

Michael Muschalle

# Research Projects on Rudolf Steiner's Worldview

Translated from the German Original “Forschungsprojekte zur Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners” by Terry Boardman and Gabriele Savier

As of: 22.01.09

Here you will find themes for prospective research subjects, which in my estimation can be helpful for an understanding of Rudolf Steiner's worldview and which can realistically be dealt with. The list of subjects will be expanded as time goes on and the contents developed.

## Introduction

Whoever studies Peter Bieri's introductory chapter to the collected volume edited by him and titled *Analytische Philosophie des Geistes* (An Analytical Philosophy of Mind)<sup>3</sup> (Weinheim 1991, pp.1-28) will be able straightaway to pick out a dozen problems from the text which suggest themselves as themes for scientific treatises or larger projects in the centre of which stands the worldview of Rudolf Steiner. For the questions raised by Bieri are without exception also essential for an understanding of Rudolf Steiner. Indeed, today one can only successfully relate Steiner to the body of traditional epistemological research when one understands how he is able to provide answers to the questions thrown up by Bieri. Naturally, these do not by any means circumscribe all the questions deriving from Steiner's world view, but I would say that some questions of very fundamental significance are here raised by Bieri. Although I shall not turn to Bieri's account here, I would very much like to recommend his ideas to readers to enable them to gain an impression of current philosophical ideas and of where the eventual foci of research might eventually lie. It may therefore be recommended to interested readers to prepare themselves by a study of Bieri's introductory chapter and in doing so, to consider the answers that Steiner gives to the questions that Bieri raises and how he grounds those answers in detail.

The following list of proposed projects is not in any sense systematically based, but rather, has grown out of my own individual and historical engagement with the theme as it has developed over a number of years.

In the course of time it became evident to me that certain questions urgently required clarification, questions that are of significance not only for the anthroposophists' understanding, but also, in my view, for the intellectual acceptance of Steiner's thought forms in the cultural environment of the present time. The following list will grow further in the course of time, so it is therefore not possible or expedient to give it a systematic form in advance. That can perhaps be left for a later time, but at the moment I would like to hold off from doing so and simply present, quite pragmatically, a series of proposed themes.

What informed the drawing up of the list was for me not only the aspect of urgency of the themes in question but also the aspect of their solubility.

## Single Themes

### 1. The Monism of Rudolf Steiner's Worldview

A central focus of Rudolf Steiner's worldview lies in his conviction presented in the second chapter of his book *Die Philosophie der Freiheit (The Philosophy of Freedom)* (GA 04, Dornach 1978, p.34) that one can only find nature outside of oneself when one has first known her inside oneself. Likewise, it could only be nature's own activity which also lives within the human being (p. 33). With this, the dualistic theory of separate inner and outer worlds is countered by the kernel of a monism that Steiner seeks to develop in his writings.

The consequences of this initial position for a contemporary understanding of the world are considerable. For clearly, it is Steiner's conviction that contemporary culture has an unreal or insubstantial picture of nature, precisely because *this* path is *not*, as a rule, the one followed by natural science. On the contrary, natural science today heads in the opposite direction and does not first seek nature within the human being in order then to find this activity of nature outside him, but rather, as a rule, proceeds in its thinking from external nature *to* the human being. The acknowledged consequence of this is that the human being becomes an appendage and accidental product of a materially dominated nature with all the consequences that brings for the further development of the image of Man within the scientific mainstream and all the philosophical concepts that follow from it and are related to it. It is Steiner's conviction then that the relationship between man and nature perceived by modern natural science is not commensurate with reality, but is completely back to front.

This naturally affects not only the physical understanding of the world in the broadest sense, but also everything else that relates in some way to this physical understanding of the world. This applies most particularly to current philosophical ideas about freedom, which regularly collide with contemporary physics, whether freedom is declared to be a complete illusion in view of the prevailing laws of nature or whether the issue exhausts itself in the problem of how it could possibly be that physical effects can proceed from an immaterial being. (See Bieri's thematisation of mental causation.)

Not only Steiner's understanding of nature but also his philosophy of freedom is inextricably linked to the monism he presents. No true understanding of Steiner's philosophy of freedom can be gained unless one has rightly conceived his ideological monism. This, to my mind, is why the clarification of his monistic view of the world is one of the most pressing and urgent subjects for research that can today be presented by the anthroposophical movement.

For without this understanding, it is not possible to take part constructively and convincingly in scientific discussions on the question of what constitutes nature or on the question of freedom, and to represent Steiner's anthroposophical view on either topic.

Nor to represent Steiner's anthroposophical worldview in such discussions, nor is it possible to engage in discourse about the question of freedom. That applies especially to discussion of types, as indicated above in relation to Peter Bieri's introduction.

## Questions

- ★ What is this nature which must first be found within the human being so that it can then be discovered outside him?
- ★ Why must this nature first be sought within? Why not proceed the opposite way, from outer nature?
- ★ How does the activity of nature come about within the human being? What is its character?
- ★ How does the human being become aware of it?
- ★ On what is based Steiner's conviction that the workings of nature both inside and outside the human being are one and the same?
- ★ What does this way of thinking signify in its consequences for the dynamic relationship between the inner and outer worlds?
- ★ What in fact does *inner* and *outer* even mean here?
- ★ Why indeed does he regard the understanding of what is within the human being to be a precondition for understanding what is outside the human being? What arguments does he employ to support this conviction?
- ★ Did Steiner simply adopt the idea of the correspondence between inner and outer from the philosophical tradition, or did he develop it himself?

## Project Overview and Structure

My personal conviction with regard to the significance of this research subject is that it is a key project. That is, very much depends upon it in regard to numerous other questions. This also means that, owing to its complexity, it can only be elaborated in numerous single steps, because many questions depend on it and are bound up with it, each of which requires to be clarified in itself.

On the other hand, it also represents a rich seam in that most of the relevant lines of thought are well-documented in Steiner's philosophical writings. One is not therefore faced with the need in these fundamental questions to turn to the less authenticated and often problematic representations made in the texts of Steiner's lectures. Doing so can be helpful in individual questions but is no intellectual precondition for a fundamental explanation of the problem in itself.

Thematically, the subject provides all the possibilities for a thorough elaboration - from the specific investigation of single issues in the form of a seminar, to graduate dissertations or even short magazine and journal contributions, to doctoral and postdoctoral research. It is also possible to study Steiner's thoughts not only in themselves but also in context, since Steiner almost always developed his own philosophical convictions in the contextual problematic of contemporary opinions and views. This will be an important viewpoint above all for academic researchers, as it will not be so hard for them to find suitable mentors for a comparative and contrastive project on *Steiner's Monism*.

Public interest in such a project might not be slight. Apart from the fact that, in my experience, supporters of anthroposophy have not been sufficiently clear about these things for a long time, the degree of interest in them outside of anthroposophy cannot be underestimated either. For the relationship between inner and outer, between the mental and physical worlds, which in the narrower sense is also the problem of freedom, has once again

become a major focus of debate within academia and within culture at large. A well-developed and grounded anthroposophical way of approaching the issue would therefore make an important and constructive contribution to a burning issue of our time.

### Aspects and strategic indications

- A decisive point in such a study lies in the fact that for Steiner, thinking is of such extraordinary significance in any conception of the world, and indeed, not only - and this is the crucial point – for the *methodological* process in any such world conception, but also for the *ontological* assessment of the world in its entirety (*Weltganze*). Steiner's monism in his philosophical writings is a monism of ideas (*Ideenmonismus*) in the sense that the ideas – or better, the Idea – are, or is, the actual active being in the world, both within and without.
- Human thinking is not only the individual form of appearance of the Idea, but *thinking is in fact the very being of the world itself*. The effectiveness of ideas as such (I shall refer to it here as world thinking) and individual thinking are, for Steiner, qualitatively, one and the same thing. "...*that thinking is the being of the world and that the thinking of the individual human being is a single form of appearance of this being*", as is stated in *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* [A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception] (GA 02, Dornach 1979, p.79) is a line of thought which, as far as I can see, he maintained consistently. Above all, Steiner's argumentation which leads to this line of thought - thinking as the being of the world - such as we find, for example, in *A Theory of Knowledge...* (GA 02) or *Goethes Weltanschauung* [Goethe's World View] (GA 06) merits special attention.
- What the Idea signified for him was much differentiated in the sphere of his later anthroposophical activity in the direction of individual spiritual beings, but the basic thought as such remained the same: the world of ideas or the world of thinking is directly present within the human being, both in its content and in its dynamic activity. What *works* within the human being as idea is the same as that which works outside him. The outer processes of nature correspond in their being to the processes of thought i.e. they are the consequences of the activity of ideas. They are - as represented in the later anthroposophical viewpoint – the deeds of individual spiritual beings, and their doing is a thinking activity.
- The Idea is all-comprehending with regard to both subject and object and extends beyond such categories, above all, in relation to outer and inner. What *is at work* outside the human being is the one Idea, and his individual thinking too is the working of this all-embracing Idea itself.

*In the observation of thinking the human being perceives the world process (lit. the world happening – transl.) He does not have to investigate this process according to an idea, for the process is the idea itself. (Goethes Weltanschauung [Goethe's World View], GA 06, paperback edition, Dornach 1979, p.86).*

It is from this thought, above all, that it is necessary to proceed.

- Human thinking thereby becomes a stage for the activity of world beings which in their nature consist of thought.
- This further signifies that human thinking is related in its essence to all the forces of the world - even the outer ones – as they are all but manifestations of the one Idea,

and here again lies the key to the physical dimension of Steiner's monism. There is no fundamental opposition between the inner thought activity of the human being and the outer workings of nature, such as is regularly postulated in contemporary philosophical discourse and from which are said to proceed all the difficulties of the interactions of the mental and physical worlds. For Steiner, both are *the activity of ideas or thoughts*:

*Only when the human being becomes aware that nature forces are nothing other than forms of the same spirit that also works within himself, does the insight then arise in him that he participates in freedom. Natural law is only experienced as an outer force or pressure when one regards it as an alien power. If one lives into its being, one then perceives it to be a power that one exercises within oneself; one feels oneself to be a productive, co-working element in the becoming and being of things. One feels at one with all the powers of becoming. (GA-06, Dornach 1979, S. 83 f)*

The problem of dualism for Steiner is only a secondary one of viewpoint or perspective. It is rooted in the fact that in the broadest possible sense, the outer world is given to the human being through the system of sense perception. The working of the idea in this outer world cannot be experienced directly; access to it can only be gained indirectly through thinking about what is mediated through sense perceptions:

*The human being does not participate in the coming about of all he perceives. The ideas of these perceptions arise within him. But these ideas would not be present if the productive power to bring them to appearance were not already there within him – the ideas of the content that is at work in the things become present through human activity. The human being can therefore only know the actual nature of the world of ideas when he beholds his own activity. In beholding everything else, he penetrates only the Idea at work; the thing that is being worked upon remains as percept outside his spirit. In beholding the Idea, that which is working and that which is worked upon are both wholly contained within himself. He has the whole process continually present within him. No longer does what is seen appear to be produced by the Idea, for what is seen is now itself the Idea. (Goethes Weltanschauung [Goethe's World View], GA-06, paperback edition, Dornach 1979, p. 85f).*

- Within himself, the human being does not only *wield* this power, which also works in the outer world; he also beholds it *directly*. In his *Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner calls this wielding and beholding of active world forces 'the observation of thinking'.

## References

- An overview article on this project can be found here on this website: [The Causality of Thinking](#)