

Rudolf Steiner's concept of history in light of his early philosophy and later esotericism

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to illustrate different aspects of Rudolf Steiner's concept of history as they are expressed in his philosophy and esotericism. One aspect of his approach to history is connected to time, and I will discuss both his early and later treatment of this concept. His relationship to theosophy will also be treated in terms of his early and later thought. In the article, I investigate and problematize Steiner's relationship to teleology, and the extent to which this plays into his conception of history. Steiner's concept of spiritual science will also be illustrated and problematized.

Keywords: Concept of history, concept of time, epistemology, esotericism, teleology

Introduction

Rudolf Steiner's (1861-1925) concept of history is complex. He formulates the epistemology on which it is grounded relatively early. The ontological space that emerges out of this epistemology, however, is gradually and substantially expanded. To put it simply, one can say that the early Steiner formulates his ideas within a humanistic, academic-literary and philosophical frame, while the later Steiner adds a new layer to the classical term of spiritual science¹, involving an ontological expansion and enrichment through the inclusion of extra-sensory phenomena, forces and beings.

The *multitude* of Steiner's perspectives on history is too comprehensive for a treatment in this article. In approaching his concept of history, I have therefore selected those perspectives which I find the most essential. Importantly, Steiner emphasized several times that the results of his cognition² and research were anchored in his own thought and experience. In his autobiography (1999), Steiner describes having had extra-sensory experiences of man's individuality and of nature already in childhood, and that the essential task he later took upon himself was to convey these experiences through a language and thought-activity able to communicate with contemporary science. In this article, I will not discuss whether or not Steiner succeeded in this, and the extent to which said emphasis is consistent. The "transition" of his lectures and authorship from mainly literary-philosophical to mainly esoteric did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. It has been subject to different interpretations throughout the trajectory of Steiner's reception (Sparby, 2013, Skagen, 2015). While referencing them, this article will not discuss the different receptions of Steiner in detail. The present

1. The early Steiner used the term *spiritual science* in the common definition of the time. Later, he used it as a term for his spiritual research. (Today, spiritual science goes by the name *humanities*.)

2. Translator's note: The German term *erkennung* will here be translated to *cognition*.

article is primarily the result of a hermeneutical reading³ of selected texts and Steiner's presentation of his own cognition-development. In this reading, I have encountered formulations and ideas that seem to both contradict and build on each other.

The enigma of time

Steiner's early thoughts on *time* are connected to his epistemological onsets. At eighteen, he is particularly occupied with the enigma of space and time (Wiesberger, 2019). Two years later, he writes a paper which, according to Christian Clement (2018, p. LXIV), reveals how the early engagement with these enigmas forms a foundation for his later philosophical and esoteric thought-development. In a letter referencing this paper, Steiner expresses gratitude towards the art philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807-1887) for revising the concept of time, a revision which "in many respects may heal science" (Steiner, in Skagen, p. 2015, p. 168). Vischer criticised what he believed to be a unilateral, chronological way of thinking in Darwinism, where the apparition of the spirit (as final) lacked an essential element; namely that this final spiritual principle be determining for the base of evolution. In other words: "...That which appears finally [the spirit], is principally the first". Accordingly, the cause of man and the world cannot be pursued in the cell or the atom, "but in the chronologically *final*, in the spirit" (Steiner and Vischer, in Skagen, 2015, p. 168).

In 1892, Steiner formulates in writing the epistemology on which his engagement with the enigma of time is grounded. He underlines that cognition's task encompasses more than conceptualization of the given and mirroring of "one or another reality". Cognition's task is "to create a completely new sphere, which when combined with the world given to our senses constitutes complete reality" (Steiner, 2009a, p. 15).⁴ The spiritual creation process of man, he continues, is "an organic part of the universal world-process". Man does not relate to the world passively, as a spectator merely registering his surroundings, he is "the active co-creator of the world-process, and cognition is the most perfect link in the organism of the universe" (p. 15). According to Clement (2018, p. LXVII, LXX), one can locate the basis of Steiner's later esoterically charged cosmogony in this western, philosophical context.

Cognition is thus, for Steiner and several other scholars of German idealism, neither separated from nor juxtaposed with the world-process, but rather a formative element incorporated in it (Skagen, 2015). As such, the world-process and the human cognition-process are not incompatible sizes. Through man's cognition-process, the cognized (the world) reaches a new form of existence. In this way, a unity between ontology and epistemology emerges, due to man's cognition-act being deeply integrated in the being, in the ontological bedrock of the world.

Steiner's early engagement with the enigma of time is carried by the idea that – because thought and cognition are not separated from the world – it must be possible for man to acquire knowledge about the being of time, knowledge that is more substantial than mere reflection and speculation. According to Hella Wiesberger (2014, p. 29), an "entirely idiosyncratic cognition of the *being of time*" can be found in Steiner's early thought. Interiorly, he had "a complete clarity regarding the concept of time" already at eighteen. Central here is that "alongside the progressive evolution, there is an interfering, regressive evolution [...]" and that the cognition of this is the "precondition of the spiritual sight" (Steiner, in Wiesberger, 2014, p. 30). Meanwhile, the problem was how to communicate this in a viable, scientific-philosophical language. According to Wiesberger (2014), "the synthetic geometry" aids Steiner in this regard. Steiner writes in his autobiography (2009) that, already at age nine, he was struck by the similarities between geometry and his own extra-sensory experiences. In his twentieth year, the awareness of the connection between

3. Here, my foundation lies in the following words of Henrik Holm: "[H]ermeneutics is to understand something in conjunction with something else. To understand the meaning of one expression with the help of another expression is, in my understanding, a good definition of hermeneutics [...]" (Holm, 2017, p. 6).

4. This article is mainly based on Norwegian renditions of Steiner. However, it will draw on the authorized English translations of the Rudolf Steiner Archive & e.Lib. <<https://www.rsarchive.org>>, particularly in the case of (Steiner 2009a), (Steiner 2009b), (Steiner 2007), (Steiner 2005), and (Steiner 1977).

the geometrical and spiritual field of experience becomes “fully conscious” (Wiesberger, 2014, p. 31). In a lecture from 1911 (rendered in Wiesberger, 2014, p. 32, 33), Steiner demonstrates this connection by asking his audience to imagine that the look towards the future and the look back at the past lead to the same point. To clarify, he adds that if one starts at the bottom of a circle, moves upwards to its highest point and then downwards again on the other side, one will return to the point of departure. He then asks his audience to imagine infinity as a line which is also a part of a circle, in other words: “Laying at the base of a perception that grasps infinity, is a straight line continuing infinitely in both directions, but which in reality is a circle line” (Steiner, in Wiesberger, 2014).

In other contexts, Steiner uses the term *the dual stream of time*. Christoph J. Hueck argues that in terms of Steiner’s view on evolution, “the dual stream of time” is one of the most difficult concepts to comprehend (Hueck, 2014, p. 18). The stream of the past has to do with the inherited, with forces that constitute growth and form (etherical forces), and furthermore that which is imprinted in us through recollections and ideas. This stream of the past, then, moves alongside the stream from the future, which has a “gestalt-potential”, and originates from an astral, soul sphere. When the etherical (stream of the past) meets the astral (stream of the future), the consciousness of the present arises. This consciousness “is the concurrence of the astral-body and the ether-body”⁵ (Steiner, in Hueck, 2014, p. 18). Hueck asserts that the dual stream of time can be related to man’s consciousness in the span of past and future forces, but also to the organic development. The stream of the past’s impetus is connected to the stream of inheritance. The stream of the future’s impetus is the gestalt-potential, which derives from what Steiner calls the *archetypes*.⁶ Even though one can theoretically distinguish between two streams of time, they are in reality

“always interwoven and active in the organism!” (p. 20).

The *dual stream of time* is a difficult term to understand indeed; a detailed examination of it is not the aim of this article. It will be sufficient for now to state that Steiner describes an active stream of time that comes from the future and is connected to an archetypal future-potential. One could also call this potential a self-realization of the inherent possibilities of a being. The stream of the past is connected to hereditary forces, including ideas and recollections. Particularly interesting with regard to Steiner’s conception(s) of history is his description of time as something animate, active, formative and spirit-like, which is accessible to cognition (Clement, 2018). This aspect, which, according to himself, was integrated both in his experience-field and his cognition-field from ages 18 to 20, would not be formulated until long after. While still working as a philosopher and literarian in the 1880s and 90s in Central Europe, Steiner writes that he was deeply occupied with this spiritual conception of time, but that it had yet to be expressed in writing. The conception of history that did appear in writing during this time will be treated in the following chapter.

His own master

In his late twenties (1886), Steiner makes an epistemological distinction between the natural sciences and the spiritual sciences (Steiner, 2009b).⁷ History (as an academic discipline of the spiritual sciences) cannot, like the natural sciences, “apply the method of mechanics and physics” (p. 122). In the natural sciences, “the particular is determined by the general”. This relation is reversed when applied to the idea of man and mankind; the individual is put in the centre, and the general is consequentially determined by the particular.

5. The concepts of *etherical* and *astral* forces were not used by the early Steiner, neither during his extra-sensory experiences of the being of time, nor when he formulated these in writing. First in his ‘theosophical phase’ does he apply these concepts. In the theosophical terminology, we find four central, anthroposophical terms: The *physical body*, which man shares with the Mineral Kingdom, the *ether-body*, shared with the Plant Kingdom, the *astral-body*, shared with the animal kingdom and finally the *I* (sometimes described as the *I-body*), which is unique to man. The use of the term *body* is not to be understood in purely physical terms, but as an organizing principle. Besides these four stages of being, several other stages are described, as well as the possibility for individuals to develop new aspects of being through schooling.

6. From the German term *Urbild*.

7. Here, Steiner uses the term *spiritual science* in the common definition of the time, i.e. what we today call *humanities*. This definition must not be confused with his later introduction of spiritual science as a concept for his own spiritual research.

General historical laws can, according to Steiner, only exist as human goals and ideals. Unlike inorganic nature, the human being is not subject to forces and laws outside of itself, and should therefore not “be the single form of a general type”. Man ought to personally “fix the purpose, the goal, of his existence, of his activity. If his actions are the results of laws, these laws must be such as he gives to himself” (p. 116).

The spiritual sciences are thus, according to Steiner, sciences of freedom, where the very *idea of freedom* forms their central point. For “the spirit takes only that place in the universal, in the totality of the world, which it gives to itself as an individual” (p. 117). Whereas the natural sciences are concerned with the idea of the Typus, the spiritual sciences operate with the idea of personality.

That intentions and goals originates from the individual itself is central to the idea of freedom. If man acts in accordance with an ideal, it is not dictated by outer laws. The ideal is active within the human being, and its will to act is thus located not outside, but *within*:

“Man does not receive laws from an external Power; he is his own lawgiver” (p. 125).

One could argue that Steiner takes an atheistic position through this unequivocal emphasis on the human being's autonomy in relation to its self-determination. However, religious concepts are also incorporated in his idealistic approach to history. After describing the idea of freedom, Steiner introduces the terms *World-Fundament* and *Guiding Power of the world*. He then posits the question: Who could give the human being laws, if not itself? He answers: “The World-Fundament has poured itself out completely into the world; it has not drawn back from the world in order to control it from without” (p. 125). Therefore, it works immanently in that its “highest form” is integrated in human thought, and by extension in human personality. “If, then, the World-Fundament has goals”, Steiner resonates, “these are identical with the goals which man sets up for himself as he manifests his own being.” (Steiner, 2009, p. 125). In my understanding, Steiner here describes a merging of man's and the World-Fundament's driving forces, but not one in which the latter, internally and/or externally, governs over what the human being brings forth of thoughts and actions – it is the other way around:

It is not by searching out this or that commandment of the guiding power of the world that [man] acts in accordance with its intentions but rather through acting in accordance with his own insights. For within these insights there lives that guiding power of the world. It does not live as will somewhere outside the human being; it has given up all will of its own in order to make everything dependent upon man's will. In order for the human being to be able to be his own lawgiver, he must give up all thoughts of such things as extra-human determining powers of the world, etc. Steiner, 2009b, p. 127, 128

Steiner operates, then, with a concept of God in his ontology; a Guiding Power, whose goals are expressed in evolution and history. However, the external, divine ruling ceases to be at a certain point in evolution, after which – as I interpret it – it is *awakened* through man's cognition. Thusly, the divine ruling becomes “identical with the goals which man sets up for himself”. Central to Steiner's concept of freedom is therefore the fact that the disappearance of divine guidance makes “man his own master, in the best of all senses of that word” (p. 126). Consequently, “in history also, the subject of which is man, we must not speak of influences upon man's conduct from without, of ideas which reside in the age, etc. Least of all must we speak of a plan constituting the basis of history” (p. 128). Steiner emphasizes instead man's actions and views as an impetus for historical development, adding that “all a priori constructions of plans which are supposed to form the basis of history are contrary to the historical method as this issues from the nature of history”.

Elaborating on this, he writes that the aim of the historical method is “to learn what men contribute for the advancement of their race; to learn what goal this or that personality has set for himself, what direction he has given to his age”, for “History is to be based entirely on human nature. The will, the tendencies of human nature, are to be grasped. Our science of knowledge excludes all possibility that a purpose should be ascribed to history, as if men were educated from a lower stage of perfection to a higher, etc.” (Steiner, 2009b, p. 127).⁸

8. That God works immanently through man's cognition cannot, in Steiner's case, only be understood in one way. Shortly after, in a new introduction to Goethe's texts on natural science, he writes that man's freedom is preconditioned by the “most elevated God-concept”, namely that “God withdrew completely from the world after he created it, and left it in its entirety to ourselves” (Steiner, cited in Skagen's preface, Steiner 2007, p. 16, 17). I will not discuss this apparent contradiction here.

Steiner's assertion that the World-Fundament has "not drawn back from the world in order to control it from without" marks, according to Skagen's preface (in Steiner, 2007), "a nearly over-personal content in the concept of personality, in that the individual, admittedly the subject of all cognition, is at the same time a kind of vessel for a universal and objective world-truth" (p. 15, 16). Personally, I want to add that Steiner here isn't content with portraying man merely as the vessel of an objective world-truth; man also *brings forth* and reshapes the contents of this vessel. The "deactivated" divine wisdom resurfaces thus as human wisdom. God-cognition and man-cognition become opposite aspects of the same idea. In a more religious terminology, one could state that God dies into man so as to be born in a new shape.

Steiner formulates, as we have seen, his epistemology in the 1880s. In doing so, he draws, According to Clement (2018), on Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's (1747-1832) and Johann Gottfried von Herder's (1744-1803) anthropocentric idea of development. In this idea, the human being is not only the goal of evolution, it is simultaneously the archetype and synthesis of all prior life-forms. Referencing Herder's philosophy of history, Steiner writes that it must be "presupposed a principal form which all beings undergo and realize in different ways" (Clement, 2018, p. LXXIX). In the same paper, Steiner uses terms like "a tendency in the world-process" and "intention of creation (my emphasis)", while at the same time distancing himself from a teleological model of explanation. In doing so, he references Goethe, for "no one has cognized as well as Goethe that an organic science must be possible independent of all forms of mysticism, exempt of all forms of teleology and without presupposing particular ideas of creation" (Steiner, in Clement, 2018, p. LXXX).

The question, also posited by Clement, is thus: How can Steiner write about *the intention* and *tendencies* of the world-process, while at the same time avoiding teleology? If it is the case that God works immanently in man's cognition, avoiding teleology will be difficult, should there nevertheless exist an original, divine goal behind creation and evolution, realized as intentions and tendencies. At best, one could interpret this as the existence of an original, divine teleology, which, at a certain point in evolution, declines as God is brought forth and reshaped in man's thought. Perhaps we can say that divine determination becomes human determination once man goes from being led by the *Guiding Power of the world* to taking the lead himself. The ambivalence that emerges out of this simultaneous resemblance and rejection of teleology is further heightened by the fact that Steiner later (in his theosophical/anthroposophical phase) talks not only about "an inherent tendency, but of spiritual beings and hierarchies underlying and, at several times, intervening in the natural development; and precisely in such a way that their intervention turns out to have the realization of the free and self-conscious human as its goal and task" (Clement, 2018, p LXXX).

Thus far I have attempted to describe aspects of Steiner's early thought on time, history and evolution, as well as his epistemological points of onset. Steiner writes in different autobiographical texts that he had, already at eighteen, an extra-sensory experience of time. He attempts to express this in a scientifically viable language. Referencing Goethe and Herder, he comments on the immanence of the deity in creation, while simultaneously rejecting the notion of teleology. Taken together, these elements contribute to the complexity of this phase, and, in my own view, to its conflicting nature. The fact that Steiner later engages with the Theosophical Society does little to clarify matters.

Steiner and theosophy

On encountering the term *theosophy*, readers today will usually associate it with the tradition of theosophy dating back to the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Central to this tradition is a spiritual wave that increasingly drew on Eastern-Indian wisdom culture. Consequently, the headquarters of the movement was moved shortly after the foundation from the US to Adyar, Madras in India (Lejon, 1997, p. 44). According to Gerhard Wehr (2007), however, the roots of theosophy stretch substantially further back, and are connected to Christian spiritual stream. At the foundation of the 'newer'⁹ theosophy lay a clear connection to ancient, eastern wisdom, as expressed, among other things, in Hinduism and Buddhism. The earlier theosophy (Greek: *theou sophia*) can, according to Wehr, be traced back to Paul, who distinguishes between

9. In this article, I will occasionally apply the adjective 'new' on the concept of theosophy. By 'new theosophy', I am referring to the theosophy that sprung from the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875.

a limited wisdom bound to space and time on one side, and a wisdom that “surpasses time” [überzeitliche], understood as “theosophy, God-wisdom” on the other (Wehr, 2007, p. 13, 14). Furthermore, the Christian theosophy operated within a Christian context. This is expressed, among others, by Jacob Böhme. According to Wehr (2007), the latter is often seen as a source of inspiration for the romanticism and natural philosophy of the 1800s, as well as for the idealistic philosophy. It is *this* theosophy (along with German idealism), Wehr writes, that initially preoccupies Steiner, *even* when he associates himself with the Theosophical Society and partly applies ‘new theosophical’ concepts in accounting for his spiritual cognitions. In one of his main works, *Theosophy*, Steiner references neither contemporary theosophists nor Eastern teachers of wisdom, but rather European thinkers. Kaj Skagen writes in the preface of the Norwegian edition (2005, p. 7) that Steiner understands his mission to be “the continuation of German idealism”, and that there is a “line of development in Steinerian history of ideas, where the mystery-knowledge of antiquity, modern philosophy and his own anthroposophy represents three stages in the same current” (Skagen, in Steiner, 2005, p. 7).

In 1902, Steiner performs on the theosophical arena, and becomes thereafter the leader of the German section of the Theosophical Society. According to himself (Steiner, 1999), “there can be no doubt” that he “in the Theosophical Society merely wished to propose the results of [his] spiritual sight” (p. 321). Should this be taken as a premise, one could conclude that concepts and ideas gathered from contemporary discourses, whether it be from science, literature, philosophy or theosophy, are being used by Steiner to express his *own* thoughts and his *own* spiritual experiences. Steiner-reception offers a variety of different and partly conflicting positions in relation to the aforementioned premise. The reception of which Helmut Zander (2007), among others, is a representative, states unequivocally that Steiner's esotericism is not based on the epistemology he formulates as a young philosopher. Neither does it originate from the Christian theosophy or idealistic philosophy; it's source is exclusively the new theosophical literature. When Steiner claims that his extra-sensory experiences are the basis for what he says and writes, he does so tactically in an attempt to profile himself as an independent esoteric. He is not expressing his own experiences, but “reading-experiences” of the theosophical literature at hand. According to Zander, Steiner's engagement with new theosophy marks a break with his previous stances on cognition; his esotericism, including his conceptualization, is accordingly a result of new theosophy (Zander, 2007, p. 571, 580). The opposite view can be found in Clement (2018), who claims that the driving forces of Steiner's esotericism spring from and are a further development of an epistemology based on Western intellectual tradition and Christian theosophy, which was formulated in his early years.

As mentioned initially, this article will not further elaborate on these matters. I mention it because the ‘transition’ from the philosophic-literary phase, which lasts until Steiner reaches his forties, and the following theosophical-anthroposophical phase, is one of the most heavily discussed biographical aspects in Steiner-reception. I have already described my position as an attempted hermeneutical reading of the trajectory of development in Steiner's epistemology and history-conception, with a preliminary focus on Steiner's own articulation of this. In the following, I will try to describe how Steiner, in his “theosophical phase”, deals with the concepts of time and history.

“Du siehst, mein Sohn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit!”¹⁰

In order to understand Steiner's concept of time and history, it is helpful to pay close attention to how he describes the term *archetypes*. One of his important inspirations in this context was Goethe. According to Steiner, Goethe cannot, like Plato, understand the ideas as unchangeable sizes in a transcendent world outside nature. A one-sided separation between idea and experience was, he continues, in conflict with Goethe's nature. Instead Goethe envisioned “Nature as permeated by ideas. A world of ideas that neither permeates the objects of Nature nor brings about their appearance and disappearance, their becoming and growth, is to him nothing but a feeble web of thought” (Steiner, 2007, p. 67).

Steiner builds upon the vitality and concreteness of Goethe's idea-concept in *Theosophy* (2005), written in 1904. The ideas are here described not as a space of being outside sense objects, but rather as an active,

10. “You see, my son, time changes here to space”, from Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal*.

mobile and vital forthbringer of these; an extra-sensory field of living archetypes that create, weave and work in the sensory world. Steiner writes that one usually perceives the archetypes merely as abstractions which the mind pictures and derives from sense objects. However, should one extend one's trust of the physical side of sensation to its spiritual side, one will experience "that the archetypal world has a far more intense reality than the world of the physical senses". For in the world of archetypes, "all is in perpetual, mobile activity in the process of ceaseless creating". The archetypes are "the master builders of all that comes into being in the physical and soul worlds. Their forms change rapidly and in each archetype lies the possibility of assuming myriads of specialized forms" (Steiner, 2005, p. 100).

Besides the more visual aspect of the ideas, there is, according to Steiner (2005), also an auditive aspect, which moves from a "spiritual sight" to a "spiritual hearing". As such, archetypes become "sounding" (p. 101), and one gets the sense of being encircled in an "ocean of tones". The "spiritual chiming" is a manifestation of the being-like archetypes of the spiritual world. The "intermingling", "harmony", "rhythm" and "melodies" connected to the archetypes, express "the primordial laws of their existence, their mutual relationships and affinities". Steiner references hereafter the Pythagoreans, who called this "the music of the spheres" (Steiner, 2005, p. 101).

According to Øyvind Varkøy (2019, p. 274), Steiner is "a unique representative" for what one could call "a romantic-cosmic view of music". Varkøy mentions that Steiner characterizes the music of the spheres as something one not just "clairaudiently" observes, but as something man experiences every night "in dreamless sleep". In the "musical ocean of tones", where "the grand quietude chimes", the spiritual world tones "to us and speaks to us comfortingly and encouragingly in sinuous melodies and harmonies". In this spiritual experience of sounding, man's soul is in its "original home", and perceives "its spiritual origin" (Steiner, in Varkøy, 2019, p. 274).

How, then, is Steiner's spiritual research, as it relates to his history-approach, expressed? It is a requirement in this regard, he claims, to go beyond the scientific system of concepts within which one is wrapped, and which he terms *object-cognition* (Steiner, 1939, p. 9 and 10). In object-cognition, man observes the sensory world, after which, with the help of reason, he combines and draws conclusions in the form of life-rules, social conventions and laws of nature. Such a mental activity is, according to Steiner, preconditioned by a separation of subject and object, of the I and the world. In order to undo this separation, one must take a step further, to *imaginative cognition*. Here, Steiner writes, one operates no longer with abstract concepts, but with *images*. These images are not dreamlike, but the opposite: through a conscious development of the imaginative skill, thought becomes vital, clear and awake. As such, Steiner (1939) claims that it can be compared to mathematical conception.

Steiner writes that through a continual and methodical meditative practice (which I will not detail extensively in this article), one will be able to bring forth said imaginative thinking. The imaginative thinking grasps time from within, and its initial product is that the time of one's own life is given the character of an extensive tableaux (Steiner, 1939). Time is transformed in that its chronological character is changed to one of contemporariness. We are dealing with "a world of images which one at the same time inhabits; one perceives himself to be, as it were, an image within the image" (p. 12). In order to achieve this image-consciousness, one must first of all overcome prejudices, spontaneous patterns of thought and feeling, etc. Once the skill of imaginative cognition is acquired, one will be able to, in the same way one is mobile in mathematical conceptions, experience time "as objective" and become one with creation. One "is not retained in the present, but feels like he is standing within the stream of events". By becoming one with what lives itself out in time, and simultaneously maintaining the waking consciousness, one can cognize "that which is spiritually objective outside of man". Here, one is no longer living with a clear distinction between subject and object, between perception of I and perception of world; one rather "perceives the I, and in turn, through the I, perceives the world, above all in its concrete difference and multitude [...] I am in the world, and the world is in me" (p. 13, 14).

Drawing on Goethe's formative ideas understood as an active force in the apparitions of nature, Steiner expands this to also incorporate ideas and archetypes formative in time. The first experience of a meditative

schooling will, according to Steiner (1984), be that one's own biography unfolds as a tableau. As such, it can be extended to an extra-sensory experience of time, as the latter has lived itself out in history. Accordingly, he who researches larger courses of time will be able to experience traces of historical events. Such a research, Steiner writes, does not only include physical historical handovers (Steiner, 1984). The essential, that which emerges in time, is grounded in the extra-sensory, in the eternal: and "the eternal is not available to sensory observation" (p. 9). However, should man develop skills that enable him to break through "the transient history" and move towards "the non-transient" (p. 10), the result will be similar to that of the archetypes: The researcher "views the events of the past through their eternal character, and these do not appear to him as dead testimonies of history, but rather as filled with life" (p. 10).

The actions of the individual are, as it were, stamped on the ether-body or the time-body, which, at death, appears as a tableau. In the same way, Steiner (1984) claims that what has happened in general history does not dissolve; it rather leaves traces of itself in the extra-sensory world, which we can read.¹¹ Such a reading, he adds, is a complicated process leading to a kind of omniscience. A spiritually grounded history-research is not infallible, even though such a research has existed, according to Steiner, in "esoteric schools" which more or less agree with each other for centuries (p. 11). He is open to the potential fallacies of spiritual research, and he does not encourage blind adherence to authority. He is only looking to convey his enquiries: "Each correction grounded on competent knowledge is dear to him [the spiritual researcher]" (p. 58).

The universe as organism

Even though Steiner underlines that western philosophy and Christian theosophy was closer to him than the eastern-inspired theosophy represented by the Theosophical Society, he still employed the latter's terminology. Clement (2018) writes that Steiner "adapted" and partly transformed central ontological and anthroposophical-theosophical conceptions. One such application of theosophical terminology is found in the aforementioned *ether-body*, which is a part of the more comprehensive concept *stage of being*. Another group of terms regard conceptions of *life after death*, and furthermore the entire complex of theory regarding *reincarnation and karma*, as well as "the idea of a systematic schooling of consciousness in order to reach extra-sensory cognition" (p. LIX).

During a series of lectures in a theosophical congress in Munich, 1907, Steiner goes through man's stages of being, and how they work in life and in the spiritual world after death. After having described (and exemplified) the laws of reincarnation and karma, he mentions the Platonic Year (connected to precession).¹² The Platonic Year lasts, he says, approximately 2160 years, and older cultures were "deeply sensible of what is connected with this passage through the zodiac. [...] Thus the peoples have always had a clear consciousness of the fact that what proceeds in the heavens runs parallel with the changes taking place on the earth beneath" (Steiner, 1977, p. 36, 37). This cosmic rhythm influences evolution and history according to Steiner, and human beings incarnate (as a main rule) twice during the course of a Platonic Year (2160 years), once as a woman, once as a man.

When it comes to the universe understood as a spiritual-physical organism, we are dealing with a far greater rhythm. Besides man, what we today know as the kingdoms of minerals, plants and animals respectively, is incorporated in the organic-spiritual development of the universe (p. 57). Steiner draws on theosophical terminology, where the process of evolution proceeds at a macro-level, through a gradual materialization of a purely spiritual point of origin. He also draws on cultural history, stating that certain skills become prominent in certain *culture epochs*. According to Clement (2019, p. LX), this theory of development corresponds with a monistic ontology, involving a unitary and inherently indivisible being that

11. In relation to these traces or stamps of history, Steiner uses the new theosophical concept of the *Akashic records*.

12. A Platonic Year lasts in fact approximately 25 920 years. It denotes the time it takes for the sun to pass (at spring equinox) all constellations of the zodiac. Steiner emphasizes here the duration of one such passing, namely one twelfth, 2160 years. This is called precession, and it signifies the rotation of the Earth's axis in a slow, circular movement. Because of this, the points in the horizon which constitute the zodiac signs of astrology, and the spheres of the heavens which constitute the constellations of astronomy, become continually bigger. To put it simply, one can imagine the Earth as a spinning top. It rotates quickly around its own axis, in the same way as the Earth, but at the same time it has a slow "wobble motion". Such a wobble is the Platonic Year.

manifests itself in seven areas of being. The sevenfold world-condition displayed in man and the kingdoms of nature, but also in cosmos as a whole, is an expression of this ontological fundamental structure.

It is difficult to reconcile Steiner's arguments in this new context with his earlier rejection of a teleological conception of history and his claim that it is erroneous and "unhistorical" to ascribe a purpose "to history, as if men were educated from a lower stage of perfection to a higher, etc.". Steiner now argues for the existence of different "classes of entirely spiritual beings, or *angel-hierarchies*" that "initiate, support, and sometimes also abrupt the processes of development" (Clement, 2018, p. LX). Even though Steiner, according to Clement, largely changes, reforms and affects the theosophical concepts on the basis of his own background in western philosophy and Christian theosophy, he still employs, as mentioned, the new theosophical terminology to a great extent. A remarkable 'Steinerian twist' is the degree to which Christian concepts are given space. He changes the theosophical-Buddhistic concepts of the spiritual beings active in evolution to Christian concepts (originating from the angelology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite). Furthermore, Steiner connects the Christian principle of Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) to the macro-cosmic evolution (Steiner, 1977, p. 66-70). The principle of the Son, Christ, is particularly emphasized as an utterly essential impetus in the evolution and history of the universe. When the spiritual course of development materialized on earth, this principle also played an essential role through the Mystery of Golgotha, when Christ united with the Earth (p. 68, 69).

In the aforementioned lectures, Steiner also describes a microcosmic, culture-historical perspective, which he periodizes in accordance with precession and the sevenfold rhythms.¹³ In this context, he makes use of the term culture epoch, a term that can be found in Waldorf education.¹⁴ Steiner designates these epochs "the ancient Indian", "the ancient Persian", "the Egypto-Chaldean-Babylonian", "the Greco-Roman" and "the Anglo-Germanic". Besides these five, the fifth of which marks our own time, Steiner also operates with concepts of future, Post-Atlantean culture epochs, like "the Russo-Slavic" and "the American" (Lejon, 1995). Each culture epoch stands in relation to 1/12 of the Platonic Year.¹⁵

It is worth noting that Steiner is not satisfied with "reading" instances of spiritual and divine forces in history only as it thus far has proceeded, but also in culture epochs that has yet to unfold. Lejon (1995) writes that Steiner, like Herder, portrayed the historical development as a process of cultural education, as an accelerating humanization whose ultimate goal is the deified human, *imago Dei*. The idea that development has a goal is not new.¹⁶ However, what characterizes Steiner's discourse is the level of detail with which he describes the different spiritual entities that influence this goal, and in turn how this affects man's species of consciousness in the various epochs.

The people of the "ancient Indian culture" has, according to Steiner, a consciousness that perceives the spiritual-divine world as actual, and the sensory world as Maya, i.e. as illusion (Steiner, 1977, p. 93). The "ancient Persian culture epoch", which coincides with the First Agricultural Revolution, is to a greater extent earthbound. In the "Egypto-Chaldean-Babylonian" epoch, man learns "to recognise a law in nature itself" in a spiritual-physical way, demonstrated by the astronomy and geometry of the time (p. 94). The Greco-Roman culture epoch represents yet another advancement in man's development of consciousness. Here, the human being has "come so far" that it incorporates "in civilisation that which he himself experiences as spiritual." We can find traces of this in the contemporary art, moulded matter, architecture, drama and philosophy. In philosophy, we find an accelerating, individual "judgement", figuratively expressed in *The Odyssey*, where the "the ancient priest-wisdom", belonging to older cultures, is superseded by "human cleverness" (p. 94). The Greco-Roman culture epoch continues, according to Steiner, into the Middle Ages, all the way to the 1400s. In the following "Anglo-Germanic" culture epoch, the focal point of cultural innovation is marked by the renaissance which takes place in Europe at the time. The attachment to authority is increasingly

13. In terms of Steiner's conception of history, it would more precise to also include the principle of twelvefold rhythm, which is connected to the Zodiac and the Platonic Year.

14. More on this in Barkved (2018).

15. It is the aim of a following article to further elaborate on Steiner's ideas regarding the relationship between macro-cosmic impulses in history.

16. Already in Augustine's idea of the *City of God*, there is an implanted teleology, i.e. that history progresses towards *something*, in Augustine's case, towards the realization of a City of God.

dissolved, man becomes more subjective and “his external acts bear increasingly the stamp of his character” (p. 95). Furthermore, Steiner describes the species of consciousness characterizing this epoch (which extends into our own time, and beyond).¹⁷ That man becomes “more individualised” contributes to the accelerating disintegration of traditional tribalism. He connects this individualisation to Christianity. The following words of the New Testament, “He who doth not leave father and mother, brother and sister cannot be my disciple”, are interpreted by Steiner as “all love which is founded on natural ties alone is to come to an end, human beings must stand before one another, and soul find soul” (p. 95). Furthermore, what characterizes our own age is that man, to a greater extent than in previous culture epochs, must pertain to the physical plane; “thusly, man becomes gradually a being who sinks deeper and deeper into materiality”. Whereas the Greek, in the work of art, created an idealized image of his soul-life, and the Roman, in his jurisprudence, expressed his “personal requirements”, “our age culminates in machines, which are solely a materialistic expression of mere personal human needs” (p. 95).

Two problem areas

Lastly, I want to shed light on two problem areas; the one being connected to Steiner's spiritual science, the other regarding what I find unclear and contradictory in his relationship to history and teleology.

It is everything but easy to epitomize Steiner's epistemology and its function in his description of the being, of ontology. *One* problem is how the core of Steiner's epistemology distinctly deviates from the common conception of what is possible to cognize. Even though a lot has happened in scientific thought and development since Steiner's time, the Kantian epistemology, which limited human cognition, is still prevailing. This epistemology was later to be summarized by Emil Du Bois-Reymond as “We *cannot* know” (Bois-Reymond, in Haakstad, p. 24). By the standards of a scientific view that does not allow the mind “to draw conclusions about a reality that lacks foundation in sensory observation” (Steiner, in Haakstad, 2019, p. 22), Steiner's theory of cognition must necessarily be placed outside of the scientific paradigm. One could argue that, as a consequence of this marginalization, Steiner's epistemology must be understood as metaphysical speculation, or as belonging to the religious field of revelation. It is precisely this, however, that Steiner rejected. He acknowledged that his spiritual science was encountering a boundary, but this boundary was, according to him, not definitive.

As long as Steiner's early discussion on such a theory of cognition is kept within a philosophical context, following his thought process with the aid of one's own thinking, is challenging, yet unproblematic: The human I, whose medium is thought, is not set *outside* the processes of the world; it grasps them from within, because the thinking that man brings forth is itself part of these processes. In pure sensation, the world appears subjectively, but “the first form in which reality appears before the I is not its true form; it's true form is on the contrary its last, which is shaped by the I” (Steiner, cited by Hegge, in Sparby (Ed.), 2013, p. 216). It gets more complicated when the very being, that is, ontology, is extended to include extra-sensory forces and beings. As long as Steiner grounds his epistemology in a logical-philosophical context, it can serve as a point of thought and reflection available to anyone, whether or not one agrees with the conclusion. When Steiner later, in his theosophical-anthroposophical phase, faces the consequence of his own conclusion that there are no set limits for man's cognition and formulates the results of his extra-sensory experiences, the reaction among his contemporaries is a mixture of disbelief and skepticism. “Denke dir, Doktor Steiner ist Theosoph geworden!”¹⁸ was the word among friends and acquaintances, a good portion of whom (including the writer and feminist Rosa Mayreder as well as the biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel) began distancing themselves once his engagement with the theosophical movement became known (Lejon, 1997, p. 29).

17. Steiner connects a term to each of the culture epochs, denoting different typologies of consciousness. These go together with the already mentioned term *stage of being*. Steiner designates The *age of the consciousness* soul to our own, Anglo-Germanic culture epoch.

18. “Can you imagine, Doctor Steiner has become a theosophist!”

In his own writings (Steiner, 1999), the esoteric extension of ontology does not mark a break with his prior philosophical thought. He argues on the contrary that philosophical thinking is particularly adept for such a leap, or metamorphosis. Hegge (in Sparby, 2013, p. 218) characterizes such a metamorphosis as a development “from reflection to meditation”. In newer prefaces to earlier philosophical texts, Steiner writes that these stand on their own feet, and that their contents “can be accepted also by those who, for some valid reason, want nothing to do with the results of my research in spiritual science” (Steiner, cited by Hegge, in Sparby, 2013, p. 221). At the same time, he stresses that by becoming aware of one’s own cognition- and thought-process, one can enter into a field of “thought independent of the senses” (p. 220). As previously mentioned, Steiner listed a series of meditatively influenced exercises, wherein the self-observing *activity* of thought, more so than the *content* of thought, formed the foundation out of which *object-cognition* transformed itself to *imaginative cognition*.

In summarizing Steiner’s epistemological-methodical course, one can firstly note the possibility for thought to become formative and to reach a deeper spiritual cognition. It is possible, moreover, to cognize oneself as a spiritual being, and thusly to carry one’s existence in the I. Secondly, Steiner draws on Goethe’s method, which states that through in-depth, sensory observation, thinking and imagination (Goethe called it *intuitive* judgement), one can enter into the living and extra-sensory field that underlie the apparition of sense objects (Barkved, 2016, p. 28). With these two points forming a foundation, Steiner develops his own methodology of spiritual research, in which enforcement of thought and meditative exploration of the individual consciousness are central aspects. This kind of activity can result in a more vital and enforced thinking, and as such, become *intuitive*. Thinking is transformed from object-cognition to imaginative cognition. An intuitive consciousness is capable of exploring the spiritual, extra-sensory world which is both the origin and source of the sensory. Hegge (in Sparby (Ed.), 2013, p. 212) characterizes this development as a “*connection* between his endeavours as thinker (philosopher) and as ‘seer’ (spiritual scientist)”.

Steiner’s reasoning for the connection between his early philosophy and later spiritual science makes sense. His emphasis on the potential fallacies of extra-sensory research and its need for correction is trustworthy. However, one problem remains, which the philosopher Hugo Bergman (1883-1975) partly sheds light upon. According to him, the esoteric dimension of Steiner’s philosophy places him “by himself in the history of Western philosophy”. Steiner’s philosophical body (including anthroposophy), “does not appear as a pure work of thought, but is based upon and aims to justify spiritual experiences”. To build a worldview upon such experiences is “unheard of in Western philosophy. Thereof the great distrust with which one in the world of philosophy meets Steiner” (Bergman, cited in Skagen, 2015, p. 198).

Provoking to many is the aforementioned level of detail in Steiner’s spiritual research, regarding the description of spiritual phenomena and appearances, as well as of beings and forces. As expressed in Sparby (2013): Some of Steiner’s investigations contain detailed depictions “that are second to none in esotericism [...] The level of detail in Steiner’s lectures and the way in which these details are related to more universal, spiritual perspectives, are special and remarkable” (p. 42).

As far as I can see, there is little to suggest that Steiner’s wish to be corrected on his extra-sensory research-results has been fulfilled. To scientifically verify, extend or correct Steiner’s spiritual science – procedures at work in all sciences – would, in Sparby’s words, “at best be a project under development” (Sparby, 2013, p. 16). That Steiner has provided methods for such procedures on his own research, has seemingly not issued a broader academic research-community.¹⁹ According to Sparby, “the anthroposophists still stand in the shadow of Steiner with respect to what they actually can show for in terms of meditative consciousness-alteration and research” (p. 44). In my understanding, Steiner’s spiritual science is not problematic because it is impossible to get into and understand on its own premises. What is problematic, to phrase it in a lapidary style, is the overwhelming level of detail in Steiner’s spiritual research, combined with a methodology that is mildly speaking challenging, and that turns man’s own cognition-expansion into a foundation for extra-sensory cognitions. The latter can, at best, scientifically verify and further advance the results posited by

19. Sparby (2013, p. 16) mentions examples of marginal research-communities in which this kind of verifiability is pursued, adding that even though this “in and of itself is very small – it is precisely what is needed when it comes to making Steiner’s concept of the anthroposophical spiritual science credible”.

Steiner. Such advancements are, so to speak, still absent a hundred years later. That there exist individuals and minor communities who, according to Sparby (2013), make modest attempts at such work, is not the same as Steiner's spiritual science having a field of impact in a broader academic context. It is therefore, in my eyes, still standing outside of the scientific discourse.

As far as the aforementioned teleology-aspect goes, it is connected, among other things, to a categorization of the culture epochs in determined patterns and cycles of time, where a spiritual intention is at work behind evolution and historical development. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2006) summarizes it as follows: "Steiner obviously had a very essentialist view of history, which, according to him, not only has well-defined periods, but also a clear sense and purpose" (p. 85).

As shown, Steiner distances himself from teleology in order to "save" man's freedom. Michael Zech (2012, p. 357) nuances this idea by writing that Steiner "wants to keep the teleology-concept open". Is it possible to talk about an open teleology-concept? Thomas Nagel (2012) discusses this question, claiming that our concepts of evolution are unable to explain that a world of consciousness has resulted from matter. Nagel thusly presumes that the mental side of being must have been present already from the beginning, and suggests that each theory of the universe must show "how the natural order is disposed to generate beings capable of comprehending it [...] Each of our lives is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up and becoming aware of itself" (p. 85, 86). Using Nagel's premise as a foundation, one could argue that if a consciousness connected to the universe does exist, and if this consciousness is not understood as a kind of omniscient, intelligent designer, we can start talking about an open teleology, which still includes the possibility for freedom.

Steiner rejects a dominating, deterministic teleology in both earlier and later writings. In 1915, he addresses the theme of *necessity* and *chance* (Steiner, 1986), claiming that besides necessity, there must also exist possibilities for chance. It is possible to create in the present, he says, without being subject to any already given determination. The human being can free itself from necessity, after which both the principle of freedom and that of chance is valid: "The concept of freedom, then, includes the principle of change" (p. 76). Steiner's stance here is connected to the role he ascribes man in relation to the influence of spiritual forces upon evolution and historical development. It is a carrying idea in Steiner's epistemology that man is co-creative in the development of the world and cosmos (Steiner, 1998). In this way, man is a co-worker of the Gods rather than their subject.

In other words, Steiner was aware of the dilemma himself, and discussed it. He references his freedom-philosophy several times in his treatment of the spiritual aspects of evolution, reincarnation and karma, as well as history; it is imperative to him that this treatment is not interpreted as something that repeals the principle of freedom (Steiner, 1998 and 1986).

That Steiner later problematizes teleology, among other things in an attempt to portray an area of freedom between necessity and chance, does not solve the problem, but it makes it more interesting. The driving force of history is the human being itself. At the same time, there exists divine *intentions* and *tendencies*, immersed in creation and evolution. At a certain point, however, the deity "dies" in the world, and man gradually assumes responsibility for the further advancement of evolution. What can be characterized as an original teleology underlying evolution, becomes thusly something that does not rule history from the outside, but something that man brings forth anew, through acts of cognition in which God-will becomes human-will.

The problem still remains of Steiner's detailed descriptions regarding the intentions and effects of spiritual beings, especially during his theosophical-anthroposophical phase. It is hard not to interpret it teleologically, despite Steiner emphasizing that how history is shaped is up to the human being. Thus far I have primarily presented the paradox that emerges when one encounters Steiner's concept of history. Personally, I find the paradox to be an intriguing subject for thought, but also something that is difficult, if not impossible, to solve. A more relevant question in this case is the extent to which this paradox plays a role in the history-teaching at the Waldorf school. Such a question opens the door to new, and in my eyes necessary research and discussion.

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