

## Working with the text of the First Teachers' Course/Foundations of human experience

By Martyn Rawson

In the first teachers' course (Steiner, 2020) Steiner outlined a pedagogical anthropology that is an understanding of the human being understood from an anthroposophical perspective for the teachers in the Waldorf School. I refer to these lectures using the shorthand term Foundations, because the ideas here are foundational to an understanding of Waldorf education. The lectures unfold a way of understanding the nature of the developing human being by looking at the relationships between body, psyche (or soul) and spirit and their interactions. Many of the ideas are unfamiliar from the perspective of the human sciences today being translated into English sometimes helps and sometimes veils what Steiner meant. I am here referring to the translations by Margot Saar.

There are a number of factors that make Steiner's Foundations text difficult to understand. The first is that the text obviously lacks the immediate, intimate relationship between speaker and the selected group of listeners. Steiner was addressing a small group of people, many of whom had already attended many lectures by Steiner and were steeped in anthroposophical ideas. Interestingly, the lectures were steno graphed and then typed up and copies were made so that the participants got a manuscript the next day- which considering the technology in those days, was remarkably efficient. We also know that Steiner made very few notes for each lecture and spoke, as he usually did, freely and presumably with a direct sense for his audience's capacity to follow.

Steiner uses anthroposophical terminology and references to other anthroposophical works by him without explaining them, since these were presumably familiar to most of his audience. This doesn't detract from the fact that they are carefully composed, balancing a sequence of thoughts with illustrative examples and anecdotes. However, it is not always clear what level

of understanding he expected from his listeners. As Albert Schmelzer and Jan Deschepper ask, “is this an anthroposophical sketch that aims to be scientific? Does it provide us with metaphysical descriptions of the nature of the human being that cannot be questioned? Or is it an artistic presentation, comparable with the manifesto of a contemporary artist that arises out of thinking in images- to borrow an expression from Paul Klee?” (2019, 6).

Their response is to describe the Foundations as a sketch of a pedagogical anthropology as a basis for pedagogical practice. The lectures provide no systematic or grounded scientific theory. Steiner doesn't argue his case, but he does illustrate it. The range of aspects it covers is bewildering, requiring detailed knowledge of, among other things, philosophy, history, psychology, linguistics, mathematics, literature and biology. As Schmelzer and Deschepper point out, Steiner's lack of reflexive distance means that he is presenting an anthroposophically oriented anthropology. The relationship to conventional science has to be established as part of the study process, if we are to understand these thoughts. He frequently makes references to other literature and thinkers without always naming them and some of the people he referred to were contemporaries, we know little about. Unfortunately, Schmelzer and Deschepper's introduction to the First Teachers' Course has not yet been translated into English.

How are we to relate to Steiner's anthroposophical ideas? In the first generations of teachers and student teachers this approach was influenced by Steiner's charisma as a personality and the sense people had of his significance for the world. Thus, they took on board everything he said and assumed made sense in the wider anthroposophical narrative that Steiner woven through his books and in particular through his lectures and works of art. As Ulrich Kaiser (2020) has explored, Steiner's great art was the lecture in which he was able to draw his listeners into his narrative, enabling them to enter into a frame of consciousness so they could follow his thoughts, as a great performer might do on stage. This was more than oratory, it was an art form that enabled his audience to transcend themselves and experience something whilst witnessing, or perhaps better, participating in his train of thoughts, that was more than the limits of the previous experience or knowledge.

Some people, like the Waldorf teacher Caroline von Heydebrand, who had a PhD and contributed academic papers to her field, described Steiner effect on her as follows;

It was a shattering experience for me when he (Steiner) spoke as a teacher - and afterwards, in re-thinking and re-experiencing his words - to sense from which sources the stream of his spirit flowed into our hearts. For what he taught about the essence of the human being...never bore the traces of tradition, it had not been read somewhere, nor was it only 'experienced' in the course of an abundant human life, it came directly from the world in which the soul and spirit of the human being are at home... After all, he wanted us to be free human beings and act out of our own creative powers. (Heydebrand, 1958, p. 189, quoted in Brehmer, 2012).

Other people were apparently unmoved by this charisma. One such was the poet and feminist Rosa Mayreder. In his autobiography Steiner wrote of her, she,

was one of those persons to whom in the course of my life I have had the greatest respect...what is revealed [in her writings] lived in Rosa Mayreder in a spiritual form of expression to which I had to respond with the strongest possible inner sympathy. This woman impressed me as if she possessed each of the gifts of the human mind in such measure that these in their harmonious interaction constituted the right expression of a human being...she relived me of a part of the inner loneliness in which I had lived (Steiner, 1928, p. 111).

Steiner acknowledged that what separated them was her commitment to science, “she seeks to use the scientific as the foundation for ideas which have as their goal the complete development of human personality without permitting the knowledge of a world of pure spirit to find access to this personality” (ibid, p.112). In 1922 Rosa Mayreder wrote in her diary:

Anthroposophical Congress. Stanzi invites me to a lecture by Dr. Steiner. The fact of his impact is simply inexplicable to me. He appears in pastoral dress, black, high-necked; the densely packed hall welcomes him with frenetic applause. He speaks in a

sonorous voice, monotonously pathetic and unctuous in the manner of pulpit orators. What he says can be summed up in three categories: witty aphorisms from versatile knowledge, empty talk in stock phrases, and incomprehensible intimations of supersensible abilities from the field in which the control of scientific thought to which he refers completely fails. I had thought it impossible that the great majority of his listeners could follow these remarks. Perhaps it is the promise of attaining a superior 'spiritual vision', as I like to say, through meditative exercises, without the cumbersome educational process of modern science, and thereby experiencing the past and the future alive within oneself, that draws people to anthroposophy; but perhaps the explanation of Steiner's work lies only in the pastoral tone-false with which he hypnotizes people.

Steiner acknowledges that there are many bridges that could connect these two ways of looking at the world; “she was striving for a conception of actual human personality; I toward a revelation of the world which might seek for this personality at the basis of the soul by means of spiritual eyes thus opened” (Ibid, p. 113). For those of us who do not yet possess the abilities look at the world with spiritual eyes, and one can understand Mayreder’s point, some science can help. The science I have in mind is hermeneutics.

Over the years I have adopted a hermeneutic method with teacher students in reading key works by Steiner, including the Foundations. The method can be summarized as follows:

1. **Downloading:** I start by asking the students to document their thoughts and attitudes towards the subject, e.g. the education of children, often using non-verbal means such as drawings, gestures, colours. I call this downloading, following Otto Scharmer’s (2016) Theory U method. This exercise helps to bring our implicit and mostly unconsidered expectations, assumptions, pre-knowledge and prejudices to the surface. This is important because it the starting point from which we engage with the text. We never engage with such texts neutrally or innocently, we always bring our habits of mind to the activity. This is called the starting horizon. The idea is to explore the

horizon of the text as it is today when we read it and merge this horizon with our own. If this is successful, we will have a new horizon.

2. Drawing on ideas formulated by Michael Crotty (1998) about hermeneutic inquiry, I start by asking the students to study the text with an empathic attitude, by trying to identify what the author is actually saying and putting this into one's own words and holding back judgements as much as possible. I also ask them to read the text and translate some of the ideas into drawings, ideograms and even gestures. This is very helpful
3. Secondly, we engage in a dialogical process with the text. This means contextualizing it historically, but also literally discussing the meanings and exploring how the ideas in the text relate to other ideas we know, in groups. At this point an element of criticality is important. This means teasing out the assumptions that Steiner makes, the things he takes for granted, even the dismissive tone he sometimes uses to refer to others, who he doesn't always name. An example of this is his handling of the anecdote about the woman who ran in front of the carriage of the (married) man she was in love with and then jumping in the river. This case was well-known in Freud's psychotherapeutic work, though Steiner doesn't say so. As a matter of fact, the personal doctor of Otto Specht, the hydrocephalic boy, who Steiner taught, was Joseph Breuer, who co-authored Freud's first work on hysteria. Breuer was Freud's mentor. Both were regular guests of the Specht family with whom Steiner lived for seven years.
4. Thirdly, what Crotty calls a transactional process is enacted, in which each of the students articulate in writing or word, what their engagement with the text has done to them, where they now stand in relation to it, what new perspectives it has given and what new questions have arisen. In other words, they try to describe in their journals, what their new horizon is, after engaging with the text.

Elsewhere, I have written what I think the function of working in this way is (Rawson, 2020). It is not to gather knowledge, but to develop dispositions. This process is also strongly supported by using contemplative methods with key ideas in the Foundations. I have described this process elsewhere too (Rawson, 2018)

Engaging with a complex text such as Steiner's First Teachers' Course, also known as *Foundations of Human Experience* and earlier *The Study of Man* (Steiner, 2020) requires this level of engagement if it is not simply to involve the acquisition of concepts. This kind of hermeneutic process enables the reader to enter into a relationship with both author and text. We want to open to the person or text and yet we want to use our experience to understand and at the same time to be reflexive about the assumptions and expectations we and others have. Relationships mean that our encounters affect both of us. One can be a casual reader of Steiner, or rather a recipient of received views about Steiner, without being changed by the experience. One can pick up ideas and add them to one's 'collection'.

There is no substitute for studying the Foundations lectures if one wants to really understand Waldorf education because all the various familiar practices, such having class teachers, the main lesson, working with living concepts, the rhythms of learning are the practical consequences of how the body, soul and spirit interact. In the full-time course I teach on, teacher students spend a week on each lecture and they frequently say this is not enough. The notes below are intended to act as guidance to the core ideas in the lectures. In the course of time, I hope each teacher will be able to work through the lectures. In a part-time course this is not possible, so having an orientation is first step. Working on the full lectures, especially in small study groups, or at teachers' conferences can be a genuine source of inspiration over the coming years of practice.

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