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Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy – spiritual path or science?

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With his recent article in these pages Jost Schieren (Schieren, 2011) has done much to fuel the discussion on the scientific credibility of anthroposophy.

His many-faceted and provocative treatment of the subject was long overdue, and this essay is a contribution to the debate thus kindled. Its immediate purpose is not to discuss Jost Schieren's article, but to add a few other perspectives into the picture with a view to providing a still richer basis for subsequent critical discussions.

If we wish to address this question of how anthroposophy stands in relation to what it means to be scientific, a few concepts must be clarified in advance. Modern culture is dominated by science, but finding a straightforward definition of science in the relevant literature is no simple matter. No less difficult is the creation of a consensus on what "anthroposophy" means. Right at the outset, then, it is probably worthwhile to clarify – at least within the present context – what is intended by these terms. An attempt will be made to arrive at a working definition of science based around the process of observation, by looking at situations where it leads to knowledge or where prior knowledge is being used. In the case of anthroposophy a hermeneutic approach will be taken, in which Rudolf Steiner's own conceptual interpretation will be presented.

On the concept of scientific knowledge

> "Washington – a seemingly clear-cut case: Iranian agents have been planning the assassination of a Saudi-Arabian diplomat in the USA. The government in Washington is already preparing sanctions against Iran – after all, the leadership in Teheran must have known about the plan, presumably even have been behind its instigation. Evidently, however, the situation is not so straightforward. The US government, according to some of its high-ranking members, has no hard evidence of the Iranian leadership's complicity in the assassination plan."[1]

Facts which at face value seem clear, convictions which on closer examination turn out to be mere assumptions, and hard evidence, which is either missing or put forward in order to bolster a bald assertion – this newspaper extract takes us straight to the heart of the problem of knowledge. As banal as it might sound, every search for knowledge starts with ignorance, or the desire to find out if a piece of received knowledge is really reliable. Whoever thinks they know for certain where the station is or why they have a pain in their knee will not be looking for answers, and thus will not be concerned about expanding their knowledge. If, however, they regard certain assertions as questionable, as in the case quoted above, or consider certain observed phenomena enigmatic, then the search for plausible interpretations or answers will be on.

1. http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,791521,00.html - 13.10.2011

A question can be triggered by nothing more than a simple sense impression. If someone is sitting in his living room, say, and hears a sound he can't identify at the front door, he will be puzzled or alarmed and will probably go there and check, in the hope that something else might come to his notice and thus provide an explanation for the sound.

Whatever the context, the human desire to know rests upon the perceived inadequacy of the known. Finding explanations or answers involves the making of additional observations that amplify the facts; it is the search for the "something else" that fits the context and adds to what is already known.

What we thus discover from every-day experience appears also in western cultural history. Among the beginnings of science we can make out certain phenomena with the same basic structure. For instance, the history of philosophy begins with the pre-Socratic philosophers suddenly putting in question the mythic terms in which nature was formerly experienced. Previous knowledge is no longer sufficient, natural phenomena are now calling out for explanation, and thus begins the search for fundamental causes. Socrates then founds his practice of philosophy explicitly upon the realisation of his own ignorance, and upon drawing others into the circle of this insight through dialogue, thereby bringing them in turn to admit *their* ignorance, through the experience of which new questions and explorations necessarily arise.

Aristotle, for his part, points to wonder as the source of knowledge. It is characteristic of wonder that its object – the experience or observation that called it forth – is felt to be much more complex or sometimes even simpler than at first appears. Wonder creates a strong desire to study its object and set it in some meaningful context. The search for knowledge arises out of the perceived shortcomings - in the sense of the need for either augmentation or correction - of a given idea or interpretation, and the ensuing theoretical re-working. Essentially, then, the acquisition of knowledge happens within the dynamic interplay between experience and theory: either empirical data are sought by observation or experiment and then integrated into a theoretical context, or already existing observations, data, measurements are re-interpreted in terms of novel theoretical ideas.

Taking our description of the phenomenon of *knowledge* a little further, we can say: knowledge is the outcome of a process, which clearly shows someone what is the case, or enables him to identify a fact or facts. Knowledge is also the state of mind by which someone is informed about how one thing (or fact) stands in relation to another. Relationships among facts or observed situations will always be seen to be many-sided. They can have to do with similarity, difference, causality, scale, or perhaps co-operation, exclusion, inclusion, or simply distance, speed and much more besides. When we set out to acquire knowledge our purpose is to assure ourselves that something actually occurs and to learn something of the contextual field in which it does so. This applies to every-day common sense, and equally so to science. What distinguishes the latter is its conscious and methodical mode of acquiring and developing knowledge, and its requirement that the reliability and validity of the knowledge thus acquired should be testable.

Reliable knowledge is testable knowledge. It becomes testable insofar as the acquisition process has been fully apprehended and described and the grounds for its validity thus clearly demonstrated. This can be called method-supported knowledge. Common sense isn't concerned with its own validation. It simply assumes its validity. Nor does it linger over things in order to investigate them in depth, but moves pragmatically and promptly from one thing to the next. However, common sense, in other words, knowledge unsupported by any particular method, is, like every-day language, the basis for any consciously applied scientific method. Just as we can only arrive at precise concepts and technical terms on the basis of every-day language, so an unsystematic "proto-knowledge" unsupported by method must exist before there can be "sciences" in the sense of method-based knowledge. Metaphorically, then, science is simply the saddle we put on the horse to make riding it safer and faster. Neither historically nor biographically do science and scientific language precede normal, every-day thinking and speaking. Science owes its existence to the pre-scientific mentality.

Facts and factual sequences, which have been observed either incidentally[2] or in specially designed experiments, generate information, which can be brought into relationship with other information through

2. It is well known that some crucial scientific discoveries have been made as a result of incidental (rather intentionally produced) observations (Galileo, Newton etc.)

thinking. The correspondence between these cognitively conceived relationships and visible, audible or otherwise measurable aspects of the world is what renders them tenable. These relationships, apprehended through thoughtful consideration of the facts, belong to the reality of the situation every bit as much as do the observations and data on the basis of which they were first detected. They make it what it is. A thing is not bounded by its mere physical actuality. It is what it is through the fabric of relationships in which it is embedded.[3] Facts only attain their full reality in the light of their relational context. The aim of knowledge is to make reality manifest *and* be an integral part of it. This constitutes the truth of the known. Observation and reflection upon it, in other words, the description of facts coupled with the claim to knowledge of their inter-relationships may be regarded as true if the real nature of the phenomenon under consideration is thereby made manifest. Science, on the sure footing of critical method, is the path to knowledge of reality, against which it must measure itself - as does every-day common sense.[4] Method-based knowledge is the kind which can account for its own formation, and its transparency in this regard provides the criteria for evaluating its reliability. The basic nature of scientific knowledge is that it strives to be justifiable and transparent. However, it need not necessarily be held truer, on that account, than the tenets of common sense, which are incapable of justification. Moreover, scientific knowledge is an open, future-oriented process, which at any given time includes the criticism and possible revision of its established procedures and results. Scientific knowledge is thus anti-dogmatic and sceptical, allergic to being tied down to any one, ultimately valid method or fixed content, and always open to being superseded, even to the point of entertaining a "post-scientific" perspective.

Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy as Science

The question as to the "scientific credibility" of anthroposophy has been there from the beginning, and has recently flared up with particular virulence. In view of this I think a helpful first step would be to find out what Steiner himself intended, in order to set the discussion upon a sound footing. The initial question sounds simple enough: How did Steiner see the tissue of ideas he called anthroposophy in relation to the question of its scientific credibility? In what follows this question will be pursued on the basis of a few pertinent things he said about it.

> "Anthroposophy is […] spiritually acquired knowledge; and this knowledge applies not only to the human being, but takes in all that can be experienced of the spiritual world by spiritual perception, just as the sensory world is experienced by sense perception. Because this other, inwardly-perceiving human being is our spirit form, we can designate the knowledge this inner being acquires as spiritual science."[5] (Steiner, 1984, p. 177)

According to what is said here, the principle aim of anthroposophy is knowledge. But it purports to be a special kind of knowledge. The knowledge that the spiritual part of the human being can acquire about the spiritual aspects of reality (among which are the human being and the world around him). It is thus a different kind of knowledge to that accessible to the human being as a physical (sensory) being, i.e. knowledge of the human body and of the surrounding world of bodies. Anthroposophy as knowledge of the spiritual is not in competition with that of physical reality, rather it is intended as a supplementary form of knowledge, a form in its own right and, by implication, complementary to sensory knowledge.

> "It [anthroposophy] aims to speak about the non-sensory in the same way as natural science speaks about the sensory." (Steiner, 2010, p. 3)

With this it becomes clear, on the one hand, that spiritual science is no substitute for attention to the sensory or physical aspect of reality, and vice versa. On the other hand, it points out that the mode of speaking

3. A table-top, for instance, is only a table-top by virtue of its relationship to the base of the table and through the use it is put to. It ceases to be a table-top when it is used, say, as an element in the wood-panelling of a wall.

4. The author is aware that in modern discourse the concept of knowledge of reality has been relinquished in favour of a generalised concept of the hypothesis. When hypotheses are revised, however, this happens in relation to the previously (and necessarily) rejected "reality", which remains the focal point of the process of knowledge acquisition. The hypothetical status of scientific statements is therefore methodologically compatible with talk of "knowledge of reality".

5. Rudolf Steiner (1984). Philosophy and Anthroposophy. Steiner's writings are quoted according to the way they are listed on the Rudolf Steiner Online Archive: http://anthroposophie.byu.edu.

about objects of knowledge is in both cases the same. By this is evidently meant that this methodological approach is not object-specific and that this fundamental attitude is what – according to Steiner – renders both natural and spiritual science scientific.

> "It [anthroposophy] shares the frame of mind that lies behind the practice of natural science, in other words, precisely the mental attitude that turns ideas about nature into science. It is thus justified in calling itself science." (Steiner ibid.)

Steiner here is quite clearly claiming scientific status[6] for his anthroposophical spiritual science. But since he also stipulates that each sphere of reality should have its own appropriate method of knowledge acquisition, anthroposophy is nonetheless different from natural science, both in terms of method and content. What they have in common is the "frame of mind" or inner attitude involved in the process of gaining knowledge. It could, therefore, be said that for Steiner the key to being scientific is what could be called procedural discipline or inner adherence to an ethic of knowledge.

> "The essential nature of science appears not in the object it apprehends; its signature, rather, is the human soul's way of activating itself in the struggle for knowledge." (Steiner, 2010, p. 3)

In the transition to modern times the humanities and sciences gradually emancipated themselves from the medieval knowledge paradigm and in so doing created a new one. The humanities freed themselves from theological dogma and state control, while in the sciences nature became the object of empirical, mathematically-based research. Justifying an argument no longer involved demonstrating its agreement with past authorities and traditional viewpoints, but applying a newly awakened methodological consciousness, centred upon open-mindedness and freedom of judgement. Thus natural science, although ostensibly concerned at the outset with the investigation of material facts and processes, may be seen as humanity's attainment, both individually and socially, of freedom and political maturity, and thus also as ethically motivated. It seems to me that, precisely in its method, anthroposophy, as represented by Steiner, takes its lead from this aspect of science. In this it is significantly different from the currently dominant idea of science. The latter's ideal is detachment – assumed to be value-neutral – from its object of study, which is reduced to a mere aggregation of quantitative data. Anthroposophy, on the other hand, replaces the cold, detached observer with the personally engaged individual, who is aiming at knowledge of reality and the concrete participatory experience of its spiritual dimension.

Anthroposophy is to be understood as a path of knowledge and personal development.[7] It sees the process of knowledge acquisition as an event in the life-experience of the whole person; and this knowledge is not geared towards the generation of abstractions by means of which nature can be made subservient to human needs. Anthroposophy is much more concerned with direct experience, with achieving intuitive union with reality. The conduct of life can then, on this basis, be informed by insight into and responsibility for evolution and the consequences of human action. It is thus in direct conflict with normal scientific practice, which sees the inquiring individual as a disturbance to be removed if possible, in order to arrive at a body of non-subjective, supposedly value-neutral information.

> "[Spiritual knowledge] is so constituted that it leads to attain a truer picture of the physical properties of lifeless bodies, then of plants, animals and the human being than that possessed by the average person. With this, however, we are not referring to what is usually called scientific knowledge. For the point here is not science, but participatory experience/intuitive insight/intuitive knowledge." (Steiner, 1993, p. 52)

Of course, making use of the results of Steinerian spiritual research demands of their recipient a ready willingness to experiment with them and subject them to critical appraisal. Compared to work on natural phenomena the reader is placed before special challenges and, as regards the discipline and rigorousness of the process, is faced, above all, with the necessity of extreme self-criticism.

6. This is further substantiated by the following passage: "Anthroposophy, as I understand it, is scientific investigation of the spiritual world […] Before attempting to penetrate into this world it develops in the inquiring soul those powers latent in normal consciousness and normal science that make such penetration possible." (Steiner, 1984, p. 1)

7. The soul experiences itself during its active involvement with nature, and the result of this living involvement is something other than knowledge about nature itself, namely the self-development experienced in acquiring this knowledge. (Steiner, 1997, p. 15)

> "In observing nature the soul is guided by the observed object much more strongly than when non-sensory contents are the object of its attention. In dealing with the latter it must have, to a much greater extent, the ability to maintain the essential features of the scientific way of seeing purely out of its own inner resources." (Steiner, 2010, p. 4)

Added to this are the hypothetical character of the statements themselves and their fundamental fallibility. The writings and texts bearing Steiner's name that have come down to us are not authentic and valid simply by virtue of that fact[8], and whatever validity they claim does not rest purely upon the authority of their author. Their value and validity appear solely in their relationship to the reality of which they speak.

> "The person presenting spiritual science works on the assumption that the reader is on the same factual quest as he is." (Steiner, 2010, p. 7)

And later we find:

> "They [the descriptions presented by the spiritual researcher] can be viewed as hypotheses, regulative ideas (in the sense of Kantian philosophy). Applied to the sense-bound world they will readily demonstrate their ability to confirm the assertions of the spiritual researcher. (This, of course, is nothing more than a statement of principle; it goes without saying that in certain cases the assertions of a so-called spiritual researcher could contain grave errors.) (Steiner, 1984, p. 129)

Summary

We have by no means exhausted the topic of how anthroposophy (Rudolf Steiner's spiritual science) regards itself in relation to methodological and scientific credibility, having merely sketched a few aspects in a rudimentary way.[9] On this basis, however, we can say that it justifiably sees itself as a path of knowledge acquisition based upon sound methodology, the aim of which is the laying open and full description of the spiritual aspects of reality. In this sense it sees itself as a science. It does not, however, adopt the methods of today's natural science. Instead it lays claim to being scientific in that it aligns itself with the anti-dogmatic spirit of modern science, thus putting itself in a position of being able to devise methods appropriate to its own purposes. As a path of personal knowledge, directed towards profound experience of the spiritual dimensions of reality, it seeks to further spiritual development and personality enrichment. It is far less interested in accumulating an abstract body of knowledge, the sole legitimation of which – in Francis Bacon's sense of the word – would lie in its application, i.e. in treating it essentially as an object of technological control.

Rejecting anthroposophy by arguing that it does not fulfill the criterion of testability demanded by currently established scientific practice necessarily appears problematical, when we consider that the modern paradigm of science itself is that of a historico-cultural phenomenon in process of development and radically open-ended. It rests, as described at the outset, upon a pre-scientific mentality and is moving towards a "post-scientific" one. Natural science, insofar as it follows the modern, anti-dogmatic spirit, is simply a particular form of what it means to be scientific, and in no way its only possible realization.

What lies outside its currently agreed spectrum of official methods is, therefore, not necessarily unscientific. At any rate, there is no undogmatic way of proving that the current idea of how scientific knowledge is to be acquired is the ultimate one and not replaceable.

> "[…] we must acknowledge that science is an open-ended inquiry, and it is at least conceivable that one day there will be natural sciences that are not physical sciences." (Goldberg & Pessin, 1997, p. 7)

8. For Steiner research enormous problems are created by the fact that most of the received texts are derived from stenographic reproduction, written notes or even reconstructions from memory, none of which has been checked by the "author", not to speak of authorised. To go into this here, however, would take us far beyond the scope of the present article.

9. This article is a small part of a comprehensive research project with the working title of *Anthroposophy as a Method,* which the author is pursuing within the context of his academic work at the Alanus University.

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