

Anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner/Waldorf education part II (Reincarnation and karma)

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In the first essay (Tyson 2023), I was concerned with the connection between anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner pedagogy.¹ I tried to explore how anthroposophy can be a valuable part of Steiner education when it is understood as an impulse of Bildung and that this means anthroposophy needs to be a source of transformation and new relationships. Understood solely as a doctrine about world evolution, the nature of the human being, etcetera, I argued that anthroposophy is not particularly helpful, at least not in pedagogical contexts.

In this essay I will approach the same subject from a narrative and exemplifying perspective rather than from the mostly discursive one presented in the previous text. The example I have chosen concerns the anthroposophical concepts of reincarnation and karma. They are central concepts in Steiner's oeuvre and have been heavily criticized as part of that superstructure of Steiner education that makes it fatalistic and static (eg. Ullrich 1987). If they are or not is an empirical question. Anecdotally, I know of at least two cases where teachers have used the concepts explicitly to defend not intervening in situations where (1) a teacher was clearly having trouble with discipline and was prone to severe outbursts of rage and the children were beginning to show negative signs from this (2) children were allowed to play games during recess in ways that were dangerous and harmful to some and where the games also allowed for bullying.

In both cases teachers referred to karma saying that it was the karma of the students to deal with this class teacher or, in case they got hurt, that this was part of their karma. This line of argument, it seems to me, is no different than if a medical doctor were to argue that illness is the result of karma and therefore one shouldn't intervene. Such reasoning amounts to a spiritual version of social Darwinism.

One might well argue that these are non-representational outliers. But I would counter that these concepts are comparatively fragile and that even just a few examples of irresponsible and judgmental ways of engaging with them cause extensive harm to them (if one can speak of "harming" a concept which I believe is warranted). Be that as it may, my argument here is not concerned with developing a balanced conclusion regarding the issue. But perhaps the following can be of use to someone else who is.

The concepts of reincarnation and karma

Let me, for the sake of clarity, begin here with a basic definition of these concepts as I understand them here. With reincarnation I mean the idea that we live repeated lives. How often, why one is borne in a specific

1. I will use the term Steiner education or Steiner pedagogy throughout for what is also known as Waldorf education. I understand this to encompass any educational initiative based more or less in Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy.

place, etcetera, are questions I will not go into. These are, at least to me, not questions of great relevance to pedagogy and the issue I aim to discuss is not if reincarnation and karma are generally interesting ideas but rather what, if any, value they might have for education. Or, even less broadly, what value they have for my own educational actions.

Karma, I think, means two things, one of which, it seems to me, is often overlooked. Karma denotes occurrences in one's life that happen because of actions in a previous life. This amounts to a variation on the idea of destiny or fate where certain experiences are preordained. But karma also emerges from actions engaged in, and experiences had, in this life that are not rooted in the past. This means they are new, completely undetermined, actions that then reverberate into future lives. This second aspect of karma is, as far as I am concerned, the more interesting one in educational contexts. Because education is less about determining a person's inheritance (be it biological, social or spiritual) and much more about hope. Hope that we can create something together for the future that, in its richest versions, is something wholly new, something without any precedent. This, I think, is the role of imagination in education and society more generally. Imagination liberates us to act, not out of habit, socialization, or karmic necessity but more and more out of freedom (for a recent discussion in a similar vein but far more extensive and systematic, see Ewertowski 2024).

Having said this, I can move on to the main argument. Reincarnation and karma are among the core concepts of anthroposophy and there are, of course, plenty of ways in which to approach them. Generally speaking, I have found that these kinds of spiritual concepts with major consequences for how we view life are problematic to speak about only in an abstract way without connecting explicitly to the personal, to one's biographical process of formation or *Bildung*. For this reason, I will now move away from a discursive discussion and into a narrative one based on my own experience. This limits me in that I can only really consider what reincarnation and karma mean in my own teaching practice. My guess is that this meaning is quite diverse among those of us who practice Steiner education around the globe, and it would perhaps be valuable if more of us were to speak/write of these things out of personal experience, however limited. I will return to this issue in the conclusion.

An experiential account of reincarnation and karma

My practice teaching bookbinding has included work of a supportive kind in the bookbinding workshop at the school. There, I have received students from the fifth grade upwards with various difficulties. These can range from issues with motivation in school to very serious psychological and psychosocial problems. Some students spend a few weeks in the workshop between 10-12 each day and then they return to regular classes rejuvenated by working more with their hands. Others have spent the better part of each day for more than a year in the bookbindery as they work their way back to participation (to be clear, at the school more than one workshop offers this so that students are also able to choose the material they are most interested in working with).

I guess that most of us who work with supportive or special education do it because of a strong desire to support those students in school who for one reason or other have an unusually difficult time. And also, that this is far from always successful. In general, I tend to emphasize unusually positive examples in my research (eg. Tyson 2018). Both for ethical reasons (talking about someone's failures can be insensitive and requires special care), and practical ones (practical knowledge is more often codified in stories of unusual success than ones about unresolved problems). This one is an exception.

I had a young man in the bookbinding workshop during his twelfth and last year in upper secondary school. He had a long history by then of substance abuse and other issues where the school (and other institutions in society) really had done their utmost to support him (at least that was my experience at the time). He didn't do much in school but at least he enjoyed being in the workshop and spent a lot of time there with me. During the months that he was there, I never experienced anything but a person eager to help, interested in learning, and willing to engage in practical work. Among other things we made a really

beautiful and well-crafted full leather binding together with a gold embossment of his own design on the cover. To my knowledge this was one of the few, perhaps the only, things he finished during his whole time in our high school (grades 10-12). But no matter how well we worked together and how much he enjoyed being in the workshop I noticed that the destructive circumstances outside of it that engaged him, were stronger than what I and my colleagues and others involved could measure up to. And this although I used all the energy at my disposal, everything that my imagination at the time could conceive of, in order to ensure that he felt seen and could develop a sense of meaning in the world that was more powerful than the need to use drugs.

He decided to leave school before the year ended, I don't think I ever saw him again, if so, it was just in passing and about two years later news reached me that he had passed away from an overdose. I remember being at the funeral and the book we had made together stood there leaning on the casket and the young woman who had been one of his closest friends said some words about how much this book had meant to him.

Now out of this "failure" (and others) something gradually emerged that I can only describe as a strong sense, or rather subtle experience, that we will see each other again, beginning in a shared life between death and the next birth and then in an upcoming life. It is this experience of the "reality" of reincarnation that I will try to describe below. I write "reality" in quotes because it is a concept that is easily connected to others such as "facts" and "absolute truth". It is not my purpose to rhetorically force the reader to either accept or reject what in the end is not meant as a truth-statement. I use the word in order to signify that from this point onwards in my life (and not before) the idea of reincarnation ceased to be a rather plausible thought about how things work. "Reality" denotes a peculiar experience in which thoughts become imbued with life, with a kind of energy that also changes what thinking can be.²

From a biographical perspective then, the idea of reincarnation has gained experiential content through these painful and tragic experiences I had as a teacher. Even now, more than ten years later, I can only describe this experience (and it is truly difficult to bring these kinds of experience into words) as follows. It is as if the memory of the object we worked on together, the book I helped him bind, its image, becomes transparent and opens into a realization that the important part wasn't the object we created but our shared actions, our movements in the room, the warmth and the interest that was brought into the materials we organized as the book. And every time I return to this memory, bring the book and the young man and our shared actions before my mind, the same "thoughts thinking themselves in me rather than me thinking them" are immediately there with a clarity that is only rivalled by their delicateness or fragility (as if a being spoke them to me and that being hosts their truthfulness far more than I ever could and it is so much just a whisper because I am not able to open my listening more and thus even the slightest perturbation seemingly could cause them to flee).³ These thoughts, or rather this immediate fullness of a whole sequence of thoughts as in an image but only if there were imageless images, present me with a promise that I interpret to mean (because the words I use here are of necessity my interpretation or translation of something that is wordless): one day when it is time for me to leave this life we will see each other again and the work that we shared that year in the workshop will bring us together on the other side of the threshold, like a beacon that shines

2. At this point a discussion could unfold regarding anthroposophy as spiritual science and what this means in relation to the various ways in which the spiritual can be experienced. I am describing something that is not, for example, an imagination in Steiner's sense of the word. And how, to what degree and in what manner, this could be called science is quite unclear. But I will leave those discussions for another time.

3. A skeptical reader might conclude that this sounds a lot like hallucinations, but the experience is not like hearing voices (or so I presume, having never heard another's voice in my mind). There is no quality of forcedness, no persuasion in the sense that someone else is trying to convince one. There is no overwhelming presence of another being in one's own. The quality of experiencing the presence of another being is there (somewhat akin to touching something in the darkness, like a warmth sensation if it could be tactile), but no different than being together with a friend. As a process, the experience has a quality of freedom in that I have to initiate or co-initiate the experience or it doesn't happen. As a result, the experience also has a quality of freedom in that it evokes love and a commitment to what one is called to but never forced into.

because the spiritual reality of the book we made is a sculpture entirely of warmth, and it will be the seed in that “realm” of a far greater work that we have agreed to do together.⁴

Through this experience the “thoughts thinking themselves...” also invite me to understand the relationships I participate in throughout life as the result of a great gathering before birth (I use the word “invite” here as a description, the feeling is very clearly one of receiving a gesture of invitation in one’s mind, evoking a sensation akin to being invited into a temple or other holy ground). We were there, although I cannot remember it more than as an even fainter whisper than the above description but the sensation of light is overwhelming, and we made agreements together, promises full of hope, in which we decided to, for lack of a better term, contribute to the utmost to each other’s flourishing.⁵

These promises or agreements then fell asleep in our limbs (don’t ask me why except I think, in the sense that it is my belief or my hypothesis, that this is why it is so important to work together, that our limbs are why we need the earth as a space to be in) and some of them are strong, just like some agreements in life are. And these we will almost certainly at least attempt together. Some are more like the hope one has even in the face of great obstacles, and they might only be realized in fragments or perhaps not at all. Common to all is a deep sense of freedom, the agreements are not the result of someone enforcing a debt but rather the result of an immense longing to give each other gifts, a longing, however, that is easy to forget. Perhaps unsurprisingly this has caused me to think differently about karma and what it means. ⁶Importantly, none of the agreements involve harm to another. Comprehension of the harm we do each other is not unlocked by this perception; I have nothing to say about it from this point of view. Evil remains a mystery to it, but I have found it productive never to assume that the suffering someone endures is the result of that person’s failings in past lives.

4. A critical reader could well object that my knowledge of the concepts of reincarnation and karma has caused me to interpret certain experiences in accordance with those concepts, perhaps even to have the experiences at all. Especially given the nature of them, arising as they do in my thinking. Am I not just describing wishful thoughts? There is something to this objection. However, I have had at least one spiritual experience before having read anything of Steiner’s. My background isn’t particularly religious either so there was, at that time, little in the way of wishful thinking or interpretive bias. It was rather that the experience approached and only later have I been able to enrich it conceptually, something that has added infinite depth to it. In the case presented here I would say that having the concepts before the experience were a condition for an awareness of it to develop. They, in a way, sensitize one’s perception for the “supersensible”. The above mentioned “thoughts thinking themselves...” is a way of trying to describe the difference one can experience, with this kind of spiritual encounter, between thinking and speculating about various questions and forming hypotheses about them on the one hand and on the other this immediate awareness in one’s mind of something thought-like but also somewhat alien because it is clear: “I am not thinking here, but rather becoming aware of this other ‘thinking’ in me but I must still think this other’s thinking”. Perhaps if I hadn’t had the earlier experience in which the conceptual understanding of it was not already, as it were a window to look through, I would have more doubts about living with concepts without any immediate foundation in personal experience.

5. The term “agreement” suggested itself immediately when this experience first entered my awareness and, more than most word, seems to be in accordance with the actual thought-dynamic. The topic of how these experiences enter one’s awareness is difficult; in a way they are simply just “there” suddenly, but “suddenly” only really pertains to the full awareness of them because as soon as it is there it is also clear that the experience has been going on for some time. It is as if one’s memories have become alive with more than what occurred at the time. But it also requires an individual effort, only through my own calling the memories to life do they approach. And this, I must say, happens anew each time. I can’t really “remember” the experiences. There is, in this sense, a small worry, that the next time I call the memories to life the experience might not approach once more. And so, each time it happens is a new moment of grace.

6. There are many areas where the above narrative could be discussed in relation to what Steiner (and of course also others) say on the matter. I have refrained from this here because it is also important to present the experiences as such. I would like to bracket exegesis, the critical discussion of the meaning of a text, for the moment. Not least on account of the values attached to certain concepts and words, in the case of anthroposophy not least words such as imagination, inspiration, intuition, Michael, Christ-impulse, etcetera. For some these words can be helpful as an orientation and contextualization but for others they might just as easily obscure understanding. Perhaps these experiences are also deemed to be in contradiction to what Steiner had to say on the matter. I find the question interesting but somewhat unimportant. I have written this narrative down not with the purpose of transmitting a new teaching about reincarnation and karma and therefore not primarily as a narrative to be compared with others with the aim of assessing its relative truth. It is written in order to exemplify how concepts central to anthroposophy can be enriching in the life of an individual teacher. They could just as well be meaningless or (although I really hope not) even destructive in the life of another.

Some concluding thoughts

I will not argue with a judgment that finds this essay terribly obscure, sectarian in character, or lacking in fidelity to Steiner's ideas. The narrative presented belongs to one of my most intimate and formative experiences of Bildung and at least for my own part it has also caused me to be careful in dismissing the experiences of others no matter how outlandish (not to be confused with their interpretations, one of the most difficult things with this kind of experience is separating perception or what one should call it from interpretation, and there is a whole discussion to be had about the degree to which, in these contexts, interpretation *is* perception).

Regardless of how much we might agree or disagree about the truth-value of the narrative I have given above, my main point isn't about that, but rather the degree to which it has been a source in me for stronger engagement, deeper enthusiasm, more faith, patience, and open mindedness as a teacher. Of course, it is difficult to evaluate oneself here and I will not pretend to say for sure that it has been such a source, only that it has contributed to an intense desire to develop all these things. If I have failed or not can perhaps only be decided in any real sense at the time of my passing. It has also been a source of trust in life, something that perhaps mostly reflects a personal struggle to comprehend suffering and "failure". In this sense I wouldn't be surprised if an argument could be made that many spiritual experiences are answers to larger themes in a person's life.

I can express this in a different way. Reincarnation and karma are concepts and experiences that enrich my moral imagination because they help me to see situations in a wider or more dynamic perspective. If they didn't do this, if they were only there as some kind of theory or as experiences of past lives full of exciting images but lacking in any kind of moral energy or flavor, then I really don't know what their point would be. And this is part of what I meant above in saying that that the idea of reincarnation has become a reality - it has become a source of moral energy or taken on a moral flavor.

To the degree that the concepts of reincarnation and karma enrich the moral imagination it seems to me that they have a meaningful role in education, at least for the individual teacher. But if they are used as an excuse to explain one's laxity or lack of interest in the face of suffering, if they are used to judge and dismiss someone, then they are no better than racist concepts of biological determinism. In a way they are worse because they hide behind a mask of spirituality. This is, to be sure, a strong rhetorical statement and it is not difficult to untangle two lines of argument from this text. One presenting an experience regarding reincarnation and karma and one presenting an argument about what these concepts signify in education. These two arguments might be viewed as rather unrelated and almost forced together. But my point has been twofold:

First, that we can share our experiences regarding reincarnation and karma as Steiner educators and I think this would be valuable, and hopefully the narrative presented is at least somewhat convincing in this respect.

Second, that these concepts are vulnerable to abstract generalizations and can lead to the development of a fatalistic attitude. Here I think it less meaningful to write essays about why this is not constructive, I think exploring narratives of experience is a much more direct way of engaging with this. We need to talk about what these concepts mean in our lives. Why else insist on their importance? If they are only always directed outwards, to students, colleagues, etcetera, as a way of interpreting their situations, then we need to be able to tell convincing narratives of how this has directly enriched our educational action.

What is at stake, I believe, is a certain ownership of the meaning of anthroposophy for Steiner education. At the moment, this is a largely abstract conversation (or perhaps heated discussion) where those who claim that anthroposophy is, when it is all said and done, just an ideological underpinning that can and should be discarded have a point. This, together with even just a few examples of how anthroposophical ideas have been treated ideologically (and I think using the idea of karma to justify a judgmental and inactive attitude is a clear enough example of this), makes it difficult to argue otherwise.

To prevent a possible misunderstanding here, it's not that every Steiner educator suddenly should have to be able to account for various spiritual experiences or else the value of anthroposophy is null. Even if the number of teachers who could and would be willing to speak about this were small, it is more about opening a conversational space, of saying that this is welcomed as part of what makes Steiner education particular.⁷ In this sense, what I am actually trying to ask, is if we need to be more open with the way the spiritual manifests in our lives, because this would allow it to increase its presence going forward. Perhaps anthroposophy could become central to Steiner education through this in a way it has not really been asked to be yet.

7. I would like to reiterate that inviting these narratives has its own risks. Sensationalism is one. To protect against this these narratives need to explain how the process contributed to one's educational practice. If they are about past entanglements they need to include a discussion about how they enriched the present and the potential future. It is also about the language and the form of the experiences. Perhaps it was more of a dream for example. All these things need to be considered further but my aim here is to begin the conversation not to cover every aspect of it.

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