

## Chapter 2

# The Formation of a Western Sage

**Abstract** This chapter describes Steiner's life from his boyhood years until the time when he joined the Theosophical Society. It recounts how Steiner grew up in the borderland between nature and culture and between traditional country life and the growth of modern technology. How as a young boy he had clairvoyant experiences of the spiritual world and how it led him to study philosophy, especially epistemology, in his youth. These personal interests were added to his studies of engineering at the Vienna College of Technology. Steiner edited Goethe's scientific writings and developed a Goetheanistic epistemology. He had a personal encounter with Nietzsche, obtained a Ph.D. in philosophy and wrote the book *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (*The philosophy of freedom*). He was part of cultural life in Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century, working as a writer and literary critic in journals and as a teacher in the educational movement of the working class. Steiner's open and non-dogmatic relation to Christianity, as the result of a period of inner struggles and trials, is dealt with in a special section. Finally, how Steiner gained practical pedagogical experience by working as a private tutor in his student years is described.

**Keywords** Spiritual experience • Goetheanistic philosophy of science

The East has its sages and has had them for ages. Although they can also be saintly, sages are above all *wise*. Sages have access to a spiritual wisdom that goes beyond science and ordinary experience. In the West, such people seem to have disappeared from public life around the Renaissance. Since that time, the scientific worldview has grown more and more dominant in our culture, and therefore, spiritual wisdom has been marginalised and neglected. However, Rudolf Steiner did not only possess spiritual insight and wisdom, he also had extensive knowledge of science and technology. During his lifetime, he was much more of a well-known public figure than he is today. He can certainly be called a sage of our time. How was such a

personality formed? In this chapter, I describe Steiner's life from his boyhood until when he was about 40 years old and became the secretary of the German section of the worldwide Theosophical Society (TS). Even though the first Waldorf school started many years later, when Steiner was fully engaged in the anthroposophical movement, his personal life in those years is of less interest from a conventional educational point of view.

It might be noted that the story of Steiner's life from boyhood until middle-aged adult presented here is not based on systematic biographic research (that would be too extensive a task to carry out for this book). I have chosen to take a more 'naïve' approach, using Steiner's autobiography (2000a [GA 28])<sup>1</sup> as my main source of information. This chapter is therefore based on Steiner's own testimony, unless other sources are referred to. There are many Steiner biographies, and other books describing events from his life, most of them sympathetic and appreciative (Beltle and Vierl 2001; Lindenberg 1997; Wehr 1982; Wilson 1985). Recently, however, some critical works have appeared, most notably that of Zander (2011), who deploys the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and a highly contextualistic approach (understanding Steiner's life and actions mainly from an external point of view, as the result of environmental influences and conditions). Zander's work has received some attention in anthroposophical circles, where it is often disdained as built on misapprehensions, false quotations and dubious sources (Ravagli 2009).<sup>2</sup> Personally, I have the impression that this criticism is justified; I have therefore abstained from using Zander's work to any great extent.

Another Steiner biography worth noting is that of Skagen (2015), who, in my view, has succeeded well in not falling into the any of the extremes of turning Steiner either into a divinity, or reducing him to an average person of our own times (Skagen's work so far is only available in Norwegian). As Skagen points out, Steiner wrote his autobiography towards the end of his life, when he was bedridden by a disease that would eventually end his life (he died before the biography was finished). As the leader of the Anthroposophical Society, he was beset with external criticisms from all sides: from the church (both Catholic and Protestant), the socialists and the conservatives/nationalists. The growing Nazi movement had even made at least one attempt to kill him. Skagen presents evidence that these external difficulties of 'the older Steiner' in various ways influenced his account of 'the younger Steiner's' life. He omitted things that could be misused by his enemies, and he emphasised the things that proved them wrong. In other words, he made his autobiography a weapon in the fight for anthroposophy.

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<sup>1</sup>English edition: Steiner (2010).

<sup>2</sup>The criticisms of Zander can also be found on the Website of Lorenzo Ravagli, <http://www.zander-zitiert.de/publikationen/rudolf-steiner-die-biografie/> (accessed 2017-03-16). See also Weickmann (2007, October 4), who, from a more neutral point of view, comes to a rather similar critical evaluation of Zander (2007).

## 2.1 The Formative Years: Childhood and Youth

Rudolf Steiner was born on 27 February<sup>3</sup> 1861, in Donji Kraljevec, which at that time was a small village in the Hungarian part of the Empire of Austria-Hungary (Lindenberg 1997) (nowadays, it is in Croatia, north of Zagreb). At his birth, his father was a telegraph operator at the southern Austrian Railway. About two years later, he became a railway station master in Pottschach, another village situated in the beautiful nature of the eastern Austrian Alps. Here, Steiner spent most of his childhood, from 2 to 8 years of age. Despite his father's position, the family was poor because the wages were low. However, his parents were always prepared to make sacrifices for their children's welfare (Steiner 1996).<sup>4</sup>

In Pottschach, the young Steiner could experience on the one hand the beauty of untouched, pristine nature and, on the other, the latest advancement of technology. In those times, the railway was the pinnacle of technology, especially on the countryside. Steiner recounts how people gathered at the station whenever a train arrived—which was not very often—simply to watch the event. Apart from many ordinary villagers, the schoolteacher, the priest, the accountant at the manor and even the mayor used to come. Steiner reflects that his childhood encounter with the railway was probably of great significance to his development because it awakened his interest in mechanics. This interest engaged his thinking mind and thereby threatened to dominate his feeling life, which was more attracted to the grand and beautiful natural surroundings—into which the trains repeatedly disappeared, ruled by their mechanical laws, as Steiner describes it.

He had deep experiences of the nature around Pottschach, sometimes probably of a clairvoyant character, involving 'nature spirits' and similar supersensory phenomena. It is presumed that he referred to such experiences in one of his mystery plays (the 5th scene of *The souls' probation*; Steiner 1998 [GA 14]), in which a story is told about a boy dwelling alone in the woods, seeing into invisible worlds. Things that normal people consider lifeless spoke to him of secrets hidden behind ordinary sense experience (cf. Wehr 1982). Already as a child, Steiner realised that the things he experienced through such clairvoyant perceptions could not be shared with other people. He found himself living in two worlds: the one he shared with other people and the one that he alone could experience. This became a source of inner questioning for him and already in his youth he began searching for

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<sup>3</sup>There is actually some uncertainty regarding the exact date, whether it is the 27 or the 25; again, see Ravagli's Website, <http://www.zander-zitiert.de/publikationen/rudolf-steiner-die-biografie/falsche-behauptungen/> (accessed 2017-03-17).

<sup>4</sup>This book is based on a lecture held in Berlin 1913 for members of the Anthroposophical Society (AS) and seems not (yet) to be part of the GA. The concern of the lecture is to refute the accusations of Ms. Annie Besant, at that time head of the Theosophical Society (TS). Ms. Besant claimed that Steiner was educated by the Jesuits (not a favourable thing in the theosophical view). In the book, Steiner also explains why he did not join the TS in the 1880s, when he first encountered them in Vienna. The reason was that he perceived a lack of—perhaps even a resistance to—logical and exact thinking.

answers to basic philosophical problems such as the nature of reality and the origin of human knowledge.

Steiner's father was eager that the boy learned to read and write, and Steiner was sent to the village school as soon as he reached school age. However, his father and the schoolteacher soon came into a conflict, which resulted in his father taking him out of school and starting to teach him himself. Steiner had to sit beside his father in his office at the railway station and read and write. But he was more interested in what his father was doing and wanted to do the same things as him. He also became interested in the work going on at the railway station. Gradually, he developed a strong interest in physical phenomena and the laws of nature. He recounts the fascination he felt when pouring sand over an ink-written paper and watching the ink dry, not being able to resist the temptation of testing its dryness with his finger. Another fascination was a spinning-mill close by. He could see the raw material arriving with the train and being brought into the mill. He could also see the ready-made products coming out and being sent away. But he was not allowed to enter inside the spinning-mill itself and see the work there. What was going on inside the mill was a mystery. This was his first experience of the 'limits of knowledge'. In a way, the mill became an illustration of Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself, although he would not encounter this idea until his teens, when he read Kant's *Critique of pure reason*.

In his eighth year, the Steiner family moved to Neudörfl, a then Hungarian border village that now belongs to Austria. On the slope of a mountain close by lay a cloister of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer. On his walks in the area, Steiner often met the monks from the cloister and wished that they would speak to him, but they never did. Nevertheless, they made a solemn impression on him, and he developed a feeling that there must be something very important connected with the life of these monks, something that he ought to learn about. This evoked further questions in his thinking life, questions that made him lonely because he felt there was nobody he could talk to about these things.

Nevertheless, some people he met became very important to him. One was an extra-teacher in Neudörfl, who gave lessons outside of school time, in which Steiner participated. The lessons themselves did not give him much, but he became friends with the man and spent a lot of time in his office. By this time, he could read, and he discovered a book about geometry in the teacher's library, which he could borrow and read for himself. Reading this book gave him his first experience of real happiness. He realised that it was possible to clearly grasp purely spiritual things. Even though the figures dealt with in geometry have a certain connection to our ordinary sense experience of lines and figures, they are nevertheless idealised forms. A point, for instance, has no extension, and such a thing does not exist in the physical world. Furthermore, the laws and relations between these forms are purely conceptual in nature. He realised that in addition to the external space of the sense world, there is an internal space that is the scene of spiritual processes and events. This inner space was as real for him as the world outside, and geometry was a clear illustration of this reality. It provided a basis for the assumption that the spiritual world is as real as the sense world.

This teacher also introduced Steiner to the world of art. He played the piano, and he loved to draw. He made Steiner practise copying paintings and portraits. Regarding music, Steiner was also deeply touched by Hungarian gipsy music, which he could listen to in a village close by. Regarding religion, Steiner's father was a so-called freethinker and never went to church, so at home Steiner never experienced any attempts to intentionally influence his beliefs. He was never confirmed in the Catholic faith. There were of course traditional Bible- and catechumen-classes for all children, which was obligatory the first four school years. But already by this time, the dissolution of traditional religiosity had reached even village life in this part of Europe (Steiner 1996). What the priests talked about there made very little impression on the boy Steiner. What did impress though was the music and services carried out in Catholic mass, which he experienced as an altar server and as part of the village church's boy choir. In these, he experienced a link to the supersensual world and the mood which they evoked in him stayed with him in everyday life at home, despite its relatively secular atmosphere.

As a boy, Steiner took very much part of everyday life, but his thoughts and feelings belonged to 'the other world'. In one respect, he declined to follow the common behaviour of people around him: he refused to act submissively to persons who were his father's superiors, many of whom spent their summer holidays in the village. On such occasions, he sometimes hid himself in the station waiting room, where he pondered the mysteries of a picture book with movable figures. One such day, when he was about nine years old, he recounts he had a clairvoyant vision: a woman unknown to him suddenly entered through the door, stepped into the middle of the room and started to make strange gesturing movements. She asked him to do as much as he could for her now and in the future and then disappeared into the heating stove. Some days later, Steiner came to know that in a place quite far away, a relative to the family, one that Steiner had never met, had committed suicide at the very same time that Steiner had the vision in the waiting room. From that time onwards, Steiner says he could see the spirits working in nature and allowed them to influence him (Steiner 1996, pp. 5ff).

Despite these other-worldly experiences, Steiner claims he was no dreamer but easily found his way in all practical affairs. He was interested in how the railway worked, and he learned to use the telegraph. Through the telegraph, he learned the basic laws of electricity. Thus, Steiner seems to have been eager to study and learn about many things that he encountered in the world around him. At one time, the village priest gave a lesson on the Copernican world system to a small group of more mature pupils. The subject so fascinated the 10-year-old Steiner that he was given an additional private lesson about the sun and moon eclipses. Subsequently, he directed much of his desire for knowledge to phenomena of the solar system.

As for reading and writing, these were very different activities for Steiner as a boy, perhaps because of his early homeschooling. He recounts how, when reading, the words seemed to immediately evoke images, ideas and concepts in his mind. Consequently, he did not pay attention the grammatical and orthographic aspects of the text. When writing, he tried to carefully capture the sound-pattern of the words as they sounded in his dialect, an approach which can easily lead one astray. Even

when 14–15 years old, he made mistakes in his essay writing in school. These were, however, compensated for by their contents (Steiner 1996). Later in life, he deemed this to be a good thing, because learning to write at an early age, in the way that is required by modern education, does according to Steiner kill certain qualities of the soul. This, in turn, raises many obstacles to the development of spiritual faculties, which Steiner himself therefore did not have to struggle with. In a lecture towards the end of his life, Steiner claimed that modern schooling, due among other things to its emphasis on the early acquisition of literacy, prevents people born with a potential for great spiritual wisdom to realise this wisdom in their life (Steiner 1994 [GA 235]; p. 203). From this point of view, things are perhaps even worse today.

Around his tenth year, his father decided that in his secondary school years, Steiner should attend a *Realschule*, a school form with a strong emphasis on science and modern languages. At that time, Steiner himself felt that it did not matter which kind of education he followed because he was so full of questions about life and the world that he thought he would learn something of interest in any case. The school he had to go to was placed in the city of Wiener Neustadt. Steiner found it somewhat difficult to adapt to city life, being used to life in the countryside. The first year he also had difficulties in following the teaching; it did not touch him as particularly interesting. He was longing for teachers that he could look up to as exemplary in some way. In the second year, his teacher in geometry proved worthy of his respect. This teacher payed no heed to textbooks but made all drawings himself on the blackboard, which the students copied. He then dictated to the students what they should write, so that the students made their own textbooks. This made their learning a process of active participation, which Steiner felt was a good thing. In other lessons, he notes, there were ample opportunities for sleep (Steiner 1996, p. 14).

The emptiness created by the lack of exemplary teachers was filled by reading. In an essay about physics, written by the rector of the school, Steiner came across a reference to a book by the same author, with the title *The general movement of matter as the basic cause of all natural phenomena*. Steiner decided to save money to buy this book. To learn everything that could help him understand the essay and the book became an ideal for him. Even though he did not sympathise with the views presented in the book, he felt a need to understand the ideas it contained. He had to read the book and the essay several times—and other books in mathematics and physics as well—before he could grasp the contents.

During these secondary school years, Steiner felt that he had to come closer to natural phenomena to be able to take a stand regarding that spiritual world, which he experienced so clearly and self-evidently. He felt that this spiritual world can only be understood in and by the soul, which meant that thinking must develop in such a way that it can grasp the (supersensuous) essence of natural phenomena. He therefore became fascinated by Kant's *Critique of pure reason*, which he accidentally discovered in the window of a bookshop and, again, he did everything he could to be able to buy the book as soon as possible. To find time to read the book, he took apart his textbook in history and bound it again with the pages of Kant's

book inserted. (He had earlier learnt the art of bookbinding because he had no money to get his schoolbooks bound.) In this way, pretending to read the history book, he could read Kant during history lessons. The teacher himself was merely reading from the textbook—although he pretended to give a lecture—and the students had anyway to read the same text again as homework.

Kant's work was of course no easy read for a young boy, and Steiner had to read the *Critique* many times. He strived for complete clarity of thought and to not let his emotional life influence his thinking in any way. He felt that there was an inherent power in thinking, which could be developed so that it truly grasped the world and its processes. This view is of course not in accord with Kant's notion of a 'thing-in-itself' that human understanding cannot grasp. Nevertheless, Steiner struggled to understand Kant, and at this age, he was not yet critical of his views (see Chap. 3). The reading of Kant stimulated his interest in other philosophers, so that already at the end of his secondary school years he had a good understanding of, for instance, J.F. Herbart.

In the upper secondary years, the curriculum included early Greek and Latin literature and poetry. When he met these subjects, Steiner felt a bit sorry that his father had sent him to the science programme and not the Latin programme. He perceived that so much of the characteristics of ancient Greek and Latin texts were lost in translation. He therefore started to study the upper secondary language textbooks and some years later even taught the same course as a private tutor.

In his boyhood years, Steiner can be seen to have lived and moved between several opposite or contrasting worlds, such as the world of science and technology versus that of pure nature; that of mathematics and geometry versus that of literature and poetry; and that of practical material life versus that of religion. Not only did he note that these different realms of life and experience existed, he also took an active interest in all of them. On top of his ordinary school studies, he developed his own 'study projects', many of which were related to questions of epistemology and ontology, which arose out of his clairvoyant perceptions. His searching spirit could not keep away from questions like 'what is reality?' and 'how can we really know things?'. This search for clear epistemological grounds for his spiritual experiences makes Steiner rather unique in Western cultural history. Most people who have such experiences remain content to be visionaries and just claim to know things without bothering about philosophical justifications. Already in his childhood, Steiner had an active inner life, which made him formulate his own study projects and pursue them in a self-educative manner. This tendency continued and grew stronger in his early adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>As pointed out in Chap. 1, as a young adult Steiner involved himself in studies of many different and opposed streams of thought, such as mysticism as well as natural science. Some of his critics take this as a sign of superficiality and eclecticism. But we see from his boyhood that already then, he was engaged in a personal search for truth which led him in many different directions (cf. Skagen 2015; p 80f).

## 2.2 Steiner as a Young Man

In the summer of 1879, having finished upper secondary school, Steiner prepared to enter the Vienna College of Technology. On his very first trip to Vienna, he bought a great number of books on philosophy with money that he got from selling all his schoolbooks at a second-hand bookstore. One of his favourites by this time was Fichte's *Science of knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*). It was Fichte's idea of the activity of the 'I'—or rather the 'I' *as action*—that caught his interest. Not surprisingly, he had come to the conviction that true knowledge could only be achieved by the inner efforts of the 'I'. Steiner recounts how he 're-wrote' Fichte's book out of his own perspective, which turned into a long manuscript. He also continually worked on transforming his immediate intuitions of the spiritual world into thoughts and concepts.

Steiner now directed his education towards becoming an upper secondary teacher and enrolled for studies in mathematics, natural history and chemistry. But he also attended lectures in other disciplines, such as German literature, held by Karl Schröer, where he learnt about Goethe and Schiller. At the University of Vienna, he went to lectures in philosophy held by Franz Brentano. Steiner was particularly interested in Brentano as a person. He admired the clear logic with which Brentano expressed his ideas, deriving each thought from its logical relations to several other thoughts. But he felt that Brentano's thinking was not connected to his personal life experience that it was somehow alienated. The loose way in which Brentano held his lecture manuscript and how he merely glanced in it now and then was for Steiner a gesture that confirmed this impression.

Steiner says he felt it to be his duty to search for truth through philosophy. He was going to study mathematics and science, but he was convinced that these studies would not give him anything substantial unless he had a philosophical ground of certainty for his own experience, which told him that the spiritual world was *real*. It was immediately evident to him that each human being had their own spiritual individuality, of which the body was only an external manifestation. But whenever he talked about these things with other people, he found them completely uninterested. Some of them started to talk about spiritism (the approach to the spiritual world through séances, mediums, 'Talking tables' and the like), but Steiner found it distasteful to approach spirituality in such a way. Yet he did not necessarily want others to agree with his own views, he just longed for people with a serious and genuine openness for spiritual things.

An important break in this inner loneliness was when on his regular train trips to Vienna—'by a special chain of events' (Steiner 1996, p. 23)—he came across a remarkable man, who sold wild herbs to the pharmacies in the city. This man lived with his family in a remote mountain village and possessed a lot of books on mystical and esoteric wisdom, which he had penetrated deeply. Steiner describes him as very pious, and with him, he could talk openly about the spiritual world and



his own experiences. He was an uneducated and simple person, but his soul carried an elementary and creative wisdom, much of which he had gathered in nature while picking the healing herbs. In communicating with this man, Steiner partook of an instinctive spiritual wisdom, untouched by modern civilisation, science and the contemporary worldview. Many years later, in a lecture to members of the AS, Steiner recounted how this man put him in contact with another person (whose name is not disclosed), who became his spiritual mentor and helped him to bring his powers of spiritual cognition into maturity (Steiner 1996, pp. 23ff). Through these events, which took place in the winter 1881–1882, Steiner's must have felt that his spiritual experiences were externally confirmed as real and valid.

Another confirming consolation was his repeated reading of a certain dialogue between Goethe and Schiller, in which Goethe enthusiastically describes his experience of the archetypal plant (*Urpflanze*). Schiller's rather intellectualistic, Kantian response was that this was not an experience, but an idea. To which Goethe answered that in that case, he could *see* ideas. This was very much in accord with Steiner's experience of thinking as a spiritual activity.

Steiner searched for connections between natural science and the spiritual world, but remained disappointed. He saw Darwin's idea of the development of life from simple to ever more complex organisms as fruitful, but nevertheless hard to reconcile with his own experience of the spiritual world. (Later in his life, he wrote an appreciative essay of Darwin's views and took a stand for him against the conservative resistance of the Catholic church (Steiner 1989a [GA 31]).) Neither did the philosophical search lead him to a clearer vision of the spiritual world. One reason, Steiner realised, was that many philosophers saw thinking and experience as *contraries*, whereas for him thinking was itself an experience, although not based on the external senses. Only in Hegel did he encounter a philosopher who seemed to have a similar view of thinking. (However, Steiner later realised that Hegel was one-sided in his underestimation of sense experience.) Somewhat Platonic, Steiner viewed thoughts as a reflection in the physical brain of that which the soul experiences in the spiritual world. In the beginning of his 20s, he had concluded that by moving deeper and more intensely into abstract thinking, something from the spiritual world came to meet one. In this way, one could encounter a spiritual reality, which subsequently could be re-found in the essence of natural phenomena. This was a spiritual view that was not built on vague, mystical feelings, but on clear and conscious mental activity, not very different from that of mathematics.

As a student at the technical college, Steiner became a member of a student association and study circle, in which texts related to the political and cultural issues of the day were read and discussed.<sup>6</sup> In these discussions, Steiner always

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<sup>6</sup>This was a German nationalistic student association, which was affiliated with *Leseverein der deutschen Studenten Wiens* (readers' association of German students in Vienna), a fact which has been used to depict Steiner as a German nationalist in a negative, political sense (cf. Skagen 2015; p. 319). However, as Skagen (*ibid.*) points out, German nationalism was the mainstream cultural movement in Austria by this time. In addition, Steiner's motive for participating in the association was not political but only cultural and intellectual. It gave him the opportunity to write letters to the

emphasised the plausible aspects of the opinions that were expressed, in accordance with his stance that there is always *some aspect* of truth in what human beings think. After some time, he was unanimously chosen as the chairman of the study group. However, only half a year later, everyone voted against him. The group had discovered that because he saw something justified in political opinion he could never agree with only one party, which was of course what each party had hoped for. This is a typical example of Steiner's attitude to different points of view, both in philosophical and in practical or political issues. However, it did not prevent him from strongly objecting to opinions that, in his view, distorted or misapprehended the facts of a case. All ways of seeing, or *perspectives*, have something that speaks for them (also materialism), but that does not mean that *what* they see is, in every particular case, correct and true.

Regarding politics and 'the social question', which was much debated in these times, Steiner was clear about its importance and acute need of resolution. But he felt that the abstract materialistic ways of thinking dominating the times were tragically unable to produce any fruitful solutions. For Steiner, the question of how to organise society could only be solved on the basis of a spiritual world view. After WW1, he was to present such a view in the idea of a threefolded social structure (see Chap. 6).

## 2.3 Emerging as a Philosopher

In 1882, on the recommendation from Karl Schröer (the professor of German literature mentioned above), Steiner was invited to edit Goethe's texts on nature and natural studies, which was part of a larger project on German national literature, carried out by Joseph Kürschner in Stuttgart. By this time, Steiner had no academic degree—he had finished his engineering studies in 1883 without completing the final examination (Lindenberg 2010)—and he had no formal study merits in the Humanities. Yet he was asked to do such a seemingly prestigious work. However, Goethe's natural studies were probably not as highly esteemed as his literary works, and so the edition of these texts was perhaps included more out of a sense of obligation, than out of real interest. Steiner may have seemed a good choice, because of his genuine interest and understanding of Goethe's way of thinking.

The work with Goethe's texts on natural phenomena meant that Steiner had to clarify his position regarding both natural science and Goethe's view of the world. He discovered that Goethe himself never formulated an explicit theory of knowledge, nor could one use any other existing theory to explain Goethe's way of

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(Footnote 6 continued)

authors of many books that interested him and ask them for a free copy to the association's library. Steiner's sympathy for German nationalism was based on the deep inspiration he received from German idealistic philosophy; it had no racist connotations.

thinking. Steiner therefore felt the need to work out such a theory himself, which resulted in a small book published in 1886 as *Theory of knowledge according to Goethe's world view* (Steiner 2003 [GA 2])<sup>7</sup>.

It was around this time that he found a good friend in Rosa Mayreder, an Austrian freethinker, author, painter, musician and feminist whose husband was for a time the Rector of the technical university. With Rosa Mayreder, Steiner shared an engagement in the question of human freedom and they exchanged many letters about this and other topics throughout the 1890s (Steiner 1987 [GA 39]). In Mayreder, Steiner found someone to whom he could openly express his ideas and the questions that interested him, and who would honestly answer him with her own views. He says the friendship with Mayreder somewhat eased his feelings of inner loneliness in these years. However, when he later (1902) joined the Theosophical Society in Berlin, Rosa Mayreder distanced herself from Steiner, who earlier had advised *her not* to join the TS in Vienna.

In 1889, Steiner encountered the director of the Goethe–Schiller archive in Weimar, Bernhard Suphan. Suphan supervised the work of another edition of Goethe's collected works, and on his request, Steiner again agreed to take care of Goethe's scientific texts. In the beginning, Steiner travelled back and forth between Vienna and Weimar, but in 1890, he settled in Weimar. The editing work went on for seven years, with constant tensions between himself and Suphan. In his letters, Steiner calls Suphan 'the Goethe–Pope' (*Goethe-Papst*) (Steiner 1987 [GA 39]; p. 47) and describes him as a philistine old Prussian school master, because of his lack of understanding of the philosophical implications of Goethe's studies of nature, implications that were highly important for Steiner to demonstrate.<sup>8</sup>

Steiner's feelings of inner loneliness did not prevent him from living a very active social life. In Weimar, he participated in several cultural circles of different kinds, consisting of artists, journalists, authors and academics. In these groups, he was confronted with many different views of life. Although there was much debate about such questions—especially in Weimar—and although he made great efforts to understand the point of view of others, there was hardly anyone who showed the same interest for his own ideas.

By this time, Steiner says he became aware of how the external sense world had always seemed a bit dim and distant to him and how he felt most clear and awake in his inner thinking life. When he visited other people, and talked about philosophical ideas, it was as if he had to make a special effort to step out of his own inner space to enter that of another person. Nevertheless, once he had left his own space, he felt at home also by the other person. But he never felt that another person really entered *his* 'home'. In his own spiritual world, there were no visitors. It was not that he expected agreement, he only wished for people to show an honest interest in his

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<sup>7</sup>English edition: Steiner (2009).

<sup>8</sup>Goethe himself would probably approve of how Steiner dealt with his texts on science. Schimanski (1998) reports Goethe saying that the texts he left to the world should be treated liberally and, according to his intentions, not pedantically and without love.

ideas. This general lack of interest in other people's thinking Steiner regards as an effect of 'the enchantment of intellectualism', which tends to make people content with their own perspective on things. Whereas if one *sees* the reality of the spiritual world, one also sees that many different—even opposing—standpoints have their justifications, and one must guard oneself not to be biased towards one or another of them. However, such openness to different perspectives is not to be confused with having no stance of one's own, and just 'going with the wind'. In his correspondence with Rosa Mayreder, for instance, Steiner did not hesitate to express his own ideas and how they differed from those of his female friend, to which Rosa Mayreder responded with the same straightforwardness. But they seem to simply have liked to share their views on things, not having a quarrelsome discussion about who was right.

During his work at the Goethe–Schiller archive in Weimar, Steiner met the sister of Friedrich Nietzsche, Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche. She wanted to consult Steiner regarding her intention to create a Nietzsche archive on similar principles as the one of Goethe–Schiller. She also asked whether Steiner could be the editor of Nietzsche's collected works. In the beginning, Steiner felt a deep sympathy for her, but later they were to have painful conflicts, presumably caused by her continuous attempts to distort Nietzsche's texts, in order to present him as anti-Semitic, something that she later succeeded to do in cooperation with the Nazi government (Eriksen 2013). Steiner seems to have been the first to publicly denounce her untrustworthy character (*ibid.*).

Through the contact with Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche, Steiner came to meet Nietzsche personally in his time of mental illness. The encounter made a deep impression on him: Nietzsche was lying on a sofa, to all appearances completely lost to the world. But Steiner could sense how the soul of the deep thinker was as if soaring above his head, in worlds of spiritual light, devoted to worlds that he had longed for but not been able to reach before his illness. Steiner says that what he experienced in this meeting he could only express in a 'stuttering' way in his own book about Nietzsche's philosophy. (Steiner 2000b [GA 5]). He considered Nietzsche's illness as one of the most unfortunate things that happened to Western philosophy in his time. He was convinced that if Nietzsche had read his book on the philosophy of freedom (1995a [GA 4])<sup>9</sup>, he would have found in it the further development of ideas that Nietzsche himself had left unfinished, especially regarding ethics (Steiner 1985a [GA 38], p. 238f) (see further Chap. 3).

It was during his Weimar years that Steiner—inspired by the social encounters with the artists working there—began to reflect more about the significance of art in human life. As was his habit of mind since childhood, he wanted to formulate his ideas about art in harmony with the views he had hitherto developed about knowledge. In 1890, he published some essays in the field of aesthetics (Steiner 1985b [GA 271]), and throughout his life, he repeatedly returned to the significance of art for spiritual insight and development. Perhaps there is a correlation between

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<sup>9</sup>English edition: Steiner (2011a).

Steiner's new interest in art and his claim that towards the end of the Weimar period he felt that his senses became more sharp and clear and that his observation of the physical world became more exact and intensive. Thereby, the opposition and contradictions between the spiritual world and the sense world also became more prevalent for him. But he did not experience this opposition as something that had to be mediated, explained or dissolved. On the contrary, he felt that to really experience this opposition was to understand life as it really is. Any attempt to dissolve the contraries by a mere idea would smother out life into something abstract and dead. Seeing that life thrives on contradictions, Steiner instead devoted himself to intense contemplation of the mysteries of the world.

Steiner, perhaps a bit surprisingly, did not feel that the riddles and mysteries of existence could be solved in or by thought. Thinking could take one a bit on the way, but the actual solutions had to be found in the world itself. Some phenomenon or process would *show* the solution. One is reminded of Goethe's dictum that 'facts are their own theory' and his view of the sunrise as the archetypal phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) that explains all optical colours.<sup>10</sup> For Steiner, the human being itself became the ultimate solution to the mysteries of the world—a basic principle of his later anthroposophical teachings. This has perhaps some affinity with what is presently called the anthropic view of the universe: that the whole of creation is geared towards the arising of humankind (cf. Breuer 1991).

The consequence of this view, according to Steiner, is that human insight itself becomes part of the world process. Insight means *participation* in what processes and happenings in the physical and spiritual world communicate to us. The solution to the world riddle is participation in the mystery itself, one might say. This relates to the non-representational view of knowledge that is a crucial aspect of Steiner's epistemology (more about this in Chap. 3).

During the Weimar years, Steiner was struggling hard to find a clear expression of his philosophical views (but in a way, this struggle continued throughout his whole life). Among other things, he worked on a thesis on epistemology, and in 1891, he was promoted Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Rostock. The title of his thesis was *The basic question of epistemology with special regard to Fichte's theory of science* (*Die Grundfrage der Erkenntnistheorie mit besondere Rücksicht auf Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre*). In 1892, an extended version of the thesis was published as a book with the title *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft* (1980 [GA 3])<sup>11</sup>. A few years later, in 1894, the first edition of Steiner's main philosophical work, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1995a), was published. In a letter to Rosa Mayreder, he describes this book as a biography of a soul striving for freedom (1987 [GA 39], p. 232). He says he is not trying to teach something, he is only giving an account of the paths of thought that he has wandered in his soul, when searching for a true

<sup>10</sup>Goethe says: 'The highest would be: to understand, that all actuality (*alles Faktische*) is already theory. The blueness of the sky reveals the basic law of chromatics. Only do not seek anything behind the phenomena: they themselves are the theory (*die Lehre*)' (Goethe 1981, p. 233; my translation).

<sup>11</sup>English edition: Steiner (2007).

understanding of freedom. (This may be the reason why most academic philosophers do not consider this book a serious philosophical work.)

Steiner's productive engagement with his own philosophical quest had consequences for his editorial work with Goethe's texts, which was constantly delayed and therefore a source of irritation to Suphan, his employer at the Goethe archive. By this time, Steiner had changed his plans and hoped for a position at some university, which must have spurred him to write and publish his own ideas. From Steiner's letters, we can see that he aimed first for a professor's chair in Philosophy at the Vienna College of Technology and later for a *Privatdozentur* (Associate Professor) at the University of Jena (Steiner 1987 [GA 39]; p. 246 and 273).

In his autobiography, Steiner admits that *on the surface* there are contradictions in his writings from this time (the 1890s). Steiner claims, however, that if one can see behind the words into what he was trying to convey, such contradictions are dissolved.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, he was painfully aware that the way he understood the philosophical issues of knowledge, reality and ethics was very much opposed to the predominating views of the times. In a talk with a physicist about Goethe's theory of colours, the scientist told him that Goethe's views were such that they were completely useless to physics. This utterance made Steiner dumbfounded. He realised that what was truth for him was of no interest at all to the world in general. Towards the end of the 1890s, the question 'Must one become dumb?' lived strongly in his soul (Steiner 2000a [GA 28]; p. 334).

By this time, Steiner was invited to become editor of a magazine on literature—*Magazin für die Literatur des In- und Auslandes*—which published poetry and essays from all streams of cultural life. The magazine had an open approach to different views, and Steiner accepted the task and was given the publishing rights in 1897. The magazine had constant financial problems, and Steiner did not manage to increase its number of readers. Nevertheless, he continued to be its editor for some years, and this work, he says, led him to a deeper understanding of the ideas and attitudes of the bourgeoisie at the time.

The work at the Goethe–Schiller archive in Weimar was at an end, and the new job as editor made Steiner move to Berlin. There, in 1898, he was approached by another fraction of society: Wilhelm Liebknecht's *Bildungsschule* for working class people. The leaders of this institution asked whether he could take on the lessons in history and rhetoric. The socialist ideology on which the institute was based did not interest Steiner, but he felt that teaching people from the working class would be an interesting task. He therefore accepted on the condition that he could teach history from his own point of view and not based on marxism, as was usual at the time in such institutions. This condition was granted. As a teacher for these people, Steiner

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<sup>12</sup>One can find such a contradiction also in his autobiography: in contrast to his objection to dissolving the dualism between spirit and matter noted above, he later in the same book (Steiner 2000a [GA 28]) says, that the source of that which expresses itself as spirit in human culture and as matter in the physical world is something, that is beyond both modes of being. This something unites both spirit and matter and is the basis for Steiner's monistic ontology, which is therefore, strictly speaking, neither materialistic nor spiritualistic (see further Chap. 3).

says he had to learn their conceptions and way of forming judgments to be able to communicate his ideas in a language that they understood. He himself came from a poor family background and probably found it easy to identify with his new students. He found that their way of seeing things was very much based on their experience of working life. But they had no ideas about the spiritual forces at work in history; therefore, the marxist view of history could easily find acceptance with them, because of its focus on economy and productive material work. True to his basic attitude towards different perspectives, Steiner admitted that there was some truth in the marxist view of history, but only after the sixteenth century. Before that age, social life was dominated by other powers, what marxism would call ideology: the formative power of ideas and spiritual influences. Steiner demonstrated to the workers that the human capacities for knowledge, religion and art also had contributed to historical development. To begin with, the leadership of the school gave Steiner freehands and did not care much about the contents of his lessons. But as time passed, they learnt more about his ideas and became more concerned. Steiner recounts how one of their lesser leaders spoke at a gathering of his students and explained how the proletarian movement did not want freedom but ‘rational force’ (*‘vernünftigen Zwang’*; Steiner 2000a [GA 28]; p. 379). The purpose of the speech was to drive Steiner away, against the will of his students who were very fond of him. But in 1902, Steiner had to abandon this teaching work.<sup>13</sup>

In Berlin, Steiner continued his habit of becoming a member of different cultural societies. One of them was *Die Kommenden* (The Coming), founded by a Jewish poet, Ludwig Jakobowski, with which Steiner became friends. The society consisted of authors, artists, scientists and other people interested in cultural life. Jakobowski was also the leader of an association devoted to resistance to anti-semitism. Steiner sympathetically describes how this work weighed heavily on the poet’s soul, because every day it reminded him of the forces of antipathy directed towards his people.

Another society Steiner visited was the Giordano Bruno Association, consisting of people who sympathised with a monistic spiritual world view. When Steiner gave a lecture at one of their meetings, he caused a great upheaval against himself. The main part of the leadership of the association thought that Steiner wanted to introduce Catholicism, because he had pointed to the non-dualistic world view of the early Medieval Scholastics.<sup>14</sup> According to Steiner, the strong opposition between matter and spirit, which the society wanted to dissolve, is really a construction of modern times and was not so strong in earlier ages. For the early Scholastics, the whole of creation dwells in Divine Wisdom; it is only the limits of human perception that make us blind to this fact. Steiner says he mentions this event in his autobiography because later many people imagined that by this time in

<sup>13</sup>The number of students increased each year and the lectures were held in late evening, from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m.—perhaps a testimony to the interest and enthusiasm of both the students and their teacher.

<sup>14</sup>Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome in 1600, condemned for heresy by the Catholic Church.



his life he adhered to a *materialistic* world view. This is an example of how his flexibility in terms of intellectual perspectives made people ascribe all kinds of different and contradictory world views to him.

Steiner visited, or was invited to give lectures, to several groups and gatherings around famous personalities of the Berlin society around the turn of the century. One of them was the Berlin branch of the Theosophical Society, where he finally found people who were not only interested in his ideas, but also—according to Steiner’s perception—had an inner need for them. Steiner was careful to explain that he did not talk out of a mere intellectual understanding and adherence to theosophical book knowledge (he says he found most theosophical literature of the time ‘distasteful’ in how it presented spiritual ideas). He spoke only out of his own insight and experience. His lectures were much appreciated, and eventually, in 1902, he became part of the leadership of the German section of the worldwide Theosophical Society.

## 2.4 Steiner’s Relation to Christianity

Towards the end of the 1890s, a period started in Steiner’s life, in which he says he went through many soul conflicts and inner trials that—at least partly—had to do with his relation to Christianity (Steiner 2000a [GA 28], Chapter 26). As described above, in his childhood, the rituals of the Catholic mass made a deep impression on him when he served at the altar in the village church, but he never cared for the instructions in Christian beliefs given by priests and teachers. Now, he felt that he had to come to terms with the ideas of the Christian faith. This inner crisis lasted a few years and resulted in a small book about Christianity as a ‘mystical fact’ (1989d [GA 8])<sup>15</sup>, which was first published in 1902.<sup>16</sup> His so-called ethical individualism, which is a basic element in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (Steiner 1995a; see further Chap. 3), seems to have been at the centre of these inner struggles. Steiner’s ethical individualism is based on a radical concept of freedom in the realm of morals and ethics, a concept that contradicts the traditional Abrahamic religions, which are based on revelations of ‘God’s will’. This implies that ethical values are given by a source external to the individual. In contrast, Steiner saw values and ideals as the result of the unfolding of the human spirit, an unfoldment which can only take place in freedom and can therefore take different external forms in different people.

Another aspect of these inner conflicts had to do with Steiner’s view that a modern spiritual world view had to take natural science as a *starting point*. It could no longer be based on revelatory scriptures and speculative interpretations of such texts. Steiner saw the impulse that generated natural science as itself of spiritual

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<sup>15</sup>English edition: Steiner (2011b).

<sup>16</sup>According to Bock (1961), in 1899 Steiner completely changed his lifestyle almost from one day to the next, as a result of his inner tribulations.



origin and as an essential part of the development of human consciousness. Its importance lies in the development of clear concepts and of clarity in thinking. Based on such a stance, the human being can approach the spiritual world in full consciousness and absolute freedom and only so can modern mankind develop spiritually in the right way.

Steiner's views in these areas were of course not compatible with traditional Christianity, which tends to moralism in the ethical sphere and to 'blind faith' regarding the more ontological contents. That is probably the reason why he by this time felt it necessary to publish texts that were critical of Christianity and texts that sometimes border on atheism and are not far from the spirit of Nietzsche (see Steiner 1989c [GA 30]). Steiner's way out of these soul conflicts was to study the history of Christianity, which led him to the insights published in GA 8 (1989d). In this book, we find a form of Christianity that is completely reconcilable with the other aspects of Steiner's thinking. Christ is of cosmic significance for the spiritual development of mankind as well as of the Earth, but this does *not* mean that we all must become Christians in a denominational—or even confessional—sense. In a beautiful passage from one of his lectures, Steiner describes what a true Christian culture could be like, a description which also has strong educational implications (cf. Dahlin 2013):

Imagine that you were on an island where there were as yet no scriptures about the mystery of Golgotha: if people there worked in such a way that they through their spiritual life in full consciousness took in the power of early childhood all the way up to old age, then they would be Christians in the true sense. (Steiner 1989b, p. 96)

## 2.5 Steiner as Practical Pedagogue

Steiner was never employed as a schoolteacher, but he was a practical pedagogue from his early youth. Fourteen years old, in the lower secondary school, he often helped his younger friends to understand things they found difficult. In the upper secondary, at the age of fifteen, he started taking jobs as a private tutor. He recounts how he assimilated many of the things he was taught in school in a sort of half-dream state. Only what he had to struggle with, out of inner interest, was clear and fully conscious to him. However, the task of teaching others gave him the opportunity to achieve this clarity about more things than those which spontaneously interested him. Perhaps it was this experience that led him to suggest that students make their own textbooks: working on such a task is a bit like teaching or communicating to others what you yourself have understood. Steiner's private tutoring made him learn many things about psychological development in childhood and youth. Among other things, he noted how the processes of maturation in boys and girls are very different. He continued private tutoring during his higher education years at the Vienna College of Technology. At the time, this was a very common way for poor students to earn their livelihood. He taught mostly

undergraduates, but also some postgraduate students, mostly in mathematics (Wehr 1982).

In 1884, Schröer, the professor in German literature, recommended him as private tutor to a business family in Vienna. The family had four sons, one of whom suffered from hydrocephaly. The parents had no great expectations for this boy. Steiner, however, accepted the task to try to educate the boy, on the condition that he was given complete command over his life, i.e. his daily habits of rest, movement, food and sleep. He won the parents' trust to do this, especially the mother's. He was convinced that the boy had great spiritual gifts, despite his obvious handicap. In one of his lectures, Steiner says that a seemingly undeveloped brain may hide great spiritual capacities and that the environment in which a child grows up is an important factor for how these capacities manifest (Steiner 1983 [GA 54]; p. 227). In a significant way, human beings are mirror-images of their surrounding world. Present theories of development would have no argument with the idea that we are 'products' of our immediate surroundings, our culture and our society. Yet Steiner also says in his autobiography that already in his youth he was convinced that the human 'I' is an independent spiritual reality. People who see the 'I' as the result of merely external influences do not know its essential nature. This is an example of how Steiner often thinks 'both-and' instead of 'either-or'. Paradoxes of 'both-and' can usually be dissolved by more careful thinking and more sensitive perceptions. For instance, the 'I' is not the same as the *character* of a person, or the manifest personality. The latter is formed by all kinds of factors, from biological to sociological, whereas the 'I', the spiritual kernel, primarily exists in the inner depths of the soul.

As for the hydrocephalic boy, Steiner recounts how he first had to find an entrance to the boy's soul, which mostly dwelled in a kind of sleeping state and had difficulties controlling its body functions. In the beginning, he taught the boy only for half an hour a day, a lesson which he spent several hours to plan and prepare, so that it would be as effective as possible. Primarily, the task was to bring the boy's soul into the body, so to speak. His work with teaching this boy gave him many insights into the nature of the human being, insights that later became part of the pedagogical anthropology of Waldorf education and presumably also of his curative pedagogy (*Heilpädagogik*; see Steiner 1995b [GA 317]), i.e. his educational methods for mentally handicapped. Because of Steiner's work, the boy developed far above expectations. He was eventually able to enter upper secondary school and then went on to become a physician.

One of this boy's brothers once told how Steiner later in his life, as the leader of the AS, used to pay social visits to the family (Wehr 1982, pp. 64f). During such visits, he never talked about anthroposophy, and when asked why, he said that for him this topic was far too serious to 'discuss' or 'converse' about in a social gathering. Anyone who was genuinely interested was welcome to visit him privately about it, he explained. This shows something of Steiner's attitude towards his spiritual teachings. Even though he considered them vitally important to the future of humanity, they were not something to be talked about indiscriminately and certainly not to be propagated to children and young people in school.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Steiner's whole life was, in a way, a life in and for the spirit. Already in his boyhood, he was occupied with deep questions of a philosophical and spiritual nature. But he was not, according to his own words, a dreamer with no sense for practical things (and those who knew him as an adult would most probably agree). And he was always willing to enter new situations and to communicate with people who had different views of life, to learn from them. He worked and associated with artists and freethinkers of the middle class, and he became a teacher for working class people and tried to understand their way of thinking. His mind was probably both sensitive and flexible by nature, and his way of taking on different tasks must certainly have kept these qualities alive and even developed them.

Looking only at his inner, thinking life, one could perhaps divide his biography into three main periods: up to his 30s, he was constantly struggling to find ways to understand his spiritual experiences and their relation to the science and philosophy of his time. This inner struggle culminated in his book about 'the philosophy of freedom' (Steiner 1995a, b [GA 4]), which can be understood as demonstrating how a spiritual philosophy and science is possible. In the second period, from around 30 to 40 years old, Steiner's struggle changed into finding ways to express spiritual truth and reality in forms suitable for the time and age. The third period, finally, starts when he joins the TS and becomes the secretary of its German section. Within this framework, he found the possibility to express his spiritual experience and insight in ways that could be understood and appreciated by other people. However, in 1913, for reasons we need not go into here, he felt compelled to break with the theosophists and founded his own society, based on anthroposophy.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-58906-0>

Rudolf Steiner

The Relevance of Waldorf Education

Dahlin, B.

2017, XI, 143 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-58906-0