

RUDOLF STEINER (1861-1925)

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Life dates

Rudolf Steiner was born in Kraljevec, Austria-Hungary (currently Croatia) on February 27, 1861, of Austrian parents. A quiet, introverted child, he spent most of his childhood and youth in a beautiful mountainous region of Austria, surrounded by natural beauty but immersed in the new technologies of telegraph and railway through his father. He attended high school in Wiener-Neustadt, near Vienna. In addition to his school subjects Steiner privately studied high level mathematics and physics, Ancient Greek and Latin, and the scientific and philosophical works of the major German idealists and Romantics. Between 1879 and 1883 he completed his undergraduate studies at the Vienna Institute of Technology, during which time he worked as a private tutor and editor. In 1891, he completed his Doctorate at Rostock University, Germany, on: *Truth and Knowledge: The Fundamentals of a Theory of Cognition with Special Reference to Fichte's Scientific Teaching*. While still an undergraduate student Steiner commenced his in-depth studies of the scientific works of Goethe.

Influenced by his exposure to what he referred to as the living thinking of Goethe, Steiner developed a new epistemology in his first authored book *Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*, published in 1886. In 1893, he published what is perhaps his most significant philosophical treatise *The Philosophy of Freedom*. He worked extensively from the age of 21, editing numerous volumes of Goethe's works between 1882 and 1897, spending the last seven years of this period working at the Schiller-Goethe Archives in Weimar (Steiner, 1925/1928). Steiner's productivity during this time in Weimar was prodigious. In addition to editing Goethe's work, he put in order the archives of Friedrich Nietzsche at the request of Nietzsche's sister, edited and published the complete works of Schopenhauer in twelve volumes, and the works of Jean Paul in eight volumes, researched and published some of his most fundamental philosophical works.

In 1897, Steiner moved to Berlin, which was to become his base until 1913, just before the outbreak of the First World War. In Berlin, Steiner combined his editing work with his own writing and lecturing, and also worked as an instructor at the Berlin "Workers' School of Education." As editor of the weekly *Das Magazin für Literatur* Steiner came into close social contact with the intellectual and artistic élite of Berlin at the time, his acquaintances including poets, playwrights, novelists and political activists. In 1900 he began what has become known as his anthroposophical work, which he continued until his death. In 1902 he met Marie von Sievers who would become his constant collaborator and eventually his second wife. During this time he worked in collaboration with the Theosophic Society, including becoming the General Secretary of the German Theosophic Society. However as a result of fundamental differences of direction, he publicly

distanced himself from the Theosophic Society in 1913 and moved to Dornach in Switzerland to commence the building of the first *Goetheanum*. The building was tragically burned to the ground by an arsonist in 1922 shortly after its completion. Steiner almost immediately announced plans for a second Goetheanum, built of concrete, which still stands today in Dornach. Both buildings are considered architectural landmarks of the 20th century.

Steiner's writing is generally regarded to have occurred in two major phases. In the first phase until approximately 1904, he primarily wrote from a purely philosophical or natural scientific perspective. In the second phase, he claimed to be speaking and writing from his intuitive spiritual-scientific research. He spent much of his adult life traveling and lecturing extensively throughout Europe. From 1888 to 1924 he gave over 5,000 lectures on a wide variety of themes in 96 European cities within 17 countries. His lecturing took him the length and breadth of Europe mostly by train, from Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki in the north to Milan, Bologna and Trieste in the south, from Oxford, Torquay and Paris in the west to Vienna, Prague and Budapest in the east. In the last few years before his death he gave an average of 400 lectures per year. Steiner died at age 64, after a six-month illness on March 30, 1925

Contribution(s) to the field of learning

In the mode of a "Renaissance universal man" Steiner was a respected and well-published scientific, literary, and philosophical scholar and artist, as well as an accomplished linguist, classical scholar, mathematician, and historian (McDermott, 2009). Also a futurist, he had a macrocosmic perspective on time in relation to the evolution of human culture and consciousness. His ideas were post-conventional, innovative and futures oriented. With foresight he initiated many significant cultural and social projects, which are still active throughout the world 100 years later—including innovative and holistic approaches to education, agriculture (bio-dynamics), architecture, medicine, social reform, community development and the arts. He authored over two dozen books, including essays, plays, verse and autobiography and his collected lectures make up over 300 volumes. His complete corpus covers almost every imaginable theme, including art, history, religion, education, evolution, natural and hermetic sciences, meditative practices, psychology, physiology, social and community development, agriculture and medicine. On a more personal basis, Steiner remains somewhat enigmatic, having been described as charismatic, yet humble, erudite yet matter-of-fact, as an idealist and also pragmatic, as both seriously earnest and extremely funny. Boris Bugayev, a distinguished Russian symbolist poet who wrote under the pen name of Andrei Belyi, wrote a book about Rudolf Steiner in Russian in 1928, noting a more personal feature:

[Steiner] had, as it were, a therapeutic smile; the countenance blossomed... one felt that one had nothing *of the kind* to give in return. He had the gift of the smile, the faculty of direct expression from the heart . . . Many know his sunny smile; we spoke of it. One must speak about it, for not a single photograph of his reflects it. (Cited in (Easton, 1980, pp. 215-216)

In spite of his large following he discouraged any tendency of others to view him as a guru, believing that such a role was no longer appropriate in the modern age when the spirit of individual freedom is vital. Steiner is probably best known in the world today for the independent schooling system that he initiated in the early 20th century. Steiner founded his first school in 1919, in Stuttgart, Germany for the children of the workers of the Waldorf cigarette factory. Notably, he not only put his educational ideas into practice, he took personal interest in the teachers and the children including apparently knowing every child in the school. He appointed, guided and advised the first teachers and delivered numerous series of pedagogical lectures. The name Waldorf is still used today for many of the schools, particularly in Germany and the USA. In the UK, Australia and elsewhere they are more commonly called Steiner schools. The hyphenated term Steiner-Waldorf is becoming increasingly acceptable as an overriding term. As of 2010 there were approximately 1,000 Steiner-Waldorf schools across sixty countries, even more kindergartens and dozens of institutions for special education worldwide. The most extensive concentrations of the schools, and also many teacher education courses and colleges, are in Western Europe, North America and Australia/New Zealand.

It is beyond the scope of this brief biography to discuss Steiner-Waldorf education in any detail. However it should be noted that many of the key features of Steiner pedagogy are to be found in the emerging innovative pedagogies of the late 20th century and early 21st century. These include the importance of integration, imagination, aesthetics, the whole child, ecology, spirituality to name a few. The unique architecture of Steiner-Waldorf schools reflects the striving to create a fully integrated learning environment. While some commentators claim that Steiner's pedagogical work was ahead of its time, a contrasting view is that Steiner pedagogy was actually very much a product of his time and was closely aligned to what emerged in 1919 as the *New Education* in Germany after the First World War. The substance of much of the critique of Steiner education involves the perceived rigidity of application of Steiner pedagogy in contemporary Steiner-Waldorf schools. While this is actually a critique of the contemporary *application* of Steiner's pedagogy rather than a critique of Steiner's actual ideas, the two are often conflated. On the other hand there is emerging support for Steiner pedagogy today particularly from holistic and integral educators (Gidley, 2007).

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

The primary terms Steiner used to refer to his work were *spiritual science* and *anthroposophy*. The term *anthroposophy*—coined in the 17th century by Rosicrucian, Thomas Vaughan—is derived from the Greek *anthropos* meaning human being, and *sophia* meaning wisdom. In Steiner's own words in *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*: “Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge, to guide the Spiritual in the human being to the Spiritual in the universe.” The world movement that has arisen from Steiner's anthroposophy is based on the notion that there is a spiritual world comprehensible to pure thought but accessible only through advanced cognitive faculties.

In addition to the educational institutions, numerous medical clinics, therapeutic facilities, banking institutions and hundreds of farms in many parts of the world bear witness to the wide dissemination and establishment of Steiner's ideas. Through his biodynamic farming methods, he anticipated the growth of organic farming, believing that a farm should be a self-contained ecological entity. He was also instrumental in the founding of Weleda, which is still producing homeopathic and herbal medicines today. Steiner's aesthetic approach inspired artists such as Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Joseph Beuys. He is also regarded as one of the founders of "organic architecture."

One of the most striking issues surrounding Steiner's prolific—albeit heterodox—contribution to so many fields of knowledge in the early 20th century is not that there is a discourse of academic critique but rather that there has been such a lack of response to his work, other than from proponents of Steiner's approach. Steiner is frequently referred to as one of the most underappreciated figures of the twentieth century (Lachman, 2007). Although proponents of Steiner's work have written a great deal of material about it, the majority has been published by "in-house" Steiner Presses, with much of this being unrealistically uncritical. Steiner's integralism and his opposition to materialism and the dry intellectualism of modernity led to attacks from upholders of the status quo. One reason given for Steiner's rejection by the mainstream academy in his time is that as a forerunner of the contemporary holistic/integral movement he was decades ahead of his time. Another stated reason why Steiner's work was marginalised by the academy is his unashamed esotericism.

Critics of Steiner often focus on the fact that he was a spiritual researcher and because of his early association with the *Theosophical Society*, link his work with the occultism of theosophists. Owen Barfield proposed that it may have been Steiner's use of the term *occult*—in the title of one of his principal source books—that has played a great part in his rejection by the academy. Barfield, cited in (Reilly, 1971/2006) argued however that an objective scholarly approach to Steiner's work would demonstrate that the word *occult*, as used by Steiner, "signifies no more than what a more conventionally phrased cosmogony would determine as 'non-phenomenal,' 'noumenal,' 'transcendental.'" Barfield contrasted this with the more mystical, trance-like Theosophic form of *occultism*, which Steiner eschewed. According to Steiner himself, in his autobiography, even as an eight year old child he was aware of the existence of a supersensible world which to him was just as real as the physical, but his interest as an adult was to further develop such perceptions, consciously through intense, meta-cognitive activity. Steiner's signature contribution to this field of study was to apply the rigorous thinking and methods of the natural sciences to thinking itself, referring to this process as "sense-free thinking." This formed the basis of much of his methodical research of psychological and spiritual phenomena.

There have been several challenges to adequate reception of Steiner's work in the wider academic world. Firstly, his writings were originally written or delivered in German and many of them have still not been

translated into English. Secondly, although Steiner did write a substantial number of actual authored books the vast majority of his available work is actually based on shorthand transcripts of his lectures, many of which he never had time to revise. Thirdly, his works are so extensive and interrelated that an extraordinary amount of time and effort is required even to access them, let alone comprehend them.

Although Steiner's stated aim was to bring spiritual-scientific research out from the forum of secret societies and place it firmly on the footing of rational and scientific thinking, his achievements fell short of what he apparently hoped for. Ironically, much of his lecturing was enacted outside the academy in private circles of students or in the public sphere. Arguably, he did not manage to make a successful bridge between his spiritual-scientific research and the academy during his lifetime. A challenge for the future for those academics and educators who see untapped potential in his work is to demythologise his writings and disseminate it in a more scholarly fashion.

In summary, in spite of the relative ignorance of Steiner's writing in most fields of academic discourse to which his work could contribute, he made a seminal contribution to pedagogical theory and practice as well as many other fields. Unlike most spiritual researchers and spiritually oriented philosophers, Steiner never lost sight of the relationship between his spiritual research and its application to the life-world.

Cross-References

- ... Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) Biography
- ... Holistic Education
- ... Integral Education

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