and Waldorf education is very like harnessing such a team, thus placing antagonistic tendencies in the service of a common task. The lion in the picture – anthroposophy as a content-rich worldview – needs to rein itself in. *Epoché*, a holding back or suspension of anthroposophy is the result. Within Waldorf education anthroposophy has no value as regards content, but only as regards method. It serves the development of a good form of schooling, and the qualitative evaluation of what constitutes “a good form of schooling” is the sole prerogative of empirical research. And Waldorf education, which in the picture passes for the wild boar, in moving in step with factors conditioned by the times, by culture and by science, and being particularly attuned to the needs of children and adolescents, needs to be taken seriously and respected in its own terms, so that chariot and team can make headway in the service of good schooling.

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