RoSE
Research on Steiner Education

Volume 10 Number 2
pp. 20-28

Hosted at www.rosejourn.com

Herbert Witzenmann's Path to the Philosophical Sources of Anthroposophy

Part I

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ABSTRACT. This article is the written version of a lecture given in December 2017 at Alanus University as a contribution to the lecture series "The Philosophical Sources of Anthroposophy". It pursues Herbert Witzenmann's (1905-1988) struggle for the philosophical originality of Anthroposophy in the fields of tension and development of his biography and tries to show how this can be found in the relationship of individual appropriation movements to universal meaning structures. This core principle of Anthroposophy, described by Witzenmann himself as the basic structure, is outlined in exemplary aspects of his conscious development and his literary and artistic expression, especially in Witzenmann's school and university education, his work in the family business, his commitment to the Anthroposophical society and his endeavour to make Anthroposophy connectable to academic forms of science. With his explanation of the double-sided, methodological and structural-logical source point of Anthroposophy, Witzenmann stands productively within Steiner's unfinished work and at the same time points beyond its current manifestations – and encourages its further development.

Keywords: Husserl, Jaspers, basic structure, egomorphosis, scientific elaboration of Anthroposophy

1. Introduction

In researching the philosophical sources of anthroposophy, it might seem strange at first glance to be speaking about an individual who was not a philosopher in the usual sense, and was neither a precursor nor a contemporary of Rudolf Steiner. This apparent confusion could, however, prompt us to turn the source metaphor around upon itself and inquire not only into the sources in the sense of external 'origins' in particular philosophers or schools of thought which ostensibly influenced Rudolf Steiner (*genitivus objectivus*), but into anthroposophy itself as a 'spring' feeding streams which took on philosophical and other forms (*genitivus subjectivus*). The question is whether, as various authors have suggested (Zander, 2007; Traub, 2011), Steiner's anthroposophy can to any extent be regarded as simply the sum of its presumed parts; or whether as a whole it is more than the sum of all its verifiable points of reference within the history of philosophy – whether, in other words, it has a philosophical core of its own. Turning the metaphor around as suggested only makes sense in the latter case, for only from this perspective could anthroposophy been seen as having the requisite inherent potential to go beyond and further develop those philosophical territories staked out by Steiner's precursors and contemporaries, and possibly even by Steiner himself. In the former case, simply providing a referenced account of its philosophical components would be sufficient to explain anthroposophy – rather like the contributions of Christianity, Plato and Aristotle to medieval scholasticism – and would rob it of any possibility of philosophical originality.

The struggle to identify the specific philosophical character of anthroposophy and to give it clear scientific expression may be regarded as the leitmotif of Herbert Witzenmann's life. 'Character', in turn, can be construed both from a universal and an individual perspective. Consequently Witzenmann sees anthroposophy not only as an objectively founded system which remains, as far as possible, impersonal, absolute and abstract, but more particularly as a path of individual development, through which its character – in comparison to other schools of philosophy – really only begins to be fully and appropriately realised. That there need be no contradiction in the polarity between individual expression and the affirmation of trans-subjectivity, neither in an artistic nor a scientific sense, is shown by Witzenmann's biography, which can be read as an exploration into anthroposophy, carried on through succeeding stages of maturity, and a quest to find its appropriate modern modes of expression. Accordingly, this article is not only an account of Witzenmann's philosophical works and their relationship to anthroposophy, but also brings in certain biographical landmarks which illuminate the central aspects of his interpretation of anthroposophy and how it relates to his own personal achievements. Viewed in this way neither anthroposophy nor, for that matter, science can remain as they are, or as they are generally thought to be, but will be in continual development in accordance with that of the individual minds engaged in them. This genetic, process-centred approach in no way negates the logical core or intellectual principles of scientific method, but it makes clear that the constituents of this core – as in the case of anthroposophy – may depend on how it has been progressively expressed, and that it can therefore only gradually take form through the actions of individual practitioners and the insights they have acquired.

2. Biographical development

At this point, then, some details of Herbert Wtzenmann's biography will be presented, insofar as they are relevant to the exposition (Hartmann, 2010; Witzenmann, 1985). He was born in 1905 into a family of inventors and manufacturers, and grew up in Pforzheim. Here his grandfather had, in 1889, invented the flexible metal hose and founded a factory which underwent constant expansion, and which he handed on to Herbert Witzenmann's father and brothers. Witzenmann's early childhood experience was full of contrast. On the one hand, he was already accompanying his father on the factory floor at the age of three, and there he spent a lot of time among the work-benches, made friends with the workers, and received his first impressions of industrial manufacturing processes. On the other hand, his own words tell how he experienced paranormal states of consciousness, in which he felt himself to be in flowing harmony with the world, and which he attempted to cultivate further in his later childhood and youth, especially through an activity he dearly loved – playing the piano. By the age of four, from being read fairy tales by his grandfather, Witzenmann had taught himself to read. From that time on reading and writing became increasingly important to him. His first literary attempts were written down for him by his father. At five he started having piano lessons. Schooling having begun with teachers at home, he subsequently attended primary school, and at the age of nine entered a non-denominational grammar school. The quality of the teaching he there encountered was rather poor by today's standards, and as a result Witzenmann's highly intelligent and artistically sensitive nature was plunged into an initial crisis. When he was 14 or 15 he started, together with some of his schoolmates, an "alliance against intellectualism". The idea was that they would articulate their protests by taking up contrary positions in their school assignments. However, "this brought him the first real experience of pain in his life, as the initially very enthusiastic members […] found it easier to make compromises which contradicted the alliance's aims" (Witzenmann, 1985, p. 109). This state of affairs is an early illustration of Witzenmann's highly idealistic and at times seemingly uncompromising disposition, and would appear to anticipate the sort of confrontations he got into in later phases of his life.

His heartfelt aim to become a professional pianist and devote his life completely to the pursuit of his art was shattered by the discovery of an incurable weakness in the tendons of his arms. In his distress over this he appealed, in 1923, to Rudolf Steiner whom he had heard speak in the First Goetheanum in Dornach on one brief occasion. Rudolf Steiner's books, first and foremost "Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment", were already familiar to him. In them he found that what he had long held to be certain from his own inner experience was expressed and taken further. It therefore seemed to him only natural to

ask Steiner for advice about this necessary change in the course of his studies. Steiner recommended him to pursue his special love of poetry and literature by taking a course on literature and art history. As things stood Witzenmann had already been studying piano at the College of Music in Stuttgart and "general science" at the Higher Institute of Technology. In the context of this latter course, which his father had urged him to do with an eye to his later participation in the family business, he attended physics lectures by Schrödinger and Heisenberg. Following Steiner's advice, Witzenmann enrolled in autumn 1923 at the University of Munich to study philosophy and art history, but moved to the University of Basel the next year in order to be closer to Steiner and the anthroposophical movement in Dornach. The experience he had of Steiner at the educational conference in Stuttgart and the drama course in Dornach in 1924 made a lasting impression on the young man. Steiner recommended that he join in with the work of the Youth Section, but Witzenmann could not find it in himself to do so, since he felt that its activities lacked the methodological and epistemological quality he was looking for, and that it therefore offered him little chance of learning anything. After Steiner's death in 1925 he left Switzerland and continued his studies in Freiburg, now focusing primarily on linguistics in addition to philosophy, art theory and musicology. Here he attended a number of lectures by Edmund Husserl, among others "Fundamental Problems of Logic" and "Nature and Mind", as well as introductions to phenomenology and phenomenological psychology. If later on Witzenmann never explicitly referred to Husserl, he may well, nevertheless, have found these lectures very interesting and inspiring as examples of the form and content of an introspective, phenomenological method of research in philosophy. Indeed he did, at a later date, "while writing about [Steiner's] theory of knowledge and spiritual science, follow up, in his own way, on a whole series of specific questions posed by Husserl" (Hartmann, 2010, p. 104), even though he rejected the notion of a pre-supposed reality and described the basic process of cognition in a different way to Husserl (Wagemann, 2010).

The fact that Witzenmann had no further experience of Husserl during his studies may have been due to the latter's retirement in 1928. On the other hand, his own thinking was not entirely in tune with the philosophy of phenomenology, the reason being that ever since his school-days Witzenmann had pursued the idea of a "psycho-morphosis" (later "ego-morphosis") of language: "The human Self – this I sensed in a dim sort of a way from very early on – is the ultimate power behind all acts of creativity. It sets the structural power of its formative seal upon all its productions. All human artefacts, and especially all productions of genuine art, bear the stamp of this Self, and language is a primal work of art structured by this power of the Self" (Witzenmann, 2005, p. 102). After the collapse of his dream of being a pianist he had concentrated his studies upon the aim of turning this idea into some kind of scientific treatise. In Freiburg he found in the linguist Hermann Ammann (1885-1956) a responsive listener, and potential dissertation supervisor. However, two characteristic factors of Witzenmann's constitution combined in hindering the completion of this work: on the one hand, his delicate state of health kept holding him back, and on the other there was his "stubborn universalising tendency", which caused the dissertation "to grow into a book encompassing my whole worldview" (after Hartmann, 2010, p. 114). Witzenmann became seriously ill and left Freiburg at the end of 1929 without a degree.

It took him the next three years to get better. Part of his convalescence he spent in Switzerland on a bio-dynamic farm, where he taught on an educational project for unemployed people. In 1930 he married the poet and singer, Maria Wozak, and in the same year also wrote some poems of considerable length as well as a drama. The real possibility opening up for him at the time of making his living as a professional author and poet was dashed, however, with the rise to power of the National Socialists. This meant that to have his works published in Germany he would have had to join the NS Artists Federation, which he categorically refused to do. During his time in Switzerland there had also been his growing friendship with Ernst Schenkel, who was working on a dissertation[1], and this led him to think of resuming his plans for his own dissertation. In 1933 Witzenmann enrolled in Heidelberg and approached Karl Jaspers with his intended plan. Jaspers suggested to him a more strictly philosophical topic: "The philosophy of work in Hegel and Nietzsche." At first he was on very friendly terms with Jaspers, but the latter distanced himself once he became aware of Witzenmann's fundamentally anthroposophical leanings. The volume submitted to Jaspers as a doctoral

1. Individuum und Gemeinschaft. Der demokratische Gedanke bei J. G. Fichte, 1933.

thesis in 1934 was rejected. In the period following this it seems Witzenmann was busy with the revision of the manuscript, but it remains unclear whether he simply did not manage to finish it, did not hand it in again, or whether it was once more rejected. At any rate, after the war an attempt on Witzenmann's part to re-awaken Jaspers' interest in his work also came to nothing.

It seemed to me necessary to present Witzenmann's early years in this fairly comprehensive way in order to show clearly how he was caught in the intellectual and spiritual tension between academia and anthroposophy. In 1937 a third stress-point, which hitherto had remained in the background, entered his life, when he became technical manager of the family firm, having studied engineering in Munich. Of the privations he and his family of, by now, four children suffered during the war, of the political danger they faced, and of the ultimate experience of the loss of all their belongings and the almost total destruction of the factory in Pforzheim, the full details will not here be given. Suffice it to say that in two bombing raids on Pforzheim all Witzenmann's material possessions, including all his literary and academic papers, were destroyed. In 1945, at the age of forty, he found himself faced, like many another in Germany, with the necessity of having to start from scratch. Since the firm was in process of being rebuilt it could only provide a living for one family (that of his brother) in the immediate aftermath of the war. Witzenmann, therefore, tried to find a position among his anthroposophical connections and worked for some time on the editorial staff of the magazine "Die Drei", and of the publishing house "Freies Geistesleben". He also became intensely involved in giving lectures and courses under the auspices of the Anthroposophical Society. For "Die Drei" he wrote numerous articles, among them "Intuition und Beobachtung" ("Intuition and Observation"), which presents his own concentrated and systematic account of Steiner's theory of knowledge, interpreted in terms of the phenomenology of consciousness. In 1951 Witzenmann resumed his position as the firm's technical manager. The years that followed were marked by an increasingly difficult juggling act between his work for the firm and his anthroposophical commitments, and by a protracted phase of illness. During this latter, in 1958, he wrote "Die Voraussetzungslosigkeit der Anthroposophie" ("The Unconditionality of Anthroposophy") as an introductory book for young people. Time and again Witzenmann would use such retreat phases due to illness for the purposes of writing. In 1963 he was nominated onto the executive council of the General Anthroposophical Society by Albert Steffen, whom Steiner had named as his successor. Witzenmann now needed to leave the firm, but it took four years of legal wrangles for him to finally do so. He found no longer being involved in the inventions and fortunes of the family business very painful.

In parallel with this, through his work on the executive council he found himself at the end of the sixties in the middle of a conflict situation which plunged him into an existential crisis. The background to this notorious episode, known as the "books dispute", needs to be outlined here, if Witzenmann's approach to anthroposophy is to be understood. After Steiner's death the publication rights to all his works were transferred to his wife, Marie Steiner. As she considered the then executive council of the Anthroposophical Society, and the Society as a whole, to be incapable of preserving and promoting Steiner's works in the manner they required, she set up an independent association to manage and publish his literary estate. To the members of the executive council at that time – also to Witzenmann – this seemed to stand in glaring contradiction to the spirit of the Christmas conference of 1923, where Steiner had brought about a merger between the anthroposophical movement and the Society, including the School of Spiritual Science (Goetheanum) (cf. Witzenmann, 1988b, p. 24f).[2] What it came down to, therefore, was a dispute over inheritance, provoked by separating the legal-economic (Estate Association) and the spiritual (Society and School) aspects of the situation, thus setting them against one another. In the controversies which continued over the succeeding decades Witzenmann made his position clear, fleshing out his arguments in full detail. He felt that it was the task of the Society and the School of Spiritual Science to have full responsibility for the organisation and further development of anthroposophy. To regard Steiner's work as finished until his presumed next incarnation, and to simply manage it in this spirit and publish it in book form, was deeply repugnant to him.

2. "Through the Christmas conference Rudolf Steiner accomplished two things: for the archetypal image of a school of esoteric teaching that every human being carries in the depths of their unconscious he provided a valid earthly manifestation in the form of an institution appropriate to our time; moreover, of this epochal, in other words, thoroughly modern impulse towards a School of Spiritual Science he made a principle of a community of practical knowledge" (Witzenmann, 1988b, p. 29).

The only solution he saw, therefore, would take the form of a consciousness raising exercise, both within the executive council, and between the council and the Estate Association, with a view to the latter's eventual re-integration into the School of Spiritual Science (the Society). Since, however, the Estate Association was more or less constrained, according to the statutes of its constitution, to deny the School of Spiritual Science its right to exist – at least in terms of its esoteric function – this path of action seemed to be a dead end. On the other hand, after the death of Albert Steffen voices were increasingly raised on the executive council and among the Society membership in favour of a compromise, which would permit Steiner's books to be offered for sale in the Goetheanum, thus enabling officially approved access to his works.

In 1968 opinion on the executive council finally shifted in favour of such a compromise – "the books resolution", as it was called. This pushed Witzenmann, who stuck resolutely to his opinion, into the position of outsider. He felt betrayed by his colleagues on the council, but he continued to be completely committed to his place on the council and its associated duties and activities, regarding it as a life-long task. He therefore refused, at first, to leave his post at the Goetheanum (Witzenmann, 1988b, p. 25). Subsequently, however, his conditions of work were made very difficult, and he was removed from his position as leader of the Section for Social Science (1970) and of the Youth Section (1971). As a result of these events, from the early seventies on a number of initiatives either developed or began intensifying their work. These had either been started by Witzenamnn himself or formed around his philosophical and anthroposophical work. Here may be mentioned: the working group "Beiträge zur Weltlage" ("Reports on the State of the World"), which had been running since 1962, the Alanus Foundation, founded by Betty Lipin in 1969, the "Seminar für Freie Jugendarbeit, Kunst and Sozialorganik" ("Seminar for Independent Youth Work, Art and the Social Organism") started in 1973, and Gideon Spicker Press, founded by Henriette Jaquet in 1972, which has published the greater part of Witzenmann's books. In terms of his output of philosophical and anthroposophical works, Witzenmann's last 15 years may be regarded as his most productive. In addition to various collections of essays, he wrote the monographs "Vererbung and Wiederverkörperung des Geistes" ("Inheritance and Re-incarnation of the Spirit" 1972/1984), "Die Philosophie der Freiheit als Grundlage künstlerischen Schaffens" ("The Philosophy of Freedom as a Basis for Artistic Creation" 1980), "Strukturphänomenologie" ("Structural Phenomenology", 1983) – developed from a series of lectures given at the Ruhr University in Bochum, and "Goethes universalästhetischer Impuls" ("Goethe's universal aesthetic Impulse" 1987). Herbert Witzenmann died in Heidelberg in September 1988 at the age of 85.

3. Philosophical Works

3.1 The Method of Introspective Observation

Although Witzenmann's efforts to forge an academic career for himself came to an end with Jaspers' repeated rejection of his proposed dissertation, he did not lose interest in current developments in philosophy, psychology, art theory and sociology. Depending on the occasion and the target group, he took a more or less explicit stance on a variety of historical and contemporary currents of thought and individual thinkers, viewing these in relation to his main concern of providing a scientific account of anthroposophy. By this he did not mean the importing into anthroposophy of mainstream scientific methods, such as the collection and evaluation of statistical data and deductive argumentation (Hartmann, 2013, p. 151). Rather his purpose was to justify anthroposophy as a science in its own right by exemplifying and applying its core methodology in terms of the phenomenology of consciousness, and then on this basis to show its relationship to other approaches. Through his taking on single-handed responsibility for this systematic research – "introspective observation following the methods of natural science", as Steiner called it (Steiner, 1918/1958) – he was putting the above-mentioned reversal of the "source metaphor" into practice: the source of knowledge is sought and found by the human individual through his systematic identification of the processes of his own consciousness. For anthroposophy this means replacing the kind of spirituality that looks up to authority and seeks only to preserve, expound, ritualise and institutionalise its activities ("top-down spirituality"), with one geared towards individual experience, initiative, and the power of personal expression and development ("bottom-up spirituality", Witzenmann, 1987, p. 46f.). This emancipatory motif was already present in

Witzenmann's earlier schoolboy rebellion against the intellectualism that dominated cultural life then as it still did, and which he was attempting to transform through his anthroposophical and philosophical research and through his teaching.

In demonstrating the methodological consistency in Steiner's works, Witzenmann was also placing them soundly within the context of the style of consciousness that arose at the time of the Scientific Revolution. For the principle of systematic thought combined with experimental observation, that in natural science is restricted in its application to the material world, only attains the full range of its cultural and creative capacity insofar as each person actively investigates and cultivates awareness of their participatory relationship to the world.[3] Thus, just as many insights and abilities only accessible in former cultural epochs to a few initiates and sages are now a normal part of general education (e.g. reading, writing and mathematics), so the fundamental process of personal development through knowledge, which hitherto has only attained rudimentary expression in experimental science, can in future become a fully conscious cultural possession for everyone. Accordingly, Witzenmann sees in Steiner's works the inevitable development of scientific consciousness into a "new spiritual principle of civilisation", the effects of which will permeate all areas of human life (Witzenmann, 1988b, p. 25).

From an epistemological point of view, this methodological kinship between anthroposophy and natural science stands in marked contrast to Husserl's phenomenology, for he made a sharp critical distinction between his approach and all forms of positivist science (Husserl, 1970). Insofar as Husserl one-sidedly favoured the idea of arriving at evidence of the laws governing a phenomenon via the path of phenomenological and eidetic reduction, he lost sight of the other side of the story; namely, that of the constituting of reality, the permeation in any experimental situation of the percept with ideal conceptual content. He has no interest in the possibility of forming an experimental judgement entirely at the perception pole of the cognitive spectrum, because for him sensory perception was always assumed to involve some aspect of the universal. This is expressed in his "universal passive belief in being", the full import of which can only be understood apart from the realm of the senses (Husserl, 1973, p. 30). In contrast to this, Witzenmann locates his central field of research in events where the intuitive and experimental are combined, where reality is constituted within the dynamic interaction between deconstructed stimulus and constructive concept. This will be explained in more detail in what follows.

The response-evoking sensory stimulus offers *nothing* that could be described as experiential or life-world integration – which is entirely in keeping with Steiner's and Witzenmann's findings on "pure experience" or "pure content of observation" (Steiner, 1924/2003, p. 26 / 1918/1958, p. 41)[4]. It appears initially as an unstable, totally fragmented and unqualified product of decomposition, which only takes on viable form through active thinking and observation (Witzenmann, 1984b; Wagemann, 2010). That Husserl, by contrast, speaks – unawares – in terms of an already "recomposed" state of perception is shown, for instance, by the following quotation: "[…] What affects us from the current passively given background is not a completely empty something, some datum or other (we have no really exact word for it) as yet entirely without sense, a datum absolutely unfamiliar to us. […] What is thus apprehended has, accordingly, its own *empty horizon of familiar unfamiliarity* which is to be described as the universal horizon 'object', with particular indications or, rather, prescriptions […]" (Husserl, 1973, p. 37/38). The ambivalent expressions here – "familiar unfamiliarity" (universalised percept) and "universal horizon 'object' with particular indications" (individualised concept) – point to a previously occurring, albeit unremarked, interaction between the two structural components of concept and percept, and will act in the further course of the exposition as

3. "The intuitively unique character of Rudolf Steiner's path of spiritual knowledge ensures that there is no contradiction in the fact that its goal can be realized anytime and anywhere. The general availability of this path to fulfilment is due to the state of the development of human consciousness the materialistic style of knowledge and action has reached. For the anti-spiritual mentality has attained that degree of wakeful clarity that can penetrate into the essence of consciousness" (Witzenmann, 1988b, p. 28).

4. Here there is a clear connection to the current philosophical (McDowell-Dreyfus-) debate on the extent to which percepts are imbued with conceptual content (e.g. Schear, 2013). Instead of treating this issue argumentatively in terms of so-called thought-experiments without sufficient connection to actual mental experience, Witzenmann's approach can provide a basis in the sense of empirical-introspective research (Wagemann, Edelhäuser & Weger, 2018).

reminders of the actual fundamental process of cognition (see 3.3). Thus Husserl and his followers do not manage to penetrate through conscious observation to the deepest possible level of consciousness, even though in many respects the ready correspondence among the various findings can be very illuminating.[5]

5. Further connections and differences between philosophical phenomenology and Steiner's/Witzenmann's phenomenology of consciousness are discussed in Wagemann (2010).

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