

Types of discourses about Anthroposophy in relation to Waldorf education

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Abstract

This paper outlines various types of discourses of Anthroposophy from the perspective of Waldorf education, offering a commentary on each one. The aim of the paper is to help provide a framework for scholars, students of Waldorf education, teachers and anyone who wishes to make informed judgements about the possible relationships between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy. It makes a basic distinction between an individual's relationship to Anthroposophy, which can be based on belief, conviction, or experience and which they are totally free to have, and the position of an institution like a school or university to the theory underpinning Waldorf education. The main problem that Waldorf education has in being taken seriously by the academy and the public is the association with esoteric and apparently unscientific aspects of Anthroposophy. Gaining acceptance for Anthroposophy as a legitimate science of the spirit is worth striving for but Waldorf education cannot wait that long. The discourses described include the charismatic nature of the anthroposophical movement, whether it is a religion or ideology, whether everything published in Steiner's name is Anthroposophy, Anthroposophy as a 'theory of everything' or grand narrative, Anthroposophy as an esoteric schooling and path of meditation and finally as a science of the spiritual. In the final section the paper addresses the possible role of Anthroposophy in teacher education and as a basis for Waldorf education.

Introduction

In order to answer the question about the relationship of Waldorf education to Anthroposophy, we need first to clarify; "what do we mean by Anthroposophy?". There are a number of possible answers to this question. Each of these answers makes assumptions, some of which may be taken-for-granted, some are based on personal conviction, some draw on particular experiences, some are supported by various authorities, but they always represent a particular perspective from a certain standpoint. We can call these various positions, *discourses on Anthroposophy*. All the discourses are valid for those who hold that position, yet none can be said to be the definitive 'right answers' to the question, though some of these discourses take the position that they know what the 'right answer' is. Each of the discourses can be positioned along a spectrum from loyal believer to total skeptic, and along a spectrum from 'insider' to 'outsider', whereby the position of insider refers to someone who is, or has been, an active practitioner of Waldorf education. Obviously, the point at which one identifies as insider is subjective and personal, but I would include novices within the community of Waldorf practitioners. The point is, it is an important reflective step to position oneself, for example, as a tentative but open beginner, or as a skeptical beginner (but a beginner none the less, since no one has coerced you to join the community!).

The purpose of describing these various discourses is primarily to offer scholars, university students, teachers and anyone wishing to make qualified judgements about this question, a benign hermeneutic reading of Waldorf education and a heuristic framework to help to address the issues involved, in what is a complex, fluid and contested situation. The article is written from the perspective of Waldorf education and by a fully committed Waldorf insider, though a critically thinking one. I believe I am able to articulate *both* the letter and the spirit of Waldorf education (see

Eugene Schwartz's 2024, criticism of me). This heuristic is a model that offers perspectives rather than categories in a taxonomy. Against a continuing background of medial and academic criticism of Waldorf education and a crisis within Waldorf teacher education (why are there so few students and are full-time programmes a thing of the past?), there is urgent need for clarity in this question.

Some of the criticisms formulated by Klaus Prange (1985) in his infamous book 'Erziehung zur Anthroposophie' (*Education Towards Anthroposophy*- a play on Carlgren's well-known book *Education Towards Freedom*) are still valid today from a certain point of view. But the same applies to the arguments put forward by Johannes Kiersch in the *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (1986) in response to Prange, to which Prange responded by repeating his core criticism that Steiner's insights cannot be scientifically verified. In a 'last word' to Prange, Kiersch wrote,

Contrary to Prange's assumption, I am not at all of the opinion that Steiner's anthroposophy as a process of generating knowledge and as a teaching system is not sufficiently secured in theory. I assert this – in the expectation of being criticised for it by some of my anthroposophical friends – explicitly *only* for Steiner's pedagogy. This, admittedly, requires a more precise anthropological and educational-theoretical justification in many details (Kiersch, 1986, p.555, author trans.).

This is precisely the point I would like to address. My argument is that it is not the task of Waldorf education to justify the scientific validity of anthroposophy as a whole, but to create a scientific basis for Waldorf practice based on Steiner's spiritual pedagogical anthropology.

It seems to me that both the 'purists' (Oberman, 2008) or loyalists among Waldorf interpreters and the academic critics have been too literal in their assessment of Steiner's radical ideas about humanity and its potential. His followers were often concerned with accepting the whole and explaining details, and thus, with preserving the whole without critically questioning the parts. Their desire to see the whole *as a whole* sometimes leads to the fear that if one removes a 'brick' from the wall, the whole building could collapse. Either everything is true, or the whole is at risk. This explains the selective use of quotations – 'Dr Steiner once said...' – to justify any interpretation. Every single one of Steiner's statements must reflect the truth of the whole. The gesture of such loyalists is to explain *away* anomalies or ideas that irritate contemporary readers – such as Steiner's reference to race (as we shall see below). This is called an apologetic approach, which doesn't mean apologising for things Steiner said, but trying to defend his position by interpreting it exclusively in a positive way.

Many non-Anthroposophists, especially critics and opponents of Steiner, also tend to focus on the details. Because they do not accept the whole, which they see as esoteric and conducive to an irrational world view, they pick out the details, look for inconsistencies and similarities to other thinkers - and in doing so, lose sight of the whole by destroying the parts. Some critics are capable of making distinctions that most anthroposophists are unwilling to make. The German educationalist Heiner Ullrich specialises in research into Steiner and Waldorf education. He has consistently described the education as excellent, but has denounced its anthroposophical foundations. Israel Koren, an Israeli scientist, has written a comprehensive critical work on Steiner's relationship to Judaism, but describes Steiner's approach and Waldorf education as extremely important. Anthroposophists, on the other hand, are generally unable to identify any parts of Steiner's work as outdated, inaccurate, inappropriate or even wrong without calling the whole thing into question.

To summarise, it can be said that the experts (i.e. those who study Steiner intensively and in detail) can no longer see the forest for the trees, or cannot see the trees because they feel obliged to preserve the whole forest. Lay people (i.e. those who are not familiar with Steiner's work in general) tend to see what they are looking for, or to pick and choose according to their own preconceptions.

Steiner's work is difficult and challenging, and the vagaries of translation into other languages and the fact that his context is often difficult to reconstruct, do not exactly make it any easier. There are those who have spent years studying Steiner's works and have 'internalised' his way of thinking. However, many people working in Waldorf education have had neither the time nor the opportunity to do this and have to rely on 'experts' and secondary literature. This increases the tendency to project their own views, desires and hopes onto what they understand. People like this tend not to focus on details because they are unfamiliar with them, and instead take a less focused, more general view, which is usually uncritical because they have chosen to follow a Waldorf path.

Between the widespread 'secularisation' of Waldorf education, which means a de facto distancing from its esoteric roots, and the deeply felt personal commitment of anthroposophical 'experts', there are a multitude of paths that can be followed. The Steiner experts on both sides of the divide – the purists, adherents and believers on the one hand, the sceptics and critics on the other – do not want to acknowledge the fertility and potential of these middle ways. This article is recommending a renewed Waldorf education based on the anthroposophical aspects referred to by Johannes Kiersch in the quote above.

This article part of a wider attempt to revision and reposition Waldorf education within contemporary educational discourse, undertaken by critical 'insiders', who like me, want Waldorf education to thrive and grow, but see as inadequately fulfilling its aim to make a significant contribution to children and young people across all cultures and social classes. I personally believe that Waldorf education is undergoing something of a crisis of identity, and this is preventing real progress in adapting the education to a rapidly changing world. It is part of this crisis that not all Waldorf practitioners recognize this as a problem. Conservative and traditionalist individuals and institutions do not see the need for revisioning, believing that the current, original vision, just needs to be pursued more intensively, though even they have little answer to central problem Waldorf teacher education; how to do it effectively and how to attract more, qualified young people to the profession. In short, declining quality and increasing public criticism demand a reformation rather than a counter-reformation. This paper is part of wider thesis that makes the case that Waldorf education needs to take a step out its niche and start inhabiting a wider educational habitat. As Frank Steinwachs has suggested, "it [is] about positioning Waldorf education as an independent pedagogical movement that has to constantly reinvent, reform and reposition itself in its current contemporaneity, since today's perspective ...differs from the pedagogical reality of 1919" (Steinwachs, 2014, p. 116). In order to reposition itself within the educational landscape, Waldorf education has to realign itself in relation to the wider educational discourse and therefore it has to recalibrate its relationship to Anthroposophy and how this relationship is perceived within the Waldorf movement and also outside.

As Schieren has pointed out, "Waldorf education is viewed critically by educational science, whereby the main criticism is not directed at Waldorf education itself, but at the Anthroposophy behind it" (2015, p. 128). In the German-speaking academic world, the general tenor can be summarized in Heiner Ullrich's often quoted phrase: "Strange anachronism or forward-looking

model...Impressive practice and dubious theory" (Ullrich, 2012, p.220). Although this appears to be mainly true of German educational science, given the historically central position of the German-speaking Waldorf movement, it would be important to try to bring about a revision of this rejection.

There are a number of reasons why this alignment may be necessary (see *The case for independent teachers within private and public Waldorf education*), but they essentially have to do with the ability of Waldorf education to have a bigger impact as an alternative to mainstream education and internally, to enable the educational culture to renew itself and adapt to ongoing social, cultural, economic and climatic changes in ways that do justice to the changing developmental tasks of the pupils, whilst maintaining its core principles. In order to do this, it is necessary to review the relationship of Waldorf education to Anthroposophy. This is by no means an easy task, given that the first Waldorf School was founded by Rudolf Steiner and was intended to "be a practical proof of the penetrating power of the anthroposophical world orientation" (Steiner 2019, p.31 MR trans.), as Steiner put it in his opening address to the future teachers.

As Gilad Goldshmidt concludes his discussion of the relationship between Waldorf education and anthroposophy, by pointing out that the accusation that Waldorf is based on a "mystical or faith-based worldview is irrelevant" (2023, online) because every educational approach arises from some worldview, "which in turn relies mainly on the forces of feeling and faith, not on scientific research" (Ibid.). This applies to secular state schools as much as faith schools. The relevant question, Goldshmidt suggests is "the degree to which educators are aware of their worldview and how they work with it in educational and methodological processes." (Ibid). That I suggest is the salient questions.

The question of realigning the relationship between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy touches many people personally who identify biographically with Anthroposophy in their biography. This makes the question both emotive and threatening. A recent small-scale unpublished survey in which Waldorf teachers were asked to describe what Anthroposophy meant for them, showed that understandings of what they mean by Anthroposophy are quite individual, which means that the question of the relationship between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy is often interpreted in personal rather than institutional terms. And indeed, this is the key point of the proposal I am making. I am seeking to distinguish between three standpoints,

1. a person's personal relationship to Anthroposophy, which they are of course entirely free to have,
2. the official position an institution like a school or teacher education programme has when explaining the foundation of its educational approach,
3. the status of Anthroposophy and its representative organizations such as the General Anthroposophical Society and its High School for Spiritual Science, and the Pedagogical Section.

There are undoubtedly those who will not recognize or acknowledge this distinction and for many people who have devoted a lifetime to working in Waldorf education and have contributed to its growth and development, these three are identical. The standpoint I am representing is the second one. This paradigm shift is necessary, I believe, if Waldorf education is to thrive and make a difference for many more children and young people than it is currently able to do.

This study is the result of a symposium at the National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, in May 2024, a conference of the Rudolf Steiner University College, Oslo, in April 2024 at the Steinerskolen Vestfold and summer course for teachers at Rudolf Steiner College Canada, in Toronto in July 2024.

In these events, lectures, texts (e.g. the translation into Mandarin of a longer article (Rawson, 2023) and my recent book, 2021) and short presentations formed the basis of the discussions. In Taiwan, the students on the National TsingHua University Master's programme gave feedback on this article for a day and a half, and at the symposium, speakers from the university and the Waldorf school movement gave presentations on it. This unusual form of discourse was extremely fruitful. On the one hand, this difficult topic could be addressed in an appropriate setting, and on the other, the feedback in both countries came from young and new Waldorf teachers, but also from very experienced people, some of whom are Waldorf school founders and thus belong to the main pillars of the Waldorf movement in Norway and Taiwan. Both countries have established Waldorf school movements as well as solid social and political recognition and financial support.

In the conclusion of their recently published book on the international reception of Waldorf education, Hoffmann & Buck (2024), the authors note that while the distance between Waldorf and Anthroposophy has increased over the generations since the 1920s and across a wider variety of teachers, most practitioners continue to identify with Steiner and Anthroposophy, albeit in an increasingly informal way. They note that this distancing is particularly evident in countries (such as Finland and the Netherlands) where Waldorf education is more integrated into mainstream education. In many other countries, Waldorf education is still seen by parents and professionals as an alternative to the state school system. As these authors summarize in their book, there is considerable variation from country to country in the extent to which Waldorf teachers (and parents) orientate themselves towards Anthroposophy, often related to the provision and nature of Waldorf teacher training. Hoffmann and Buck have opened a door to a new field of study within 'Waldorf Studies' (or research in Steiner education), namely cross-cultural comparative pedagogy. The field of comparative pedagogy offers more than adequate models from this (Alexander, 2001, 2009, Ermenc, 2015, Manzon, 2018). As Alexander notes, the central question is "differentiating the universal in pedagogy from the culturally specific" (2009, 20), which is exactly the question for Waldorf education.

With reference to educational policy and curriculum, Ball and Bowe (1992) offer the analytical distinction between intended policy, actual policy and policy-in-use. Applied to the question of Waldorf education and its relationship to Anthroposophy we could say that the intended relationship, as determined by international bodies such as the Hague Circle (International Conference), Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum, and transnational and national bodies such as the European Council of Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) or the Association of Waldorf Schools in North America (AWSNA), or national federations, has until recently been 'purist'. Oberman (2008) distinguishes between three types of Waldorf approaches: purist, accommodationist/adaptive (a mixture of Waldorf tradition and new terminology) and evolutionist, where schools adapt to local conditions and changing contexts. The purist approach would no doubt see Waldorf education as the 'child' of Anthroposophy, and even though the 'child' has long since outgrown the influence of the parent and the relationship – as intended – is filial. The actual relationship, following Ball and Bowe's analytic tool, is defined by texts that outline the relationship (e.g. criteria for what makes a school Waldorf, or what defines membership of an association) yet also what is not written down and open to local interpretation. The equivalent to policy-in-use are the actual practices and discourses that emerge in practice, among practitioners, which are very much shaped by context and the explicit and implicit positions taken by actors (i.e. teachers). We currently have no research on this. As Boland and Rawson (2023) have argued, the actual dissemination of Waldorf education has been rhizomic, that is, not through the reproduction of a standardized model following the origin Stuttgart model, but through hybridization, whilst most practitioners believe it is arboreal, because they believe they are recreating the true-original model. The reality is, we simply don't know, because of the absence of research.

The basic dilemma

Christian Rittelmeyer (2023) is a well-known German educational scholar, who is not an anthroposophist but has written a book exploring ways of engaging with Steiner and Anthroposophy, because he thinks Steiner has important ideas to contribute to our times, in which he suggests a number of ways of doing this, which he refers to as discourses, which is why I have adopted his use of this term. His position could be described as *benign outsider*. Over 30 years ago he suggested that the problem of dealing with the apparently unscientific nature of the anthroposophical basis of Waldorf education could be solved by approaching Steiner's ideas not as facts but heuristically, the example he explores is the temperaments (Rittelmeyer, 1990, 2011). The scientific discourse itself asks questions as to what we mean by science and which scientific discourses are appropriate to either studying Anthroposophy or practicing it as a science. Building on this approach, I have suggested that we should work with Steiner texts using hermeneutic methods (Rawson, 2021a). Both of these suggestions, if practiced would counter those who simply denounce Anthroposophy as unscientific.

Another important discourse says that Anthroposophy cannot be understood by science because its methods are inadequate. This discourse interprets history, for example, within the anthroposophical frame or *mythos*. Following Ricoeur, 1991 (and Aristotle's *Poetics*, 2008), *mythos* is a complex, constituting core of a narrative that gives meaning to the events and characters in the story). Within this discourse history is read through the lens of Steiner's anthroposophical account, linking only to sources from outside when they align with and affirm elements in this discourse. An example is the use of Steiner's cultural epochs as a framework for understanding cultural history and the evolution of consciousness. Other sources, which may show that Steiner's accounts of Atlantis, Ancient India and Persia, for example, do not align with current knowledge, or our current picture of prehistory includes many more cultures than Steiner took into account, are marginalized. If the dates Steiner gave are not supported by recent research, this fact is glossed over (see Zech, 2020). This discourse, however, is a source of inspiration and meaning to individuals, in ways the scientific accounts are not and can't be. If the history of China lies outside Steiner's account of the cultural epochs, then it is to highlight the 'necessity' of Steiner's narrative. China has/had another mission, as Benjamin Cherry (2014) argues, that of guarding wisdom until the time was right to reveal it as the healing forces in the conflict between China today and the West. Furthermore, Cherry argues, each culture, and above all China has its own doorways to Anthroposophy, which exists in its own right as the esoteric truth, an idea akin to 19th Century transcendentalist metaphysical universalism, Western theosophy, modern Sufism and Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy. As we shall see below, we also have echoes of the polarity between natural science and the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*).

One cannot argue against such interpretations because they are based on belief, personal conviction and the power that individuals draw from their relationship to Anthroposophy as a universal narrative that weaves a path between religion and myth. Thus, we appear to have an incommensurability of positions, treating Anthroposophy as a science or as an imaginative source of knowledge.

30 years ago, I tried to build a bridge between the science of human prehistory and Steiner's account. After ten years of comparing Steiner's multiple and unsystematic references, and drawing on literature by Wolfgang Schad, Andreas Suchantke and others, I concluded that I was not able to distinguish between the physical and spiritual dimensions in his accounts. I therefore took a very broad view based on Steiner's narrative of a progressive incarnation of the human spirit through the archetypal stages of upright walking, speech and thinking and the evolution of consciousness from

collective to individual. I sought and found a conceptual thread running through the gesture of uprightness in earlier anatomical forms, in bipedal walking, tool production, the importance of a prolonged childhood and youth and the emergence of symbolic behaviour. I formulated the imaginative notion of a spiritual selection that operated parallel to natural selection, in that forms evolved that progressively enabled the human spirit to come to every more effective expression, eventually enabling an emergent cultural life, which then took over as the motor of evolution. Since human beings were capable of learning and passing on knowledge from generation to generation by virtue of their symbolic capacities of language and art, human bootstrapping was possible. Central to this whole process were and are the life phases of childhood and youth (with the embryonic phase behind also vital). I tried hard to avoid teleologies and the notion that human evolution was guided at each stage by higher beings, mainly because it is too easy to introduce them as a *deus ex machina* in history and parsimonious accounts seemed to me to be more than adequate.

After publishing the book, *The Spirit in Human Evolution* (Rawson, 2003), which in effect took the story of human evolution up to the end of the last ice age, I followed this up with an account of the transition from hunter-gatherer to the earliest settled farming communities (Rawson, 2013). I continue to monitor the recent discoveries and keep an interest in the evolving theoretical accounts. Several things emerge from this process. Things are always more complex and more messy than neat phases and stages suggest. Accurate dating always tends to push human history back in time. The science is correspondingly multi-faceted and anything but reductionist. If anything, contemporary science seems to generate complexity that is worthy of our wonder and admiration. In other words, the accounts of contemporary processual archaeology, anthropology, feminist and queer prehistory are far from simplistic, causal accounts, but reveal how interrelated, correlated and richly complex life is. The medial world with its thirst for sensation and its fundamental distrust of science also generates the growth of pseudo-scientific accounts (such as Graham Hancock's Netflix series on mysterious lost civilizations). It is possible that one day archaeologists locate Atlantis and show that theosophical imaginations of how our "Atlantean Forefathers" lived, will enable people like Benjamin Cherry to claim that Steiner was right. Far more fruitful from my perspective is adding insights derived from Steiner's Anthroposophy as perspectives on new knowledge, to add the spiritual dimension. But this requires that we go beyond cherry-picking Steiner's ideas and looking for correlations. It requires scholars to generate knowledge using anthroposophical methods and ideas heuristically to contribute to the growth of knowledge. I believe Steiner was edging towards this position in his 1917 book *Riddles of the Soul (The Case for Anthroposophy)*, Steiner/Barfield, 2010) and above all once anthroposophy started by applied in fields of practice outside the Anthroposophical movement.

A continuum of positionality

I outline a range of discourses about Anthroposophy using a continuum of positions, similar to Herr & Anderson's (2015) spectrum of researcher positionality: this ranges from the position of benign insider to skeptical outsiders in terms of their positionality towards Anthroposophy. We therefore have a triangular construct in which the basis AB is the continuum of perspectives on Anthroposophy from the benevolent position of an insider A, given the warm colour red, to skeptical outsider position B, given the cooler colour blue. Waldorf education is C. The length of AC or BC signifies the proximity or distance of Waldorf education to the various positions on the insider-outsider continuum of Anthroposophy.

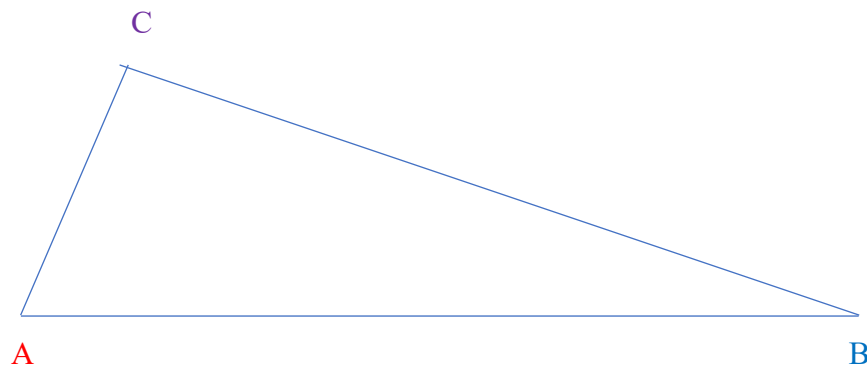


Figure 1 Triangle of positionality in which AB is the spectrum of positions from benign to skeptical and C is Waldorf education.

If a Waldorf researcher sees Waldorf education as identical to Anthroposophy and identifies personally with this position, the triangle collapses to a single point at **A**. Looked at from the outside, an observer could accept this complete identification of Waldorf education with Anthroposophy, but could also adopt a skeptical perspective on both, which would lengthen the line AB. In the figure above, Waldorf education is seen as separate from Anthroposophy, but close to it and the relationship is perceived as positive. The purpose of this model is to enable scholars to declare their own positionality, when writing about Waldorf education in relation to Anthroposophy. As Crotty (1998) points out, the credibility of research depends on our account of the research process and this includes our position within this, which is based on our unique lived experiences, which make critical reflexivity essential in science today. Reflexivity means being aware of the structures that structure the way we think, feel and act (Archer, 2010).

The Anthroposophical Movement as charisma

The Greek and Hebrew etymology of charisma points to a spiritual power of leadership conferred by divine grace, and the term is used in this sense, for example, in the Pentecostal movement of the 19th and 20th centuries and in contemporary Charismatic Christianity, which is based on an assumption of direct divine inspiration (as opposed to through sacraments or mediated by a priest). Max Weber (1922/1947) borrowed the term charisma from religious studies to describe a form of leadership based on a charismatic person who attracts other charismatic people who found a movement after the leader's demise. The emphasis in Weber's usage is on the followers who attribute the powers of charisma to the leader rather than the leader claiming any special status. With each successive generation, the charisma weakens, and the founder's teachings become canonized and eventually begin to petrify and fossilize. Bruce Uhrmacher (1995) has used Max Weber's concept of charisma to explain the development of the Waldorf movement, and Helmut Zander (2008, p. 160) has done the same to explain the development of the anthroposophical movement, and indeed this is a useful heuristic for understanding the charismatic effect of Steiner and his works on his followers. The difference, however, is that Uhrmacher uses the metaphor analytically and without value judgement, whereas Zander uses it to support his accusation that Steiner used his charisma to manipulate people (see Uhlendorf, 2011, p. 18). We can show this in graphic form as follows.

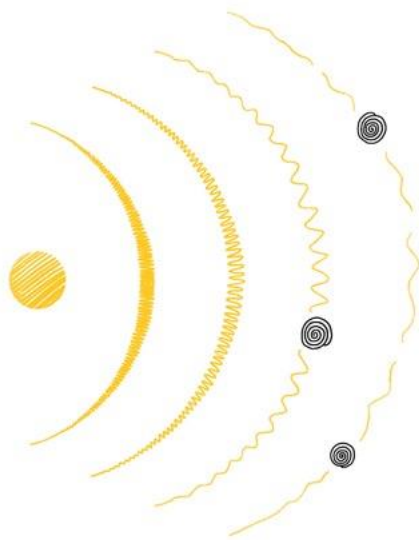


Illustration 1 This graph illustrates the decline of the charismatic impact of Steiner and his immediate successors and the subsequent 'fossilization' of anthroposophical ideas.

Commentary

The description of Anthroposophy as a charismatic movement is a sociological perspective that reflects certain aspects of Anthroposophy as social movement, though applied to the Anthroposophical movement, it clearly implies heightened spiritual powers. More recently the notion of charismatic personalities has acquired a certain inflated and generalized meaning applied to assumed personal qualities that endow charismatic people with celebrity, that leads people to follow their example like social media influences. This cluster of associations leads to negative associations. For anthroposophists, it is a matter of determining for themselves what consequences arise from this view. Since Weber's concept of charisma refers to the leadership and direction of a movement, one could conclude that self-leadership and self-awareness, also in the sense of Steiner's freedom philosophy, is the basis of action and not the authority of Steiner, his works, the Anthroposophical Society, the Goetheanum with its Sections and its Executive Council. Steiner freedom philosophy is both an epistemology and an ethic because it advises action on the basis of self-generated knowledge. This radically decentralized, rhizomatic structure, in which all points are equally interlinked, would be a kind of anti-charisma, one could also say, an anarchist attitude. Steiner himself has anarchist traits (Skagen, 2020) and his philosophy of individualism is anti-charismatic.

Johannes Kiersch has pointed out the dangers of the anthroposophical movement becoming a "self-made creed", with the following misguided beliefs that Anthroposophy "proclaims universally valid truth...does not need to develop...the teachings of Anthroposophy are scientific facts...anthroposophists must not be otherwise ideologically bound...the School of Spiritual Science is a sacred secret....and hierarchically ordered" (2018, p. 118). As Kiersch also points out, Steiner was well aware of these risks and spoke out against them, particularly around the time he re-founded the Anthroposophical Society.

Anthroposophy as a religion or a 'Weltanschauung'

The religious overtones of the term charisma link us to the question whether Anthroposophy can be considered a religion and whether this is the same as a *Weltanschauung*- or world view. As Zander notes, around 1900 the terms worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and religion were synonymous, which prompted him to regard Anthroposophy as a religion, which he justifies with the statement, "To me,

too, the categorization under religion seems fundamentally legitimate, insofar as Steiner answers the classical questions of the theological encyclopedia - the constitution of the world, the position of man, his relationship to God/the divine - in the implementation of his system. The fact that he developed a Christology or religious school celebrations within this system is a consequence of this approach" (Zander, 2001, p. 293). Indeed, some anthroposophists do relate to Anthroposophy as if it were a religion with elements of worship. These include devotional images of Steiner and his wooden sculpture, known as the Representative of Humanity, which widely understood as an image of the Resurrected Christ, displayed in prominent placed in institutions. Much of the secondary literature had a hagiographic tone and there have even been elements of pilgrimage (to the Goetheanum). Steiner's Christology, including texts such as the Fifth Gospel also give the impression that Anthroposophy is religious.

Steiner insisted that the Waldorf School should not be seen as a "worldview school" (*Weltanschauungsschule*). He emphasized this in his speech at the introductory course for teachers at the new Waldorf school,

We do not want to establish a worldview school here at the Waldorf School. The Waldorf School should not be a worldview school in which the children are crammed full of anthroposophical dogmas. We do not want to teach anthroposophical dogmatics, Anthroposophy is not a subject matter, but we strive for the practical application of Anthroposophy. We want to translate what can be gained in the anthroposophical field into real teaching practice (Steiner, 20th August 1919, 2019, p.32. MR trans.).

This passage contains several important statements that can be interpreted in different ways (which are discussed at length in my article *Weltanschauungsschule or Method School*). It unequivocally emphasizes that no anthroposophical ideas should be taught in the school. But what this includes and excludes is ambivalent and has been interpreted very generously over the years. An example of this is the fact that Steiner's cultural epochs are part of the history curriculum, although this presentation is not supported by current archaeology, prehistory or history (Zech, 2020). It is worth recalling that the well-known Van Baarda Commission (2009) in the Netherlands, which investigated whether Steiner's texts reveal him as racist, was set up because a parent reported that her child had copied statements about race based on Steiner from the blackboard into her main lesson booklet. Not long ago, teachers were still teaching about Atlantis.

More difficult to identify and address are the accusations that Waldorf education has a hidden curriculum (Steinwachs, 2024) to predispose students to an anthroposophical perspective as some critics have suggested. German scholars such as Prange (2000, 2005), Skiera (2009) and Zander (2000, 2008, 2019) have argued that Anthroposophy has a hidden ideological curriculum. Hidden also means that it remains hidden from the teachers themselves, in the sense that they have an unconscious disposition. Recent research in North America (Knight, 2022, Wilson, 2022) and Germany (Idel, 2014) suggests that Waldorf notions of child development and the assumption of universality as well assumptions actually betray a culturally specific and romantic notion of childhood. Also, Largo's (2012) work on child development has substantially undermined typical Waldorf views of child development being tagged to a fine-grained model of phases and annual developmental changes. Here we have to do with interpretations of what are assumed to be anthroposophical ideas within Waldorf education, that may be a blend of cultural readings of Waldorf ideas and practices and implications of what Steiner actually said. In effect there is a sub-discourse anthroposophical ideas that are not explicit, or even tacit, in Steiner's works.

Commentary

It is difficult on the face of it to understand today why Steiner insisted that the Waldorf School should not be a worldview school when Anthroposophy clearly is a worldview. Given that the word *Weltanschauung*, then as now, is closely associated with religion and cults, this was an element he clearly hoped to avoid in public perception. When Steiner said 1923 that “it is a slander when it is said that Anthroposophy should be taught in Waldorf schools” (Steiner, GA 304a p.141, The Hague, 19 November 1923, MR trans.), we get a sense that the accusation might have serious consequences. Steiner was clearly trying to avoid the school being labelled anthroposophical. The teaching was to be inspired by an anthroposophical understanding of the developing human being, but not be identifiable as anthroposophical.

Once the application of Steiner’s ideas moved beyond the internal community of the Anthroposophical Society and started being applied in professional field such as education, later medicine, farming, banking and so on, then it changed its status because the people benefitting from it were not supposed to be exclusively anthroposophists, but people with no interest in Anthroposophy. People who buy Demeter products in the supermarket do so not because they are interested in Anthroposophy but because they value the product. What the farmer, gardener or vintner believes in, is their affair.

Where this gets problematical is when it comes to religion in school. As Carlo Willmann explains,

Rudolf Steiner took the religious dimension of human life very seriously in his pedagogical considerations. He was convinced that religion and religiosity are a necessary part of the human being and must therefore be developed in the child so that it can later be shaped in freedom and on its own responsibility. Like science and art, religion should also be cultivated in Waldorf education... Steiner's concept of a general religious education is not primarily concerned with a specific religion and its statements of belief - these are of secondary importance to him - but with developing a differentiated capacity for feeling and stimulating and strengthening religious feelings and impulses of the will. The children should experience what religion is all about in the best sense of the word: being able to trust and be amazed; learning to feel awe, humility and universal gratitude; being able to experience loving devotion to the world, learning to take responsibility, experiencing man [sic] as the image of God. These are elements that every religion claims for itself. This is an important aspect because it does not grant any religion dominance.

The context determines which religious festivals, content and knowledge, aesthetic forms or ritual elements are included in this education or not. Even though Waldorf education is deeply rooted in the Christian world of ideas, it is open to all religions and cultures because it appeals to the living religious in all people. (Willmann, 2016).

In many ways what is being described here align with what many authors today refer to as spirituality in childhood and youth (Wright, 2000, Huss, 2014, Miller, 2015, Bellous, 2019) and it might be less misleading if the Waldorf discourse referred to cultivating spirituality, rather than religion and lessened its emphasis on the Christian aspects. Activities such as the Childrens’ Service and Youth Service in which teachers act as lay priests in front of a Christian altar (von Kügelgen, 2022)

Making a distinction between the personal beliefs of individuals and the foundations of an institutional education approach, and referring to spirituality, might go some way to deflating the accusations that Anthroposophy is a belief system underpinning Waldorf education.

Historians of science, such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend have made it clear that there is no science without some kind of world view, which cannot be bracketed out but must be acknowledged. Majorek (2002) notes that Steiner's method of generating knowledge of non-sense-perceptible phenomena could be seen as a kind of Copernican paradigm change, in that it shows that by enhancing human faculties of perception and thinking, an objective knowledge of this realm can be achieved. Thus, those German scholars, who claim that the theory behind Waldorf education cannot be taken seriously, obviously haven't grasped that Anthroposophy is a legitimate worldview, a valid symbolic system (Cassirer, 1962) underpinned by a non-representational philosophy (Dahlin, 2013). It may belong to different paradigm, but epistemological plurality is not only acceptable, but called for today. Furthermore, their stance is disingenuous, since there can be no practice without an underlying theory, as Paulo Friere (1972) has argued.

The problem is that so few scholars have sought to represent an anthroposophical research approach within a scientific framework, which would include a critical reflection of knowledge assumptions and thus the paradigm shift is potential and as such, relatively easy to dismiss. Trying to establish credibility for an anthroposophical approach would be a major undertaking, best achieved by a number of overlapping pieces of research. Establishing an academic framework for Waldorf education would be a much more manageable task.

Anthroposophy as identical to Steiner's complete published works

Steiner complete works (referred to in German as the GA- Gesamtausgabe) is now more than 400 volumes. It is administered by a remarkably professional archive that is responsible for authenticating and categorizing all Steiner's published and unpublished works (letters, notebooks, sketches, artefacts etc.). The GA discourse stands for the idea that Anthroposophy is identical to all these works and material, because they derive from Steiner. One could take a narrower view and say Anthroposophy covers only the works that he named as such, and would preclude his theosophical writing, journalism, early philosophical works and so on. In other words, one could differentiate Steiner's works into categories. Then it would be possible to say, Waldorf education builds on these categories and has no direct connection to others. This is done with other authors in various fields and many authors have what are considered their major works that are focused on. This given the scale and complexity of Steiner's overall oeuvre, this is a task for Steiner scholars, rather than Waldorf teachers. Once one moves away from the notion that everything Steiner did was equally important, then it becomes necessary to sort and make choices. To take a somewhat extreme example, some people believe everything in the Bible, whilst others acknowledge that the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are complex compilations of texts of various origins and varying translation, and this is a specialist field of scholarship.

Commentary

The habit of using the collected works as an encyclopedia, or as a source of suitable quotations to embellish 'sermons', without contextualizing the words chosen, is not a serious way of working. In 400 volumes it is possible to find all kinds of details that don't necessarily fit into a coherent and reliable bigger picture. Scholars such as Zander can do the same thing to denounce Steiner- it works both ways. It is very hard for anyone to thoroughly study Steiner's complete works, even today with the possibilities of using digital search engines. This is one of the reasons that there are few, if any really definitive studies of Steiner's unbelievable range of work. If we assume that Steiner was a

multi-talented polymath, he was nevertheless unlikely to have been entirely consistent, given that he rarely had time to go back over and correct texts that were published, often relying on others, notably his second wife Marie Steiner, whose own interpretations and priorities no doubt played a role. As Johannes Kiersch (2010) has noted, there were often no words in the German language for the experiences he had and he made use of a wide range of sources for his terminology, including inventing words, which the German language facilitates. David Wood (2013) cites Steiner as saying that he borrowed the method of modifying the ‘letter in order to promote the spirit’ from Fichte, “For Steiner, all his terms are interrelated and chosen with care, and one must not dogmatically remain at the single word. Instead, the student has to actively bring all the meanings of the different terms together in order to form a more comprehensive concept” (Wood, 2013, p.183). Mostly Steiner used existing terminology, though giving the words new meanings.

Students writing Master or PhD theses on Waldorf education and who wish to reference Steiner have to be critical about how they cite his texts. This means contextualizing the passages they cite, showing how this is interpreted within the current Waldorf discourse and how it relates to current practice. For example, instead of simply stating Steiner’s claim that reading children’s temperaments is important pedagogically, either Steiner’s account needs to be discussed in detail, showing exactly what he meant, how this perspective is supposed to be used, how this relates to other theories of temperaments, or indeed to other theories about interpreting children’s behaviour, or reference should be given to competent literature that does this. Then the writer needs to show how the ‘theory’ of temperaments is applied and what evidence there is, if any, about the usefulness of this approach. This is the same as would be done with any other theory of child development. If the student is working in other languages than German, they have to compare available translations.

The central problem of using Steiner’s collected works as an encyclopaedic reference work is that his various works, in the form of books, published articles (and those not published at time of writing), transcripts of lectures, notebooks, correspondence, sketches, models, paintings and sculptures, is that these works need to be interpreted and contextualized. Michael Zech has described Steiner’s works as a self-referential system that was constantly in a process of development, as a “differentiated whole, in which each individual utterance is a pointed fragment that always refers to the whole, thus pointing beyond itself” (2019, p.128). By drawing on Walter Benjamin’s notion of critical and dialectic understanding of texts as fragments, and on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Zech describes the process of interpreting Steiner’s works through reflection as a process that,

...changes the meaning of its originator, because he is no longer accorded the original or sole authority to interpret it. Rather, the work, understood as a fragment, stands both in the context to which it directly refers and in that of the world in which it is to be valid. By including the dimension of what has been said and not (yet) said, critique allows a work to experience its expansion from the background of its self-evaluation. In this respect, it does not make sense to ask what the authors meant by their work, but rather the only question that can be asked is how it is realised in the thinking recipient. However, this blurs the line between the work and its critical reception in a principally open poetic and autopoietic process (Zech, 2019, p. 130).

In other words, Steiner thoughts, as expressed in his texts, have a self-referential validity within their own context, but through the act of reflection and interpretation, the reader becomes co-author, and the meaning of the text is thus extended. As Ulrich Kaiser (2020) has

shown, Steiner's lectures - perhaps his most effective means of communication – had the effect of transforming his original audience by temporarily transporting them into another state of consciousness, as a great actor or musician on stage can. The hermeneutic method of reading Steiner's education lectures is described below. Let us hold fast, the recognition that Steiner's complete works are only the starting point of a process of inner transformation that each reader has to enact through reflective and reflexive activity, rather than a series of established facts. If the complete works comprise anthroposophy, then this refers to the transformative process of interpretation.

Finally, it would be necessary to discuss one's own positionality in relation to the idea of temperaments, relating what Steiner said to other authors and to showing the relevance of the ideas to the topic they are writing about, and they have show they are aware of their own positionality and initial horizon of assumptions, pre-knowledge and prejudices. This practice is to be recommended for anyone making use of Steiner texts to explain what they are doing.

Anthroposophy as grand narrative

The term metanarrative or grand narrative (*grands récits*) was coined by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) and refers to totalizing narratives that offer a comprehensive account of historical events, experiences, social and cultural phenomena that invoke a kind of universal truth or claim to be universally valid. In fact, it is typical of Enlightenment narratives that they are based on universalist ideals such as freedom, universal rights, universal laws, principles and truths, rationalism, notions of education and culture, and so on.

With the term *postmodern*, Lyotard wanted to consider the effect of modernity in the present and he expressed the disbelief and mistrust of metanarratives in his famous critique of modernity. In particular he wanted to say that post-Auschwitz, and following the work of Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, Enlightenment values can only be relativized. Following Auschwitz as a symbol of the ultimate consequences of totalizing world views and following the hard-won recognition of postcolonial perspectives (Varela & Dhawan, 2020), the high ideals of the 'Western' Enlightenment are not entirely invalidated, but they no longer have any claim to exclusivity or precedence. Whether in the fields of science, religion or art, Lyotard argued that knowledge and moral values are relative and it would fair to say, this few has become widely accepted, even at the level of public opinion. We live in an age of general skepticism towards all knowledge claims and, apart from fundamentalists, who are characterized by the fact that they have a fanatical commitment on one version of reality, people to avoid absolute explanations. One does not have to agree with Lyotard, and the criticism of his account by Benhabib (1984) and Hammer (1998) is justified, but the critical attitude towards modernity is justified. This is also the message of postcolonialism Plurality must be recognized. There are enough critiques of the concept of the postmodern that I do not want to go into them here, but merely point out with my use of the term meta-narrative that Anthroposophy can be seen as a *theory of everything*, in which everything is related to a central narrative.

Commentary

The point about postmodernism (and poststructuralism and postcolonialism) is to interrogate tacit, unconsidered assumptions and take multiple perspectives on the central ideas within any system. A post-Steiner stance does not mean that Steiner is *passé* or no longer relevant and we need to put Steiner behind us, far from it. The term 'post-Steiner', which I used in online talk on International Campus Waldorf series- and which inevitable drew vehement criticism and the sincere request not to use it- means looking at Steiner-in-the-present, looking at Anthroposophy from the perspective of the

present, from the perspective of 1925 + 100 years. At the same time, we must not regard Steiner's texts as ahistorical; they clearly belong in a historical context. As Jörg Ewertowski puts it:

Steiner's immediate background, however, is formed by the now historically outdated epistemological questions of Neo-Kantianism and the equally historically outdated natural science of Haeckel. It is therefore important for us to re-read Anthroposophy against the background of the questions that have characterized the academic humanities from Dilthey to the present day and continue to do so - in other words, to deal intensively with Steiner's content, but also to adopt different points of view from those taken by Steiner himself. It is impossible to repeat the same perspective. This is the phenomenon of the historicity of our existence (2010, p.20).

It already helps from an academic perspective if one positions oneself in relation to Anthroposophy as a grand narrative by acknowledging it as such. There have been other grand narratives. According to the Oxford Reference website

(<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095903493>, accessed 13.8.2024) the major grand narratives have been the Greek fatalism, Christian redemptionism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, democracy, Marxism, Darwinism, the notion of revolution, bourgeois progressivism and eurocentrism. We should not forget that 'grand narrative' is a metaphor.

Anthroposophy as School of Michael

Towards the end of his life, Steiner published the Anthroposophical Principles (*Anthroposophische Leitsätze. The path of knowledge of Anthroposophy. The Michael Mystery*, GA 26). In this work Steiner describes Anthroposophy as a path to the spiritual in the human being and from there to the spiritual in the universe. In the form of short aphoristic sections and essays, it summarizes many of the core themes of his entire anthroposophical work. Karl Unger (2007), a close collaborator of Steiner, writes that Steiner developed a completely new language for Anthroposophy in the last year of his life. Previously, he had often adapted his lectures to the interests and consciousness of his listeners in a particular place at a particular time. Now, according to Unger, in his last year Steiner was addressing the whole of humanity and at the same time tying Anthroposophy more closely than before to the Anthroposophical Society. In the guiding principles, said Unger, Steiner made it clearer than before that through the method of observation of Anthroposophy one can grasp the supersensible structures of the human being by experiencing the things of the world from within, from the soul, a reversal of sensory perception. The ideas of our sensory experiences are preserved in the spirit and placed in relation to other concepts, detached from their sensory context. In this way, we expand the boundaries of our knowledge by mentally connecting with reality.

Commentary

Steiner's 185 *Anthroposophical Guiding Principles* are a distillation of the whole of Anthroposophy and as they belong to the last part of his life, one could dispense with a large part of the complete edition and concentrate only on these aphoristic statements with their commentaries. Summarized in a small book, the guiding principles are the closest thing to a definitive anthroposophical teaching. The text form is suitable as a stimulus for contemplative meditation (Zajonc, 2010), as a topic of conversation, but also as a guide through the whole of Anthroposophy. Unger (2007) is also very helpful here, as he has found a clear epistemological approach to the Leading Thoughts.

Anthroposophy as an esoteric path of schooling and contemplative practice

Steiner offered a wealth of meditation exercises, contemplation exercises, mantras and verses for the development of consciousness, thinking, contemplation and meditation. Many verses summarize core ideas of Anthroposophy in poetic form, such as the Calendar of the Soul and the Mantras of the

Class Lessons. The arts of Eurythmy and Speech Formation are also pathways of schooling consciousness and experiencing reality through and beyond the senses. Steiner's descriptions of the spiritual dimension, including after the death of the physical body are also meant as inner preparation for spiritual experience through contemplation.

Commentary

As Russel Williams (Taylor, 2015) and many other meditation teachers recommend, the meditation you do is the most important one. Since Steiner explicitly gave certain meditations for teachers, there is no reason not to practice them voluntarily. Steiner always emphasized that meditation should be a free act, not a duty or an expedient activity. I will write more below about Steiner's approach of studying, meditating and remembering.

Arthur Zajonc (2009, 2016) and Otto Scharmer (2016) has shown in various ways how contemplative methods based on Steiner's approach can be practiced in scientific work and also in organizational development, without further commitment to Anthroposophy. Other authors have built on Steiner's work to develop exercises for the development of our perceptive capacities in relation to the natural world, sometimes referred to as Goethean observation (Bortoft, 1996, Holdrege, 2005, 2013), based as Holdrege says on exact, loving observation, philosophical thinking as a "compass within the world of ideas" and thirdly the capacity to bring observation and ideas together in a synthesis (Holdrege, 2018), which is another application of Steiner's theory of knowing.

In his book *Riddles of Philosophy*, Steiner positioned anthroposophy at the culmination of Western philosophy. This raises two interesting possibilities. Firstly, even though Steiner saw Eastern philosophies as unmodern, in fact actual contemporary studies of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism suggest close affinities with anthroposophy. Ken Wilber's (2001) integral studies approach foregrounds this aspect in ways that could be very fruitful for contemporary anthroposophy practices, as Jennifer Gidley (2016) has shown. Most European anthroposophists keep their distance from Wilber, though Jan Göschel (2012) is a noble exception.

Steiner's references to past philosophies has a significant lacuna, namely Chinese and Indian philosophy (as opposed to sacral texts). The Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang-Yangming (1472-1529), who represented the tradition of Mencius that unified knowledge with action, said, "to know and not to act, is not to know" (cited in Rowson, 2019, p.5). Wang also taught that objects do exist entirely separate from mind, because the mind gives meaning to the world, a position that is very close to Steiner's.

The second option is to recognize that within the non-anthroposophical philosophical, epistemological and education discourse today, there are multiple points of contact, overlap, affinities, alignments, especially if we get behind the often-opaque terminology (a problem anthroposophy also has). Space does not permit elaboration of this. It will have to suffice to direct attention to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (and his collaborator Felix Guattari) and their many followers. Feminism and queer theory have opened many eyes and doors 'other' ways of being and knowing, as has the voice of indigenous knowledge that is beginning to be heard. Critiques of positivist empiricism in research and knowledge generation has reached significant levels, as have the critiques of neoliberal education policies and the knowledge base it claims. As I mention below, spirituality has become a hot topic in education. There is ample scope for building bridges between science, spirituality and educational practice. There are positions to be taken that no longer need to fear being marginalized, if they are adequately contextualized in contemporary discourses.

Anthroposophy as science of the spirit

From the perspective of Waldorf education, there are three questions that concern us here, and none of them can be discussed in any detail (my aim here is merely to highlight what they are);

- How credible is Anthroposophy as a science of the spirit?
- How can scholars deal with Steiner's texts in a scientific way?
- How can anthroposophical methods be used as part of educational research?

A Science of the spirit

Steiner always wanted his approach to be understood as scientific and A.P. Shephard (1961) aptly titled his biography of Steiner, *Scientist of the Invisible*. His theory of knowledge is an attempt to create an epistemological basis for the generation of knowledge about the world, which is first and foremost a scientific gesture. His aim was to show that there are no theoretical limits to knowledge, as Kant and other important philosophers suggested. Steiner frequently cites the German physiologist and pioneer of the neurosciences, Emil du Bois-Reymond's statement that we can only push the boundaries of knowledge as far as we can make observations, beyond which *ignorabimus* (we will never know), though to be fair to du Bois-Reymond, he was referring to the nature of sensations and sentience in living beings¹ (Finkelstein, 2013). The question of sentience has to this day not been entirely resolved. Du Bois-Reymond, who was also a polymath, charismatic speaker and one of the pioneers of the modern neurosciences, was in a way the antithesis of Steiner, because he sought a scientific account of the human psyche using experimental science, rather than spiritual imagination.

In the West, there is more of a traditional separation between religion and science, which developed particularly in the course of the 19th century. Steiner himself notes in his book *Riddles of Philosophy* (1914/1973, GA18) that materialism has changed our view of the spirit. While science at the beginning of the 19th century assumed that matter had emerged from the spirit, this had been reversed by the end of the century. The question of whether consciousness is generated by the brain/body or exists independently of it and only manifests itself in the brain is still the subject of philosophical and neurological debate today.

Few other spiritual teachings have attempted to be understood as scientific (leaving Christian Science aside). Steiner repeatedly described Anthroposophy as a spiritual science and sought to establish its usefulness in practical life (e.g. *The Education of the Child from the Point of View of Spiritual Science*, 1907). He referred to it a science of the spirit or an "anthroposophically orientated spiritual science" (Steiner, 2010, *Riddles of the Soul* or *The Case for Anthroposophy*). Ewertovsky (2010) surmises that Steiner called his book *Occult Science* (*Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, also published in English as *An Outline of Esoteric Science*) to distinguish it from Helena Blavatsky's theosophical book *Secret Doctrine* (published in German as the *Geheimlehre*). In his book *Riddles of the Soul* published in 1917 he attempted to explain the relationship between spiritual science (anthroposophy) and the other human and social sciences as not antagonistic but complementary. I will return to this text below.

¹ Finkelstein writes: "As a descendant of immigrants, du Bois-Reymond always felt a bit at odds with his surroundings. He had grown up speaking French, his wife was from England, and he counted Jews and foreigners among his closest friends. Even his connections to the Prussian crown prince and princess disaffected him from the regime. Du Bois-Reymond supported women, defended minorities, and attacked superstition; he warned against the dangers of power, wealth, and faith; and he stood up to Bismarck in matters of principle. His example reminds us that patriots in Imperial Germany could be cosmopolitan critics as well as chauvinist reactionaries".

Epistemology was a highly political and cultural topic in the late 19th Century Germany (Finkelstein, 2013). Many leading thinkers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), were trying to establish the credibility of a social, cultural and human science, distinct from the science of nature (Naturwissenschaft), which was built on identifying and applying natural laws. The term *Geisteswissenschaft* referring to the humanities, though literally meaning spiritual science, acquired its this meaning through the work of Dilthey. He argued that human life has its own meaning and used the method of hermeneutics as a systematic approach to understanding the human being and history through interpretation (which is essentially what hermeneutics means). Dilthey (1883/1927) found an alternative to natural causality and its positivist epistemology in what he called a philosophy of life based on an intensification of the consciousness of experience. Dilthey believed that the autonomy of the human mind cannot be determined by fixed natural laws but that it belongs to cultural and historical processes of change. Individuals have the potential to shape themselves through the process known as *Bildung*, by engaging with and recognizing the culture in which they are embedded.

Part of the problem of clarifying what Steiner meant by spiritual science is that in German, the word *Geist* can have both a spiritual and a non-spiritual meaning (cf. the German translation of Eric Kandel's 2007 book *In Search of Memory: The emergence of a new science of mind*, the subtitle of which was translated as: *Die Entstehung einer neuen Wissenschaft des Geistes* (literally the emergence of a new science of the spirit). In anthroposophy the translation of Geist into English is always ambivalent but in German this ambivalence works to the benefit of anthroposophy today.

Dilthey distinguished the natural sciences from the humanities by their different functions. Natural science attempts to *explain* natural phenomena objectively and searches for causal explanations that are valid independently of human subjectivity. The humanities have the task of *understanding* the human mind and human culture, as these are only produced by people themselves and cannot be fully explained by natural causes. In the humanities, in the process known as *Bildung* (self-formation), the activity of cognition, transforms the subject, which is why education is also called *Bildung*. It would take too long to elaborate on the landscape of meanings of the term *Bildung* (Rittelmeyer, 2012), but suffice it say that it is the central concept in German education and cultural-identity. What runs as a common thread through all versions of *Bildung* is the idea that the self-formation and maturation of the person as a life-long process in the direction of individual emancipation and the wellbeing of civil society via culture (Horlacher, 2017). The notion of *Bildung* has a much wider sphere of influence than the German speaking world, having travelled to America in the 19th Century (often referred to as continental philosophy, or humanist *Bildung*) through influential figures such as Emerson, Thoreau and Dewey and still influences many thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum (2011), whose theory of capabilities is a contemporary version of *Bildung*.

Dilthey's methodology was hermeneutics, which attempts to understand the phenomenon in its historical context. Later in his career, Dilthey changed his description of this approach to the humanities, to the connection between experience, expression and understanding, which added a linguistic layer to understanding and also adds an element of reflexivity to the knowledge process. Dilthey's approach strongly influenced Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, Ernst Cassirer, Martin Buber, Theodor Adorno, Paul Ricoeur and many others.

In Dilthey's account of *Geisteswissenschaft* (2017/1883), spirit is identical to the Romantic concept of life and is based on experience, which is the basis for understanding the meaning of events. We understand because our individual mind is able to retrieve and recognize a higher

meaning that is located in the spirit. Therefore, a hermeneutic approach to understanding human thought, history and creativity is appropriate. Understanding is therefore the rediscovery of the self in the other, because the self and the other have a common source in the spirit and spirit recognizes spirit. We understand the objects of the world because they too are an expression of the spirit: We can understand whatever is a manifestation of the mind; whatever we can understand is a manifestation of the mind.

As far as I know, only a few authors have tried to connect Steiner with Dilthey (one exception is Jörg Ewertowski, 2010). For me as a non-philosopher, there seem to be many fruitful overlaps. Steiner seems to have only noticed Dilthey relatively late in his career. The most important distinction is between seeing Anthroposophy as *the* spiritual science (singular) in relation to both the natural sciences and the cultural sciences. has been inadequately understood and this leaves a considerable ambivalence in the relationship between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy.

Steiner's spiritual science differs from Dilthey's because it attempts to explore the physical world, the living phenomena of nature *and* culture, because he experiences the spirit as the formative, emergent process in all manifestations. His theory of knowledge is based on Goethe's "science according to Schiller's method", i.e. on Goethe's concept of observation as a way of looking at things in conjunction with Schiller's sense of the ideal, of the spiritual idea or concept. The experience of contemplative Anschauung (observation) leads us to a perception- the percept- though this is initially without meaning. Meaning is given through our intuitive grasp of an explanatory concept. Dahlin (2013) has summarized Steiner's theory of cognition as experience + concept = reality. As I have explained elsewhere (Rawson, 2021), this direct experience of reality nevertheless has to be clothed in language or some other form of symbolic knowledge (Cassirer, 1962) if we wish to communicate these experiences, and probably if we want to think about them.

In his *A Science of Knowing: Outlines of an Epistemology implicit in the Goethean World View* (1988, originally published in 1886), Steiner recommends grasping the interaction of causality in the inorganic world (much as Naturwissenschaft in Dilthey does), but, "we perceive species and genera in the organic world and seek to establish their mutual relationships. In history, individual cultural epochs of humanity contrast with one another; we endeavour to recognize the inner dependence of one stage of development on another." One could say that he offers a synthesis of Dilthey's juxtaposition of natural and cultural sciences in his reinterpretation of experience in connection with the question of the relationship between idea and reality. His answer is that thinking is a higher experience in the experience and at the same time an interpreter that interprets the gestures of experience. In Steiner's theory of knowledge, the soul of the subject is a subjective arena of the encounter with the world mediated by the senses, and the thinking Self makes sense of the resulting experiences, which is ultimately a phenomenological process. The title of Jap Sijmon's (2008) analysis of Steiner's method is apt: Phenomenology and Idealism. Dahlin, emphasizes that Steiner's theory of knowledge is non-representational, that is, the mind does not have to stop at the process of producing mental images to represent what has been perceived, but in a second step, experiences them as reality.

In his book *Riddles of Philosophy*, Steiner considers the difference between the natural sciences and the humanities as follows:

Observations on the spiritual world in the manner of Dilthey or Eucken find the sum of humanity's cultural experiences as the spiritual world. With this world as the only comprehensible spiritual world, one does not stand on the ground that corresponds to the

scientific way of thinking. The totality of world beings is organized for the natural scientific view in such a way that the physical human being in their individual existence appears like a summary, a unity, to which all other natural processes and natural beings point. The world of culture is that which is created by this human being. However, it is not an individual unity of a higher kind in relation to the individuality of the human being. The spiritual science referred to here, points to an experience that the soul can have independently of the body. And this experience reveals itself as an individual. It appears like a higher human being. (2010, S. 515, MR trans)

Steiner's starting horizon for his spiritual science was that the most important philosophical knowledge cannot be articulated in words; words can only indicate the presence of a concept. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose thinking was close to Steiner's in many ways, referred to this as 'transcendental empiricism' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). Dahlin (2013) has noted that Steiner's theory of knowledge is non-representational, intuitive and therefore immanent. It is active knowledge-in-the-moment and situation, a knowledge more suited to events and processes than things and fixed concepts. Steiner's knowledge of the physical world is based on polarities and transitions between states, in the organic world on types that describe processes and relationships rather than fixed categories. In the human world the central narrative is changing consciousness. One may disagree with the examples Steiner gave and the structures he put them in (e.g. cultural epochs or historical periods as symptoms of a teleology) but his relational account of knowledge is very contemporary (see also Welburn, 2004, Amrine, 2019)

Steiner's claim that Anthroposophy is a science of the spirit is one of the main stumbling blocks to any scientific recognition of Anthroposophy. In many ways accepting Anthroposophy as a 'Weltanschauung' or an esoteric system or a philosophy would be less problematic. Nobody would try to argue that Buddhism, Catholicism, the Kabbalah or indeed Theosophy are sciences but that that does not lessen their interest and value as cultural phenomena. Rather, as Ernst Cassirer (1962) has argued, language, art, myth, religion, maths, geometry and science – and one can add esoteric systems – are all forms of symbolic imagination and intelligence that give people access to 'higher knowledge', in the sense that these symbolic systems can be used to express multiple if not unlimited relations between things and ideas. They are all different but equally valid fields of human inquiry and knowing.

The first obstacle to accepting Steiner's claim to being scientific is the, cardinal problem ...nevertheless becomes clear here and is reflected in the basic orientation within the anthroposophical movement: A central criterion of today's scientific (not merely natural scientific) methods is the demand for intersubjective verifiability of research results" (Rittelmeyer, 2023, p. 67).

Steiner frequently claims that anyone with an unbiased view can affirm what he says, but to date no one has ever claimed to have been able to do this (cf. Ibid, pp.69-71). A one-man science is not science if the intersubjective verifiability is not available. Steiner asserts intersubjective affirmation of the results of his spiritual research, but this is a purely theoretical assertion. Anthroposophists may argue that with time science will eventually get there, but this is not really an argument that carries much weight and can be dismissed as wishful thinking (or arrogance). It may be that Steiner did not give enough attention to explaining what he means by science. The attempts such as his book *Riddles of the Soul* and the lecture "Anthroposophy has something to add to modern sciences" from 12.11.1917 (Steiner, 2005), offer glimpses of an approach, but emphasize that as long as science refuses to acknowledge the spirit (as he understands it), and treats the human mind as a closed system and culture as the product of this system, it will not really understand the human being in the

way Anthroposophy does. His argument rests on a small number of cases, one of which is, the law of the conservation of energy. “Conflict thus arises with this law of the conservation of energy, which has played such a significant role in scientific developments during the 19th century, when one comes up against the idea that the soul can be the source and origin of some form of energy” (Ibid.). Steiner also objects to the tendency of science to assume that at bottom phenomena are ‘the thing in itself’. These objections hardly stand today in the light of the very broad discourse of what constitutes spiritual, that is, non-material fields, forces, systems theory, ecosystems and autopoietic processes that have tangible effects.

Steiner’s criticisms of science are of course barely relevant given how much the sciences have changed over the past century, and anyway are not in themselves arguments for taking Anthroposophy as a science seriously. Criticising assumptions and theories is a normal part of science and the validity of the scientific method does not stand or fall on whether one (or hundreds as Steiner claims in the above mentioned lecture) theory can be challenged. Steiner gave only very general guidelines as to how his epistemology should be practically applied as science, and though some Waldorf scholars have applied Steiner’s approach in various scientific fields, very little has been academically published and thus exposed to the critical response of other scientists in the field, which is an essential part of science.

As Rittelmeyer points out, there are a number of ‘facts’ that Steiner claims and that today’s science partially or completely disputes, and also notes the dismissive tone Steiner used when speaking of Einstein’s theory of relativity. If you are an esotericist and wish to challenge the major work of one of the most respected scientists of all time, it would enhance your case if you didn’t simply dismiss the other. This is often explained with the argument that science will eventually show that Steiner was right, or that the results of spiritual research simply cannot be compared with other forms of science and therefore we either have a question of faith or must accept dual worlds that never fit together. In the year 2000 I was invited to a conference of the Anthroposophical Society at the Goetheanum. I was in a working group on human prehistory (and was just about to publish a book comparing Steiner’s account with that of the contemporary sciences, Rawson, 2003) The question of dating prehistory came up and the dates Steiner gave for various cultures and events in the remote past were at odds with modern dating techniques. I noted that some 14 independent methods of dating are used to correlate estimated dates. I was told by a famous anthroposophical scientist that no one of that counted because Steiner refuted the nature of radioactivity. This ended the discussion (and my faith in anthroposophical science). When I tried to track down the Steiner reference, I found the single reference “In earlier times these atoms became more and more solidified; now however they are becoming increasingly separated. Radioactivity did not exist in earlier times and could not therefore be discovered. It has only existed for a few thousand years, because now the atoms split up more and more” (GA 90a, lecture in Berlin 5.10.1905), with no further explanation.

Within the international/Waldorf anthroposophical community, still the most common response to Dr. Steiner, is one of reverent belief. Whilst writing this article I noted a number of conversations (or emails sent to me) in which people connected with Waldorf education expressed uncritical, matter-of-fact acceptance of statements by Steiner that they could not possibly verify. One person told me that neuroscience accounts of the senses were irrelevant because they did not take into account Steiner’s explanation that sentience was a spiritual quality (personified by higher beings related to the Moon and Mars) that in effect human beings ‘grew into’ (I found the source of this statement in Steiner’s, *Occult Science* - see Anthrowiki https://en.anthro.wiki/Sentient_soul).

Steiner's description of the distinction between the sentient body and sentient soul (in *Theosophy*), could well offer a point of discussion with neurologists.

A second example was the statement of someone in a senior role in a teacher education institution who told me that what Steiner said about races may be inappropriate but was basically true. When I challenged this person, I was told, Steiner was a high initiate and therefore could not be wrong. Though perhaps not quite as crass, we find taken-for-granted assumptions about Steiner's ideas in Waldorf literature. Frank Linde, for example, eloquently presents the classical anthroposophical attitude in Waldorf education,

Without Anthroposophy, Waldorf education would not exist. Its foundation...derives from two sources: on the one hand from Steiner's perception and life experiences and on the other from the intuitions of the spiritual world, which he held as an answer to the educational challenges of life. Both sources were united in his person, but in terms of the intuitional content of the laws of the essence of the human being and his development, they go beyond the individual case and the temporality of the moment. This answers the question of the contemporary relevance of anthroposophical education (Linde, 2021, p.22 MR trans.).

Linde goes on to say that the "laws of spirit, soul and body" discovered by Steiner are just as valid today as they were 100 years ago because they are true. Only by recognizing these laws can the riddle of human evolution and development be solved, and it is the task of an ever-growing circle of anthroposophists to spread this knowledge, and Linde adds: "Anthroposophical anthropology is just as indispensable as any other specialist knowledge in any other profession. Without a medical degree no doctor can practice, without pilot training no one can fly an airplane" (ibid., p. 31), thus giving Anthroposophy the status of facts, which can be learned.

Linde's book is a classic example of the traditional attitude towards Anthroposophy in Waldorf education. It summarizes the key ideas, emphasizes that beyond specialist anthroposophical knowledge of the human being, including the child's spiritual existence before the physical birth, the importance of the educator's 'priestly' inner attitude (*priesterliche Erziehergesinnung*), knowledge of the significance of the Mystery of Golgotha and the significance for individual human development and the possibility for redemption that is cosmopolitan in its inclusiveness. He emphasizes, that "modern spiritual research of the 20th Century [sic] is based not on belief but knowledge... the understanding must always be cultivated that anthroposophical spiritual science should not be based on an belief in its contents, but as the outcome of spiritual research and knowledge... " (p. 48). This includes the knowledge that every material object, whether inanimate or living is the manifestation of spirit. If we fail to realize this, then the Christ impulse will be lost.

Here we see the very paradox at the heart of the issue; Linde expresses a deep conviction that anthroposophical education is part of the work of world redemption, which is indeed an uplifting and noble aim, but insists at the same time, that this is based on knowledge rather than belief and revelation.

But claiming anthroposophy to be a science generates critical questions and even rejection precisely because in our times science- or one should say, certain branches of science- claim to be the superior form of knowledge because it is based on rationality, with the implication that art, religion, mythology and the esoteric are less rational. At its most elementary we have a classic polarity between two ways of relating to the world; one that is revelatory, intuitive, relational, process-orientated, sensory, experiential, visceral, embodied, holistic, progressive and transformative, democratic and participatory, pluralistic, magical and spiritual and another which is

rational, rules-based, conservative, predictable, controllable, elitist and monocultural. In many ways neoliberal theory sees itself the epitome of rationality by virtue of its credo “there is no alternative” (Beckert, 2020). Neoliberal marketization of all aspects of life over the past 30 years worldwide has left a trail of “devastating harms on both human society and the living planet, harms from which we’re at risk of never recovering” (Monbiot and Hutchison, 2024, p. 5). Even though neoliberalism is waning in ideological power, there are currently no strong, viable narratives in the public discourse to replace it -there does seem to be little alternative. It seems almost perverse that some journalists, academics (including some educationalists) and politicians at a time of general ‘polycrisis’ (Sousa and Moss, 2024) are apparently so allergic to anthroposophy because they consider it irrational and somehow scandalous, though there are many more obvious ideologies and practices to pitch against.

Commentary

Anthroposophy could be part of the answer to the polycrisis, and Waldorf education could be part of the solution to the education crisis. The way anthroposophy is treated by some academics and journalists verges on discrimination, which is always irrational, and Waldorf voices should say so publicly. At the same time, since Anthroposophy currently does not match understandings of science in most of the academy, so Waldorf practitioners and scholars have two options; they can ignore the scientific doubts and carry on insisting on the truth of their beliefs (their right to this belief is not in doubt). Or they can stop arguing that spiritual science is a science, as the term is currently understood, and refer to it not as a body of knowledge but as a cultural phenomenon or resource that needs to be understood and interpreted like any other. Steiner texts, art works and artefacts need to be hermeneutically studied, contextualized, and analyzed. Furthermore, an academic approach to any aspect of Anthroposophy would not rely simply on “Steiner said...” but would build a case with arguments, direct and indirect evidence, use analogies and comparisons with other fields of knowledge. I discuss the implications for Waldorf education below.

Anthroposophy as a basis for Waldorf education

Contrary to what some critics, such as Prange, Ullrich and Zander, as discussed above, claim, and as many anthroposophists believe, Waldorf education is not a medium for promoting Anthroposophy, as Steiner made clear in his frequent statements that Anthroposophy should not be taught in a Waldorf schools. As Schieren has suggested,

Anthroposophy has a purely methodological function in Waldorf education. It is not an end in itself, but merely a means to an end. It is intended to help to better understand the children and adolescents in their development through its consideration of the nature of the human being. Epistemology, anthropology and psychology are the central features of Waldorf education. In addition, there is the individual (by all means also esoteric) training path of the teacher, which makes educational qualification possible in the first place in Steiner's view. (Schieren, 2022).

This view has earned Schieren criticism, notably from those who see this position as a significant dilution of the anthroposophical contribution to Waldorf education, for example Zdrazil (2023). No one disputes that anthroposophical insights into the nature of the developing human being should inform the way teachers teach. In Steiner’s words,

No worldview will be taught in the Waldorf School; nor is it our aim to fill the children’s heads with anthroposophical teachings. Anthroposophy is not what is taught. We strive rather to apply anthroposophy and what can be gained from it for education in general and for the method of practice of teaching in particular (Steiner, 20.August, 1919, 2020, p. 17).

This statement leaves a large grey area for interpretation.

The arguments that this includes Steiner's cosmology (e.g. as outlined in the book *Occult Science* and similar works), his Christology, his cultural history including the use of race theory and the overall Eurocentric and orientalist views (see Myers, 2006, Martins, 2012), can legitimately be contested. Three areas of Anthroposophy, I would like to add to Schieren's list are Steiner's (and his wife Marie Steiner-von Sivers) artistic endeavors such as the creation of Eurythmy and Speech Formation, particularly to the extent that these arts have been developed for pedagogical, therapeutic purposes and their function in teacher education. This also includes his ideas on architecture, the use of colour and form in buildings and his ideas on design. His recognition of the importance of drama and awareness of the importance to shared meaning making in the community through the celebration of festivals and their connection to the cycles of the year is a vital element in Waldorf education. Thirdly, the other practice-fields of anthroposophy such as medicine, agriculture, as well as banking and organizational development, which draw on Steiner's social theory, are also tangentially relevant to Waldorf education.

In some ways, though this is not wholly consistent, Steiner's activities after the First World War that were directed to requests for anthroposophical insight into areas of practice beyond the esoteric activities of the Anthroposophical Society, were of a different character, less focused on developing Anthroposophy and more focused on making a wider contribution to culture and society. Schools, clinics, therapy centres, homes for people with disabilities, businesses, publishing houses, theatres all have more interface with public life and with people and institutions that are not directly or even indirectly interested in Anthroposophy. Local social and educational authorities collaborate with schools, as do examination boards, universities, transport companies, architects, and ordinary citizens, who may use the GLS Bank or make regular donations to a Camphill community or buy Demeter or Weleda products do not have to be interested in Anthroposophy.

In order for Waldorf education to both draw on its anthroposophical roots *and* take its place in the wider social and cultural life, it needs a different relationship to Anthroposophy. The following ideas sketch out what this could mean.

Engaging with Steiner's texts in a scientific way

Rittelmeyer suggests that an ethnographic method should be applied, as can be found in any textbook on qualitative research, in order to "observe as closely as possible without prejudice and without rash judgement" (Rittelmeyer, 2023, p. 96). By analysing Steiner's texts in this way, one would arrive at subtexts, messages or the specific framework of the anthroposophical material. Such a method could be used to analyse myths in their cultural context. Such subtexts have the formative power of images or symbols, and this effect could be analysed - in other words, one could investigate how these subtexts are perceived.

Rittelmeyer also proposes two further approaches, namely, to treat Steiner's ideas as heuristic hypotheses, as thought-models, as ways of directing our attention to certain aspects of the phenomena we are studying. Finally, he suggests that one could take up certain of Steiner's suggestions, apply them and then make a comparison in a control study with an application without reference to Steiner. This could perhaps be attempted in biodynamic agriculture (cultivation of plants with and without preparations) or in medicine, but it is difficult to implement in education.

Though there seems to be a very unscientific taboo in some areas of German educational science about anything spiritual, this is not the case in the English-speaking discourse, where the spiritual is clearly immaterial, there is much less inhibition about considering this dimension as

something real in human life. There are even renowned peer-reviewed journals such as the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* or the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (transpersonal means non-bodily consciousness), both of which have published articles on Steiner and Waldorf. Today they speak of 'spiritual but not religious' and assume that there is a spiritual dimension to life that cannot be traced back to physical causes. Spirituality today is often defined as the experience of being part of a larger, non-material and meaningful whole that is not just the result of neuronal activity (Schreiber, 2012, Huss, 2014, Miller, 2015). The work of Lisa Miller (2015) from Columbia University New York builds a bridge to pedagogy. As we have seen above, talking about spirituality rather than religiosity, which has too many associations with specific religions, can open doors to understanding, that have often been closed.

From an intercultural and global perspective, the discussion of whether the spirit is real or not is clearly a Western perspective. In Asia and Africa and many other parts of the world, not to mention indigenous people everywhere, the existence of a spiritual dimension is not in doubt.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Rawson, 2021 a & b), it is possible to use a hermeneutic approach to studying Steiner's works, by for example, using an empathic form of understanding (what does the text say in my own words?), a dialogic form of understanding (contextualizing and interrogating the text) and a transactional mode of understanding (in what way has working with this text changed me?). This is a scientific or academic way of working with Steiner's texts. The scientific approach to pedagogy and anthroposophical sources is an essential aspect of the professional teaching profession because, as Desjepper & Schmelzer (2024) emphasise,

In this context, the development of a scientific attitude is central. Those who study anthroposophy should learn to perceive carefully, think clearly and arrive at appropriate judgements. Anthroposophy is not something pre-scientific but, as Rudolf Steiner's writings "Fundamentals of a Theory of Knowledge of Goethe's World View" and his "Philosophy of Freedom" show, is clearly and unambiguously based on the Enlightenment (2024, p.29).

Using anthroposophical research methods

As Schieren (2008, 2011) has discussed anthroposophical research is best suited to understanding people, including self-observation. Goeschel (2012) has shown how this can be done in his account of individual case studies in therapeutic education using what he calls a method he calls biographical mythos. This is one of the most important works in establishing an anthroposophical research method. Jan Göschel's (2012) study of the biographical case study method developed in anthroposophical curative education locates Steiner's spiritual science in Ken Wilber's (2001) third category of sciences. Alongside the empirical natural sciences and the hermeneutic human sciences, Wilber identifies a third category of sciences, the contemplative sciences. It is based on spiritual experiences that are gained through contemplative practices and that can be regarded as trans-subjective (i.e. beyond objective and subjective) results of intentional processes of consciousness that depend on the development and expansion of the researcher's awareness. Their focus extends to all areas of the physical, organic and psychological levels. Its scientific validity depends on contemplative-intersubjective plausibility, and its function is to direct the subject's attention and vision through an inductive, guiding use of language, which basically means, "If you want to know this, you have to do that" (Wilbur, 2001, p.81, cited in Göschel, 2012). Contemplative science is always struggling to find a language to express the often-inexpressible experiences and has to make do with multiple descriptions that emphasize different aspects of an experience.

This description of the contemplative scientific paradigm is very helpful in describing Anthroposophy. As we have seen, Anthroposophy accepts both the empirical (physical world) and the hermeneutical approach (organic and cultural world) in their place. As Göschel explains, According to Steiner's anthroposophical method, the transition from the formal sciences, whose object is pure ideas, to contemplative spiritual science results from turning the thinking attention away from concepts, as the content of thinking, and towards the active thinking activity itself. The resulting direct experience of a completely transparent, living mental process at its point of origin leads to a change in the experienced quality of the thinking activity. The thinking consciousness learns more and more to familiarize itself with the dynamic-generative laws of nature that are effective as living forces of creation and order in the world and in the human being. These lose their abstract quality and are transformed in the experience of the cognizing subject into living views of being with inherent effectiveness and ontological status (2012, p. 119-0. MR trans)

Here we essentially have the essence of Anthroposophy as a method, as opposed to Anthroposophy as a collection of fixed concepts. Concepts lose their static and abstract qualities and are transformed in the experience of the cognizing subject into a "living view of being with inherent efficacy and ontological status" when the subject engages in an active path of schooling thought through meditation and contemplation. This leads via the various stages that Steiner describes as imagination, inspiration and intuition.

Wilber's (2000) work on integral theory is contested within the academic community, for some of the same reasons that Steiner's is. It is claimed that his overview of multiple fields is both too complex and an overgeneralization, that his theories lack empirical validation and scientific rigour, that his worldview is hierarchical and his developmental stages of consciousness can be seen as manifesting a kind of cultural, Eurocentric superiority. In his major work, the ironically titled *Theory of Everything* (2001), but scholars such as Gidley (2016) are increasingly using Wilber, Jan Gebser, Piaget and Steiner as points of reference in supporting her theory of postformal education.

In my own work I have tried to show how contemplative practice can be incorporated into practitioner research and case studies (Rawson, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2018), including using contemplative methods in my doctoral thesis. In all these cases, contemplation is only one of a number of research methods.

Anthroposophy as capacity building

Steiner often pointed out that becoming a Waldorf teacher requires above active knowing, as well as what he calls passive knowing, what today we would call propositional knowledge. We could call Steiner's idea of active knowing, knowing-in-practice, which is the ability to observe and understand complex pedagogical situations and be able to intuitively respond in a meaningful way. Again, this is an application of Steiner's productive theory of knowing. This idea is closely related to a number of important ideas about knowledge that we can associate with John Dewey's (1938) notion of the continuum of experience in education, but also with Max van Manen (1991) notion of pedagogical tact or knowing-in-context and also John Elliott's (2009, Elliott and Lukes, 2008) 'case-based reasoning', and Gert Biesta's virtuosity (2015, 2020). All these authors in one way or another draw on Aristotle's notion of phronesis, or practical wisdom, which is about situated knowing rather than general, theoretical or idealist/essential knowledge. This involves in Elliott's words, "discerning the particularities of a situation from the standpoint of an ethical agent, and in the process, discriminating its practically relevant features" (Elliott, 2009, p. 29). The important aspect of this

pedagogical intuition is that it involves action, rather than mere contemplation or understanding- in fact the full understanding may only occur in retrospective reflection.

Steiner's version of this explicitly takes the spiritual dimension into account. In Steiner's terms, this knowing cannot be based on passive, or acquired pre-existent knowledge or knowledge based only on what can be observed, but rather the mind needs to become sensitive to what is emergent within the whole human being, spiritually and psychologically by a process of empathy, in which the educator is able to experience the child or young person as an emergent Self. Ita Wegman, with whom Steiner developed anthroposophical medical and therapeutic practices, developed a similar 'case-based reasoning' through empathic identification, which allows an intuitive experience of the processes within the other person and out of this insight into what is needed at that moment, through 'the courage to heal' (Selg, 2017). Related to education, Steiner called this the right educator-disposition ("eine rechte Erziehungsgesinnung"), which is to be experienced in one's own will as a knowing activity. As Steiner puts it, "One does not get to know the human being through passive knowledge. What one knows about the human being must be experienced, at least to a certain degree, as feeling the creative aspect of one's own being: one must fulfil it in one's own volition as a knowing activity" (Steiner, 2014, pp. 288-9, GA 36, lecture from 1.4.1923).

The relationship between Anthroposophy and Waldorf education that arises from this is not based on belief or imitation, but on an embodied understanding that is evaluated in practice through critical reflection, since intuitive actions are not always correct. The question is how this disposition can be learned. Steiner's suggestion, referred to as meditatively acquired knowledge, was to study anthroposophical anthropology, meditate or contemplate it and then be able to 'recall' it in a pedagogical situation as intuition. I have offered an account of this elsewhere (Rawson, 2021b).

Working with boundary ideas

In his (1978) book on Waldorf teacher training, Kiersch points out the connection between Steiner's ideas about boundary concepts and the acquisition of an educational attitude. In 1917 in his book *Riddles of the Soul (The case for Anthroposophy)* Steiner added to his epistemology by analysing the relationship between Anthroposophy and what he called anthropology, by which he meant the conventional humanities and cultural sciences. Here Steiner outlines a new relationship between Anthroposophy as a spiritual science and the conventional sciences that investigate the human being. Firstly, these are two valid ways of investigating the human being which, although coming from different directions, meet at the same phenomena and therefore complement each other. Steiner addresses the idea that knowledge based solely on sensory perception has its limits. Steiner recommends that if the Self has the patience to think at the limits of cognition, it can gradually experience the fruitfulness of the ideas of Anthroposophy in illuminating phenomena and that in this way we can gradually and systematically expand the limits of cognition. Furthermore, by dwelling on the limits of cognition, one can experience an imaginative energy that enlivens the normal process of experience that takes place when we create mental representations. He compares this to the difference between a photographic negative and a full colour print.

Through the process of dwelling at the boundary of cognition, we can begin to preserve the immediacy of lived experience before it becomes a mere representation. The connection of this idea with intuitive knowledge in practice as opposed to knowledge *about* practice becomes clear. Kiersch also suggests that boundary experiences can also be gained through artistic exercises and in social processes. In the activity of engaging with phenomena, the boundary idea itself becomes the organ of looking, it becomes imaginative looking.

In the fourth appendix of the *Riddles of the Soul/ Case for Anthroposophy*, Steiner distinguishes between three cognitive processes, related to spiritual experiences, "1. psychic or soul processes leading to a spiritual perception; 2. spiritual perceptions themselves; 3. spiritual perceptions translated into concepts of ordinary consciousness." (2010, p.58). Such perceptions cannot be retained and retrieved recalled like ordinary memories; the connection to the spiritual perception must be re-experienced in the soul. However, "what can, within memory, be retained of an actual spiritual perception is not the perception itself but the disposition of soul through which one attained the perception... What I should try to remember is something that will call back the psychic preparations that led me to the perception in the first place" (p. 57). It is the activity of seeing that is objective rather than the result in the form of a memory. However, Steiner adds that one can achieve the right relationship between the three processes mentioned above through careful practice.

My reading of this notion of boundary ideas can be expressed in the following diagram, which is based on Vygotsky's (1987) idea of the zone of next development to describe the space in which the learner/researcher moves from a current horizon of knowledge (1) to a new horizon (2) by internalizing a boundary idea learned either through meditative/contemplative processes, through hermeneutic study (see below) and through participation in social or artistic processes. Vygotsky's original idea is that learning precedes development. By analogy, by internalizing a boundary idea, a new level of understanding of something that could not be perceived before is achieved. The new understanding forms a new organ of knowledge and thus leads to a general mental development.

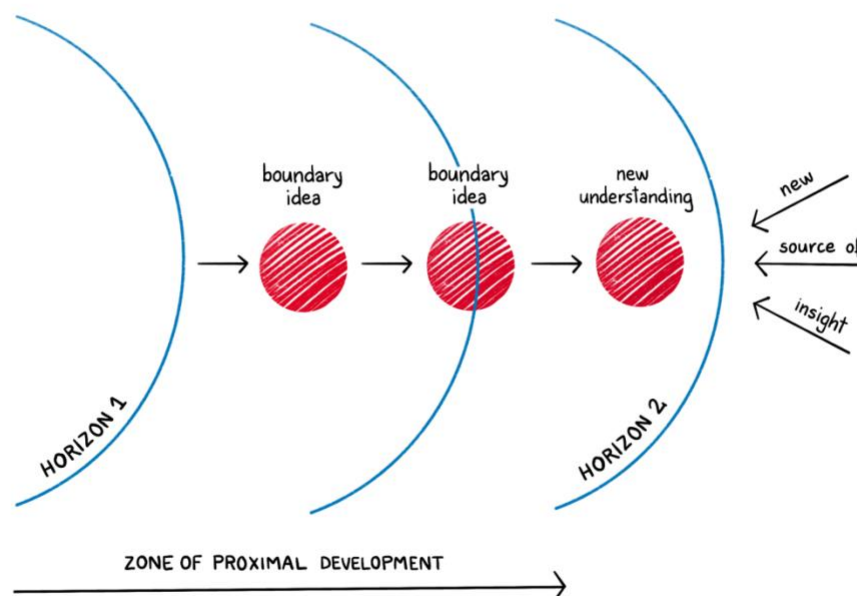


Illustration 2 Engaging with boundary ideas

Contemplative methods in pedagogical reflection and research

In 1920 Steiner (1982, GA302a) introduced the idea of the meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being, which in a way is another version of his presentation of the boundary ideas. This approach consists of studying the basics of the study of man, meditating on them and then remembering them in practice. This approach has found many explanations. My interpretation, put as simply as possible, is to work hermeneutically with the text and the ideas it contains, i.e. to interpret and contextualize the content in such a way that the student can think and critically relate to the ideas themselves.

The contemplative method described by Arthur Zajonc (2007) can be used to internalize and 'digest' key ideas. Kiersch (1995) suggests that many of the polarities presented by Steiner (e.g. blood-nerve, sympathy-antipathy) or examples of metamorphosis can be used as motifs for contemplative meditation. The third step of remembering (remembering anthropology) is a little more difficult to understand, but it is clear from the examples Steiner gives that it refers to situated, intuitive moments of knowing what to do in context. We can imagine that the process of active study and meditative internalization of 'boundary ideas' can lead to recognizing the 'hidden' or 'esoteric' meaning of pedagogical situations. Elsewhere (Rawson, 2020 a and b) I have linked this to the formation of dispositions that enable the teacher to 'read' the situation. This whole process needs to be complemented by critical reflection, because not all intuitions are true or appropriate.

The third aspect is most clearly explained by Steiner in Ilkley in August 1923 (2007, GA307), when he said that the teachers' conferences in the Waldorf school are an ongoing living university in which the teachers bring the fruits of their reflections and work and share them with their colleagues. The word *Hochschule* means university, and the main functions of universities are research and teaching. I argued that what Steiner was proposing would today be called practical research. He made it clear that the development of curriculum and education depended on the ongoing evaluation and review of practice based on Waldorf principles.

Hermeneutics

In the German-speaking tradition of educational science as a critical-hermeneutic human science (e.g. Klafki, 2007) the central task of this science is understanding. This approach is easier to apply to the understanding of texts than to pedagogical reality, except in the case of empirical studies that use a range of research methods to collect data for hermeneutic analysis. This means that experiences are transformed into texts in order to analyse and understand them as texts.

The application of Steiner's epistemology as a basis for new insights in pedagogy is surprisingly rarely dealt with in the Waldorf literature. There are many vague, informal references to reflections on individual pupils or classes (e.g. before lesson preparation, during child observation, etc.), but little that could be described as research in terms of epistemology. Schieren (2008) is one of the few authors who explicitly discusses this. This personal, meditative-contemplative method may be effective, but we do not know because it is never systematically documented or described as a research method. Actually, the children's conference or case studies with pupils would be an opportunity for this, but all previous accounts avoid a scientific approach (e.g. Seydel, 2012).

This is why Jan Göschel's (2012) scientific account and of the children's conference, or individual case study in the therapeutic field as a biographical myth and as a socio-artistic dialogue process is of great importance. We perceive people in their appearance and actions in space and time and try to experience the effect on us and then mutually, dialogically and value-free put it into words, so that something of the essence of the person can be experienced through intuition. Otto Scharmer

(2016) describes a similar process in his Theory U, in which an attempt is made to recognize the emerging future as it arises. In this way, Steiner's theory of cognition can be transferred to the context of practice.

Being part of the wider discourse

As Jenny Gidley (2016) has shown in her theory of postformal education, Steiner's ideas about the human being and education do not stand alone but are part of a wider educational discourse, which is offering a range of alternatives to the dominant, neoliberal view of education. Waldorf education today can be located within the landscape of holistic education as represented by people such as John P. (Jack) Miller (2018), Ron Miller (2000), emancipation pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1998) critical pedagogy (Henry Giroux, 1997, Kincheloe, 2008), common school theory (Fielding and Moss, , 2011) and the field of educational philosophy (e.g. Biesta, 2013) and many more. In the German language Waldorf literature, there have been significant attempts to locate Waldorf education within the wider educational discourse, though this naturally takes a very German perspective on educational theory. This has barely been attempted in the English language, except in a few PhD theses that are only known to a handful of scholars. There is often a gulf between academic discourse and education practice and in Waldorf this is particularly marked. The increased need for higher education qualifications in Waldorf education brings within it a corresponding increase in Waldorf academic publications, most of which remain remote from classroom practice. What is missing are bridges between academic work, either theoretical or research-based and practice.

Internal critical discourse

Parallel to the process of contextualizing Waldorf education within the wider discourse is the necessity of a critical reflection on both Steiner's pedagogy and what Waldorf traditions have made out of them (including the unconscious or half-conscious adoption of other, culturally situated ideas about education, starting with E.A. K. Stockmeyer's interpretations). Both Steven Sagarin () and Christof Wiechert () have highlighted a number of Waldorf practices that do not actually derive from Steiner, but have their validity and authority through an assumption of 'originality', i.e. practice are believed to belong to the origins of Waldorf education (Steiner and the Founding of the Waldorf School). One of the crucial areas to explore is the adoption of Steiner's theory of cultural epochs into the Waldorf curriculum. The notion of a sequence of cultural stages was part of German educational traditions in the late 19th Century, particularly as applied by the Herbartian educational theorists (who significantly changed the ideas of the educationalist and philosophy Herbart (1776-1841)). Heiner Ulrich (2024) has shown that the sequence of cultural epochs (from Ancient India to Greece) was part of a number of German state curricula. Here the conflation of standard curriculum content with Steiner's theory of cultural evolution needs teasing out and then contextualizing in the educational and cultural context of the present. This includes the process of decolonizing curriculum (Rawson, 2024). In relation to the recapitulation theory of individuals and human biological and cultural evolution, Steiner had the following to say:

I attempted to sketch the child's development beginning about age seven until fourteen or fifteen. Someone asked how that development relates to Haeckel's biogenetic law. This law considers the world in an external, scientific way, and says that the embryonic development of the human being repeats the evolution of human beings—that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. During the period from conception until birth, human development passes through the various animal forms from the most simple to the most complicated right up to the stage of the human being. I am aware of the exceptions and limitations, but those who understand this law certainly know it is scientifically very important. People have tried to

apply this law to the spiritual and soul development of individuals in relationship to all of humanity. In that way, however, we follow a very incorrect path.

Can we find a parallel between human spiritual and soul development and this biogenetic law? We can do so only if we can say that at the beginning of his or her earthly life, a small child goes through the various stages of humanity and moves through later periods of human development as he or she grows. Thus, the development of a child repeats the development of humanity as a whole. We could certainly create such a fantasy, but it would not correspond to reality. In this area we can approach reality only through spiritual science. When we follow the development of the human embryo from the second or third week until it matures, we can see hints of a continuously more perfect form in the developmental stages, the form of a fish, and so on. However, when we observe the early developmental years of a child, we find nothing that indicates a recapitulation of the subsequent stages of human development. We would have to attribute fantasy forces and processes to the child's development to find something like that. It is just a beautiful dream when people like Wolf try to demonstrate that children go through a period corresponding to wild barbarians, then they go through the Persian period, and so forth. Beautiful pictures can result from this, but it is nonsense nevertheless because it does not correspond to any genuine reality (Steiner, Rudolf Steiner, *Renewal of Education* GA 301, 1920, lecture 4, p.73-74- I have underlined the salient statement).

Waldorf education has generally shied away from critically reflecting on what Steiner said and did. Such a deconstruction would not lead to a destruction of Steiner's ideas, as many fear. Rather, it would have the double effect of being able to way to the world, "we are not blind followers of Steiner, who is our guru" (as Gert Biesta commented in an online interview with me during an Erasmus Project on high school education, if we treat Steiner as a guru, we lose our freedom, in the sense of Steiner's freedom philosophy). Secondly, there are so many valuable ideas in Steiner's works, any deconstruction would only highlight the complexity and subtlety of his thinking.

Conclusions: A new relationship between Waldorf and Anthroposophy

In conclusion, we can summarize the suggested new relationship between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy as follows. Waldorf education is embedded in a nested structure of relationship to Anthroposophy at different levels. These can be graphically illustrated as follows.

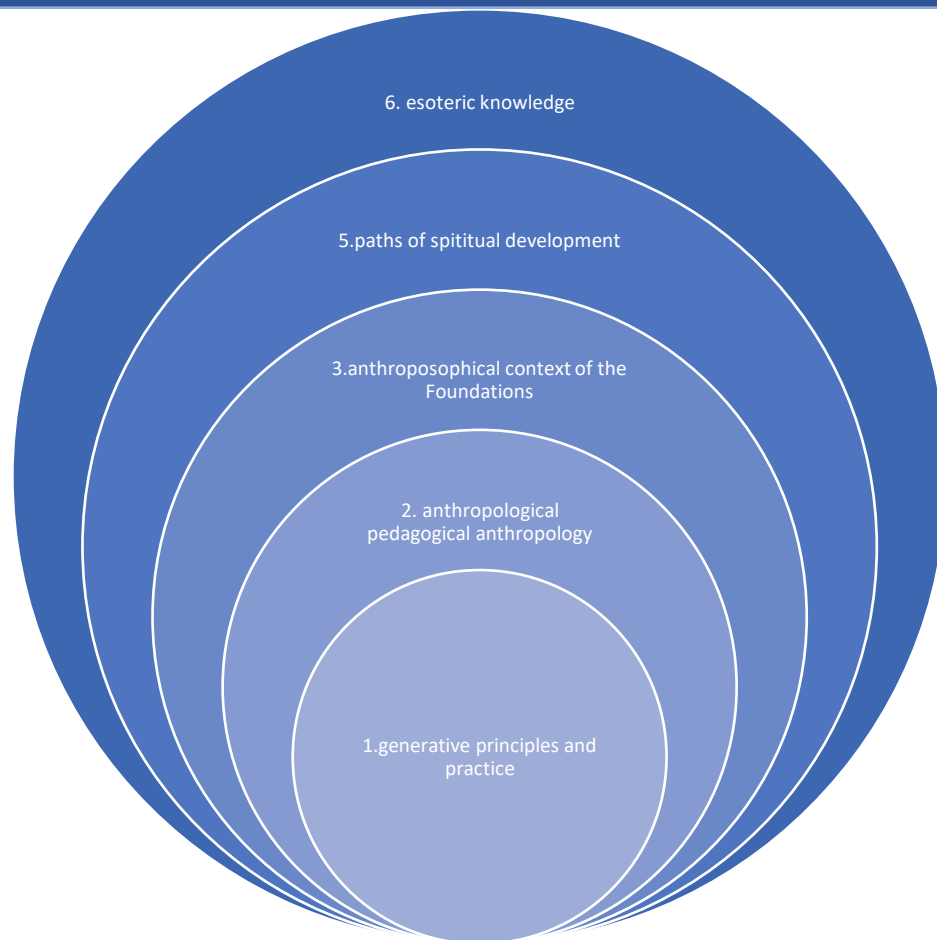


Figure 2 The fields or dimensions of anthroposophical knowledge

Following this perspective, anthroposophical ideas can be engaged with at different levels.

1. **Generative principles and practice.** The first level of anthroposophical knowledge includes the generative principles of Waldorf education (Rawson, 2021) and the practice they give rise to. These are also located within a historical perspective of the development and growth of Waldorf education. These generative principles, which in effect outline the nature of Waldorf practice, are derived from Steiner's pedagogical anthropology. They could be taught at any university and also be related to existing knowledge of the human being from other relevant fields of knowledge, such as neurology, physiology, psychology, history, anthropology. Here one would explain things such as learning, development, socio-cultural aspects of education etc. in terms that can be understood by someone who not an anthroposophist. Because pedagogical practice is culturally and locally situated, any presentation would need to make this clear and illustrate typical local practice.
2. **Pedagogical anthropology.** The second level is that of the anthroposophical pedagogical anthropology (abbreviated to the Foundations) of First Teacher Course, supplemented by more recent additions to this, such as contemporary knowledge of the senses. These

Foundational ideas can be supplemented by all Steiner's lectures on education to teachers and the public and can be used heuristically. The Foundations imply an understanding of Steiner's theory of knowledge. Ideally, the Foundations are studied using hermeneutic methods leading to expanded capacity for knowing-in-practice. As discussed above, artistic activities can also be used for capacity building by schooling awareness of process (though these do not necessarily need to have an anthroposophical background).

3. Anthroposophical context. The wider anthroposophical context of education within Steiner's works and the secondary anthroposophical literature makes up the third level. This includes works such as Theosophy, lecture cycles such as GA 115 (*Wisdom of Man, the Soul and the Spirit: Anthroposophy, Psychosophy and Pneumatosophy*), GA 45 (*Anthroposophy – A fragment*), Steiner's theory of social threefolding.
4. Steiner's various spiritual paths through meditation, contemplation and the schooling of thinking make up the fourth level. Whether one engages with these is a matter of personal judgement.
5. Esoteric Knowledge: This term can stand for Steiner's whole anthroposophical cosmology, doctrine of karma and reincarnation, Christology and world history.

Following this delineation, Level 1 can and should be presented to the world as the basis of Waldorf education. Level 2 would be required for Waldorf teacher education. Level 3 would be for advanced students of Waldorf education. In this I am in accord with the recent thoughts by Jan Desjepper and Albert Schmelzer (2024) on the relevance of Anthroposophy for Waldorf education, in particular for teacher education. These authors emphasize what aspects of Anthroposophy are relevant but stop short of naming those that are not. Levels 4 and 5 are a matter of personal choice and commitment. Scholars of Anthroposophy can and should explore how ideas expressed at level 1 or 2 can be tracked back to their correspondences and origins in the wider context of Anthroposophy since there is absolutely no doubt, in Steiner's mind, all these levels were integrated. The same ideas can be identified, described and experienced at different levels, each level expanding as a living concept depending on the context and level of consciousness of the person engaging with it. An example of this is Steiner's esoteric explanation of sentience referred to above, as the work of higher spiritual beings at an early stage in world history. This would not be acceptable at levels 1 or 2, but his account of the relationship between the sentient body and the sentient soul can be fruitfully discussed in terms of modern neurology and the theory of qualia.

Anthroposophical scholars in the fields of philosophy, literature, sociology, medicine and so on obviously need to continue their engagement with Steiner in the academic media, exploring, relating, interpreting so that the spectrum of Anthroposophy that can be accessed by mainstream sciences can be expanded. My point here is that this is not the primary task of Waldorf scholars or teachers.

The delineation presented here, if taken up, would prevent no individual from deepening their understanding of Anthroposophy to whatever level they are capable of. My central point is to establish that scholars and students of Waldorf education take a scientific/academic approach to Steiner and Anthroposophy and thereby to counter the accusations that the theory underpinning Waldorf education is not scientific. The approach I have presented here would mean that there would be no difference between a scholar referencing Steiner and one referencing Goethe, Dilthey, Marx, Freud or Weber as theorists in their fields, as I have done in this article. My hope is that other

authors more capable than me, try as I did (Rawson, 2021), or as Bo Dahlin did (2017), to create a new discourse for Waldorf education, that doesn't need to bracket anything out, or claim the validity of the whole of Anthroposophy.

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