

Useful Priorities?

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In his above contribution (*RoSE* Vol. 2, No. 2/ 2011), Jost Schieren takes the legacy of Steiner's comments as published in the Dornacher Gesamtausgabe edition, the vastness of which is barely manageable by rational means, and groups them into three categories: Firstly, comments that are verifiable by the usual empirical methods and thus readily useable, i.e. statements whose compatibility with, as Steiner puts it, 'anthropological' research results is evident or fundamentally accessible; secondly, comments that are, at least for the time being, not accessible by scientific means, but may still be considered plausible e.g. as working hypotheses; and lastly, a marginal remainder that seems to elude any rational exploration, either for the time being or even inherently. Schieren regards serious scientific research of the first category as both urgently needed and feasible. Subjects he associates with the second category, e.g. the validity of the concept of reincarnation, are to be tackled in the medium term and thus to remain unresolved for now, while an examination of the irrational remainder is deferred to the remote future. His priority is that which can be understood and taken up productively by mainstream science. For educational institutions brave enough to concern themselves with Steiner's ideas, this emphasis has the added benefit of fending off suspicions that they sacrifice the principles of rational research in favor of a self-referential interpretation of pre-scientific doctrines. Also, the meanwhile numerous fruitful results stemming from exchanges between self-critical anthroposophists and mainstream researchers support Schieren's pragmatic approach.

Individuals who value Steiner's esotericism as a source of life guidance, however, may approach Schieren's plausible strategy with a degree of skepticism. And they are not alone. In response to the question as to whether Waldorf schools would be good schools even without anthroposophy - and therefore without the embarrassing residual aspects the scientific processing of which Schieren seeks to defer temporarily or indefinitely - Walter Müller, education researcher from Würzburg, Germany, writes: 'If anthroposophy really does guarantee the currently highly-praised educational quality of Waldorf schools, albeit in respect of its functioning rather than the contents of its teachings, then a future Waldorf school without anthroposophy seems inconceivable. For, on closer examination, anthroposophy represents the center of gravity of the whole system. It is the reservoir of motivation and strength for teachers and many parents alike, and frequently the unseen principal source of the frequently invoked community spirit of the school. Without this world view as its center of reason, the Waldorf school's days would probably be numbered.' (Müller, 1999, p. 123).

This is food for thought. If even a renowned expert, more inclined to dissociate himself from esotericism of any kind, acknowledges the surprisingly productive impact of the esoteric core of Waldorf education, despite its peculiar irrationality, should we not try *not* to postpone into the remote future a possible hermeneutic convergence with just that irrationality but rather do our best to embrace and prove it?

Indeed, some remarkable attempts along these lines are already being made. Research into the history of civilization has overcome old inhibitions. Often unburdened by prejudice and with remarkable enthusiasm, largely unknown esoteric currents in world history and their cultural impact are being explored (Hanegraaff, 2005 and 2006; summarized in Dietz, 2008). Especially with regard to the clarification of specific thought forms of key branches of esotericism, much progress has been made. Schools such as the Paris Sorbonne and universities in Amsterdam, Exeter and Rome have chairs dedicated to esoteric research. In Germany, comprehensive research projects on this subject launched at the universities of Halle-Wittenberg and Siegen (Neugebauer-Wölk 1999; Vondung & Pfeiffer 2006). It is only a matter of time until the resulting wealth of methodology is also applied to the esotericism of Steiner and especially to those areas of his anthroposophy which still strike us as irrational today. Would it not be appropriate for anthroposophy-oriented experts to take the lead and, in doing so, set standards before this is done by other, less competent researchers?

In this context, Steiner's discussion of methodologies in the introductory chapter of his book 'Von Seelenrätseln' is likely to play a pioneering role (Steiner, 1917, and more often). Initially, the hermeneutic clarification of Steiner's *forms of expression* must be the focus of attention (Kiersch, 2010). Especially in this respect, his *blackboard drawings* gave an important impulse. They were only discovered in recent years and, following their public exhibition, sparked a lively debate among art experts. The wider *context* especially of his esoteric portrayals, the question of *continuity and change* in the development of his teachings (Ravagli & Röscher, 2003), his special use of *metaphors* (Kiersch, 2008; Kaiser, 2011), and the *heuristic character* of his conceptualizations (Rittelmeyer, 1990) are already the subject of discussion. The *temporary, provisional* character of all of Steiner's deliberations with regard to 'higher worlds' – in contrast to the popular view that he is concerned with 'absolute truth' – attracts considerable attention.

Research into Steiner's peculiar *forms of expression* - which incidentally bear a remarkable resemblance to those of *Goethe*, as described in detail by experts such as Uwe Pörksen (Pörksen, 2008) - may give access to the *methodology of super-sensible research*. A consolidation of this hitherto hidden methodology, scattered widely throughout Steiner's work in what are frequently just aphoristic comments, may shed a surprising light on what, for the time being, are wholly irrational areas of his teachings. Esotericism is and remains the very essence of Steiner's works. Regardless of the priorities currently set by the way of thinking and the thought collective (Fleck, 1980) of the scientific mainstream, and suggested by the constraints of a politicized educational administration, research should not be deterred from accepting today the worthwhile challenge of precisely focusing on what is incommensurable about Steiner and his teachings in order to gain at least an initial understanding.

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