

Chapter 3

Steiner's Philosophy and Its Educational Relevance

Abstract Apart from Steiner's explicit talks and texts on education, his philosophical works are also relevant, since they deal with epistemology, ethics, and philosophical anthropology. Steiner's views in each of these fields are described and related to other philosophical perspectives. For instance, Steiner's epistemology has a phenomenological character, and results in a participatory view of knowledge, anticipating the present critique of representationalism. Genuine knowledge, based on living thinking, is constituted in an active relation between the self and the world. The potential freedom inherent in human thinking is the link between knowledge and action; i.e. ethics. Steiner's ethical individualism is based on love and freedom, expecting each person to live according to the moral ideals that they intuit in their thinking and strives to realise in their lives. Steiner's 'philosophy of the human being' (*Philosophie der Menschheit*) proposes a synthesis—or at least a collaboration—between empirical studies of human nature (physiology, psychology etc.) and the spiritual insights gained through contemplative methods of research. The knowledge produced by these two approaches is not contradictory; it is like a developed photograph and its negative. The educational significance of these different fields of knowledge is pointed out.

Keywords Knowledge as non-representational · Ethical individualism · Freedom · Living thinking

3.1 Steiner's Philosophical Works

Like all scientific disciplines, educational science was once part of philosophy. In education, these philosophical roots have been kept somewhat more alive than in other disciplines, although the number of professorial chairs in philosophy of education seems to be gradually diminishing. At the same time, one can witness a growing interest in the philosophical aspects of education among educational researchers at international research conferences. One reason for this may be a search for clarity about the 'grounds' of educational science, its basic norms and

principles. There is also a wide spread reaction against the tendency to reduce educational science into a mere technology for teaching and learning.

Steiner published most of his philosophical works before he became engaged in the Theosophical movement in 1901, but he continued his work in this field also after that time, exemplified by his book *Die Rätsel der Philosophie* (Steiner 1985 [GA 18])¹, which was published in 1914.² This work is a treatise of the history of Western philosophy focused on epistemology as an expression of the evolution of human consciousness; a perspective that Steiner perhaps picked up from Hegel's *The phenomenology of spirit*. Steiner admired Hegel's capacity for abstract, conceptual thinking, but considered his philosophy as a whole to be too idealistic. He looked upon the work of philosophers as attempts to formulate in explicit rational terms that which live more as intimations and feelings in the souls of people in general. That is how the history of philosophy can be understood as an expression of the development of human consciousness.

Steiner's philosophical works can be categorised into epistemology, ethics, philosophical anthropology, and social philosophy. His philosophy of knowledge is closely related to his ethics in that the concept of freedom plays a significant part in both. The human being is free primarily in her thinking, and it is in thinking that we construct our knowledge and intuit our moral values (Steiner 1995 [GA 4]).³ The third area, philosophical anthropology, is the one most explicitly related to Steiner's anthroposophy, or spiritual science (*Geisteswissenschaft*), as he called it. Steiner's social philosophy on the other hand is relatively independent of anthroposophy or can at least be presented as such. It is laying the basis for a re-organisation of the social order and will be dealt with separately in Chap. 6.

3.2 Steiner's Phenomenological Theory of Knowledge

Within the frames of this book, it is not possible to go deeply into Steiner's epistemology. We can only give a summary of his main ideas and concepts, and relate them to similar ideas in other thinkers and streams of thought. Readers who are interested in the more explicit arguments behind Steiner's ideas have better consider his own works.⁴ It must also be emphasised that the ideas presented here are not to be understood as Steiner's final conclusions about the nature of

¹English edition: Steiner (2009a).

²However, this book is a revision and expansion of an earlier work, published in 1900–1901 in two volumes of *At the end of the century. Looking back on a hundred years of spiritual development*, vol. XIV and XIX (*Am Ende des Jahrhunderts. Rückschau auf hundert Jahre geistiger Entwicklung*). Steiner was invited to contribute to these volumes; a token of the appreciation that adhered to his person in German intellectual circles at the end of the nineteenth century (cf. Lindenberg 1997).

³English edition: Steiner (2011).

⁴Steiner's philosophical works are contained in GA 2-7, GA 18, GA 21, and GA 25.

knowledge and how it is achieved. They are more like temporary resting points awaiting further discoveries and development. Some of Steiner's followers, like Unger (1976), Witzmann (1983), and Majorek (2015), have produced such works (for an interesting comparison between Steiner and the constructivist theory of knowledge of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, see Grauer 2007). Furthermore, it may be added that Steiner often said that his most basic philosophical book, *The philosophy of spiritual activity* (GA 4),⁵ is an organic whole that ideally has to be read from beginning to end with sharply focused attention, in order to mentally perform the same acts of thinking that the author did when writing it. To read it is an exercise in pure, living thinking; a thinking that tries to connect with the spiritual well spring at the ground of our being. At the same time, Steiner admits that the book is a very personal expression of his own struggles and realisations in the philosophical quest for truth. Steiner's understanding of philosophy can be called 'expressivist' (Sparby 2016). Philosophy can only be an individual expression of the quest for a universal understanding of life and the world; a quest that in principle takes place in freedom. Steiner is, by the way, not alone in the attempt to bring life into philosophical thinking and to look upon philosophy as expressivist in nature: a more recent example is Gilles Deleuze (cf. Deleuze 1990; Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The parallel between Steiner and Deleuze in this respect has been nicely demonstrated by Eftestøl (2013; see also Eftestøl 2016). Deleuze, for that matter, was also interested in and inspired by the Western esoteric tradition, especially some of the Neo-Platonists (see Ramey 2012; Kerslake 2006).

3.2.1 *Knowledge as Non-representational*

For Steiner, knowledge is a product of human creativity. This, however, does not imply a purely subjectivist view of knowledge, which will hopefully become clear as we go along. In the foreword to his doctoral thesis (1980 [GA 3]), he says that the task of knowledge is not to construct a representation of reality, but to create a new realm that, *together* with the experiences we receive through the senses, constitute reality. Steiner therefore belongs to those philosophers who object to a so-called representational view of knowledge, according to which knowledge is a kind of image or 'representation' of reality; a view that takes reality as given independently of human consciousness and sees the task of knowledge as to reproduce a true image of it. The objection to such a view is nowadays common among educational thinkers, which emphasise that knowledge is not a representation of something that is more real than itself. Knowledge can only emerge out of active participation in the world and its social activities (cf. Osberg and Biesta 2008; Dahlin 2013).

⁵Steiner recommended this non-literal translation of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* as more appropriate for English language and culture.

Knowledge as such would not exist if human beings did not have the desire to know, as well as the capacity to create concepts and ideas, which are the very essence of knowledge. As far as their linguistic aspect goes, concepts and ideas are constructed in thinking. We strive to find the right words that express our thoughts. These discursive constructions are however preceded by a kind of prelinguistic intuition. In the context of philosophy, Steiner used the term intuition to refer to this ability to perceive concepts and their relevance for a certain (sense-) experience. In order to put prelinguistic intuitions into words, discursive thinking is required. The whole process of intuiting a relevant concept and then expressing it in words is an instance of human creativity. If through this process, we feel that we arrive at an experience of something *real*, we also experience our knowledge as *true*. Knowledge is therefore also *experienced*, but it is of course another kind of experience than what we have of the external world. In his attempt to adhere closely to experience even in such abstract realms as epistemology, Steiner has much in common with the phenomenological approach to philosophical issues. One can find interesting similarities between Steiner and Husserl (Majorek 2006) and Heidegger (Dahlin 2009) and Merleau-Ponty (Dahlin 2013).

Thinking as an inner activity is of basic significance for Steiner's philosophy. This may give a very intellectualistic impression. However, it must be noted that the thinking Steiner refers to is a *living* thinking, as are the concepts it creates. To be genuine, conceptual knowledge must be *experienced* in the soul. This means that other faculties must also be involved, such as the heart (feelings) and the imagination. The implication is that children should be engaged in aesthetic or practical activities connected with the subject of learning. This is especially important for younger children, who live more in their 'limbs' than in their 'head'. Therefore, the Waldorf concept of early learning is based on 'limb-learning' rather than 'head-learning'; it is about *participating* in the world and not about being a passive spectator (Schieren 2012). However, participation here means not merely outward action but also inner activity of the soul (thinking, feeling, imagination).

3.2.2 Points of Similarity with John Dewey

Famous as he is for the motto 'learning by doing', the active and participatory mode of learning is also prominent in John Dewey's educational thought. The 'doing' that he envisages is not only outward action; the activities of thinking and reflection are also included. There are more subtle similarities as well. In one of his later works, Dewey says we cannot really grasp and possess an idea 'in its full force' if we have not *sensed* it and *felt* it as if it were a smell or a colour (1987, p. 125). Such expressions agree well with Steiner, who often spoke of the development of organs of spiritual perception as involving the living experience of ideas and concepts. An idea in this sense is a mediator between an object and the human understanding of that object. The idea enables the essence of phenomena to manifest as knowledge in human consciousness. Dewey on his part did not primarily refer to spiritual

realities, but he certainly did not deny their existence. In another work he says, 'Soul is form, spirit informs' (1958, p. 294) and notes that even though the words 'soul' and 'spirit' are so heavily loaded with mythology that it may not be possible to use them in science and philosophy, 'the realities are there; by whatever names they are called' (ibid.).

It is noteworthy that Dewey also speaks of the *force* of an idea (1958, p. 125). This implies that ideas have energy, which may be hard to accept in the nominalist/materialistic perspectives dominant today. If ideas have energy they can, presumably, also be causal factors. Finally, to say that ideas are felt and sensed like smells and colours implies that they are experienced in a much more qualified way than a passing thought. It is significant that the quote discussed here is from Dewey's book on aesthetic experience (*Art as experience*). Steiner, for his part, said that the capacity to experience things in an aesthetic or artistic way is a good basis for the development of spiritual perception, especially if connected with an inner stillness of the mind (1992 [GA 10]; p. 47, footnote)⁶.

For Dewey, thinking is as much an action as more overt and visible behaviours. Similarly, in Steiner's phenomenological approach, to perceive and to understand are active forms of being-in-the-world. The pedagogical implication is that, to be genuinely understood, concepts and ideas must be experienced in a participatory way, not merely by the senses, but also by the mind (thinking, feeling, imagination). This insight should bring teachers into a special relation to the ideas they try to convey to children, different from the nominalist stance. For nominalism, ideas and concepts are merely lifeless shadows of the real, and they cannot by themselves awaken any strong experiences or feelings. In this view, an idea is virtually the same as a word: a contingent sound pattern or sign on paper.

3.2.3 *Goethe and Nietzsche*

Steiner found a great source of inspiration in the studies of nature carried out by J. W. Goethe (cf. Chap. 2). He often pointed to Goethe as a predecessor and anticipator of his own epistemology. Steiner's books and lectures about Goethe provide a basis for the view that Steiner's philosophy—like Goethe's approach to nature—is a kind of phenomenology, although Steiner never used that term to describe his own philosophy of science (regarding Goethe as a phenomenologist, see Seamon and Zajonc 1998; Heinemann 1934). This is probably because the famous inaugurator of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, had not yet developed his phenomenological thinking at the time when Steiner started to write about Goethe's epistemology.

⁶English edition: Steiner (2004).

But Steiner also related to another famous German thinker, who became of much greater importance for European cultural history: Friedrich Nietzsche (Steiner 2000a [GA 5]) (Nietzsche, by the way, also admired Goethe). Steiner first read Nietzsche towards the end of his years in Vienna (see Chap. 2). Nietzsche evoked contradictory feelings in him. On the one hand, he found statements which seemed to agree very much with what he himself felt and experienced in his inner life. He says some of Nietzsche's ideas corresponded completely with what he himself wrote in his early works on epistemology (2003 [GA 2])⁷. On the other hand, he was repelled by how Nietzsche could speak about spiritual things without having dived deep enough into the corresponding realities. To Steiner, Nietzsche's writings seemed to be a tragic result of the inner conflicts that the scientific materialist age caused in a sensitive and perceptive soul. Nietzsche clearly felt the inner stirrings of spiritual life, and yet believed that they had to be expressed within a scientific frame of reference, which he took from biology and Darwin's idea of evolution (although, for sure, Nietzsche also made some critical remarks about Darwin in *The will to power*).⁸ In Nietzsche, Steiner saw a soul that could not directly experience the spiritual world, but in which the spirit subconsciously struggled against the non-spiritual views of the times.⁹ From his encounter with Nietzsche in his latter days of illness (see Chap. 2) Steiner understood that spiritual search could not find anything essential in the contents of natural science, but only *through them in the spirit*. This made him see Goethe's natural studies in a new light. Goethe wanted to dwell in the observation and experience of natural phenomena. Through this, he reached the spirit at work in nature, but he did not go further, to knowledge of the spiritual world itself. Nietzsche, on the other hand, proceeded from a mystical intuition of this world, for instance in the form of the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus, who for him were real spiritual forces at work in cultural history (cf. Cox 2009). However, this vision led him not to knowledge of the spiritual world, but to *nature*. Apollo became the scientific world of material facts, and Dionysus the natural forces at work behind these facts. Thus, Goethe found the spirit *in* nature, whereas Nietzsche lost it in a subjective dream *about* nature.

One can argue that Steiner's perspective is Nietzschean in the sense that he does not seek any ultimate ground of truth, in the absolute and universal sense, that has been the inner motivation of Western epistemology at least since Descartes. In Steiner, as well as in Nietzsche, we meet a mode of thinking whose only foundation for truth is the *experience* of the thinking subject (for this aspect of Nietzsche, see Carroll 1974); including, at least in Steiner's case, the experience of thinking. Before I can use the concept of truth in my search for knowledge, I must have

⁷English edition: Steiner (2009b).

⁸Later, in a letter from 1918, Steiner expressed a similar view of Freudian psychoanalysis as originating in a longing for spiritual soul knowledge but being chained to a dogmatic view of natural science (1987 [GA 39], p. 474).

⁹As Nietzsche is often regarded as a main inspiration for post-modern or post-structural philosophies, perhaps this could be said also of these thinkers: there is a subconscious longing for a spiritualization of philosophy and science, but this cannot be outrightly expressed (cf. Gare 2002).

constituted the meaning of 'truth' in my thinking. This means that thinking—as an intuitive spiritual activity—always precedes the discrimination between truth and falsehood.¹⁰ From Steiner's point of view, it is intuitive thinking that provides any evidential experience, by bringing forth the concepts that are understood as adequate to what the senses perceive. This has the important implication that our understanding of truth is highly dependent on the range, intensity, and depth of our experience. Hence, a participatory mode of learning is of primary importance.

3.2.4 *Rigid Definitions Versus Living Concepts*

In our academic culture, there is—especially among scientists—a certain resistance to accept that real understanding can be reached without clear—which often means abstract and rigid—*definitions* of the concepts employed. Clear definitions and formal logical deductions obviously have their place, especially in what Steiner calls pure, sense-free thinking, such as mathematics. But the kind of understanding that results from such an approach is not suitable for life, because reality is more complex than any formal definition or logical deduction can grasp. As a teacher, one must surely know the basic laws of logic, but in the lower and middle grades, one should keep this knowledge in the background, not make it explicit but only let it shine through one's presentations and reasoning (1992 [GA 293]; p. 134).

Therefore, to counteract the overestimation of the logical approach, Steiner emphasised the need for pictorial descriptions and narratives when teaching subject knowledge before puberty. Rather than going from definitions to deductions, teachers should present the subject in lively and colourful pictures, without of course falsifying the knowledge as such. To make children memorise exact definitions of central concepts would be like putting 'gloves of ice' on their hands he said—an interesting analogy considering the role that our hands have had and still have for the development of our thinking (Goldin-Meadow 2005; Wilson 1998; Dahlin 2013). In this sense-based, narrative approach, concepts *emerge* out of perceptions as the *result* or product of the learning process; they are not the starting point. Such concepts can live in the soul; they can change, grow and transform. Our experience of life changes as we grow and develop. To keep pace with these changes, our concepts and ideas must be able to adapt. Static definitions cannot do this. If we remember them at all in later life, they have often turned to useless mental baggage.

Steiner often pointed out how inadequate modern education is—or was in his time at least—regarding its preparation for practical life. Whether it is better today or not, the tendencies to cognitive overload and overintellectualisation remain,

¹⁰This is a parallel to what Steiner says about the distinction between subject and object, which is also preceded by thinking. The individual subject lives "by the grace of thinking", as Steiner expresses it (1995; p. 60).

especially since much vocational training has now become part of higher education. One example is teacher education, where students often fail to see the relevance of their studies of educational theories. One reason for this may be that neither they nor their teachers have learnt to see theories and concepts as living essences necessary for making deeper sense of practical experience.

The one and single value of knowledge, Steiner claims, is that it contributes to the development of *all* aspects of the *whole* human being (1995 [GA 4], p. 271). This may be called a pragmatic view of learning and knowledge: knowledge is *for* something beyond itself. It is also a view very similar to that of W. Humboldt, who said that knowledge is only for *Menschenbildung*; i.e. for linking the self to the world in the most spirited way:

It is the ultimate task of our very existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity. This can be fulfilled only by the linking of self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay. *This alone is the yardstick by which each branch of human knowledge can be judged.* (2000; pp. 58–59; italics here)

As pointed out above, the confluence of knowledge with sense experience constitutes (our experience of) *reality*. The *search for reality* could be taken as the basic characteristic of Steiner education (Kiersch 2010). Therefore, the objects of learning are often studied from many different points of view, and the question of the sense and meaning of the world is always kept open. Reality, in its totality and fullness, can never be finally determined and understood. Nevertheless, the task of a genuinely human education is to approach this ultimate mystery again and again, from as many points of view as possible.

For something to be experienced as real, at least two of our senses must interact, Steiner claims. Many such synesthetic interactions take place naturally, for instance between the eyes and the kinaesthetic sense, which is necessary for one to grasp the shape or form of physical objects (it is known in neuroscience that the eyes always scan the things they look at). But such interactions can also be consciously encouraged. Therefore, teachers in Steiner schools (ideally) make students use as many senses as possible in learning something. In contrast, it may be noted, natural science disregards as much as possible of sense experience as subjective and therefore not to be trusted. It is still under the spell of the Pythagorean–Platonic tradition, for which the true language of nature is mathematics and the sense world is illusory (cf. Dahlin 2001).

As mentioned above, Steiner found a great source of inspiration in the studies of nature carried out by Goethe. Most modern scientists relegate these very little known works of Goethe to the dust heap of history, regarding them as of no consequence. There are, however, a few exceptions, such as Ribe (1985), Sepper (1988), Goodwin (1994) and Portmann (1956) (for a discussion of the educational possibilities inherent in Goethe's theory of optical colours, see Dahlin 2003). Steiner's view was that although the employment of mere abstract mathematical models was fruitful for grasping purely mechanical and physical phenomena, it

would never make it possible to understand the phenomena of organic life. In Goethe's approach, he found a living thinking, an openness to the *experience* of ideas. He called this approach *empirical idealism*. To understand life, our thinking must itself be alive. The kind of thinking we use to know a thing must have an affinity with the nature of that thing. Rigid abstract concepts cannot grasp the nature of a living organism. Nor can it understand psychological and social phenomena, because they too are living and fluid by nature. A so-called Goetheanistic-phenomenological approach to nature has therefore inspired parts of the Waldorf science curriculum, to counteract the effects of mechanistic scientific models and awaken in students the ability of living thinking (see for instance Kranich 2005). Unless such ability is cultivated in education, it will generally decline, Steiner maintained, and so will the possibility to understand the complexities of natural and social life.

It is known—but seldom paid much attention to—that Goethe's natural studies had some influence on Hegel's philosophy. Hegel and Goethe exchanged many letters, and in one of them, Hegel expressed his deep appreciation of Goethe's theory of optical colours (Hoffmeister 1953; see also Kaufmann 1993). Hinting at the living nature of philosophical thinking, Hegel compared an idea to a plant; that is, a living and growing organism. This desire for a thinking that is alive can be sensed also in some present-day philosophers. Thus, Deleuze (1995) compares philosophical texts to novels in which the concepts employed are like persons going through all kinds of changes and developments. Philosophy is about setting life free where it has been trapped, and a homogenous system of language and thought cannot achieve that (cf. *ibid.*, p. 140). Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) seem to imply that only a *pedagogy* of the concept can save conceptual thinking from its degeneration into either encyclopaedianism or commercialism (see *ibid.*, p. 12). Taking their lead from such hints, educational thinkers have been inspired to formulate more explicit suggestions for a curriculum that encourages living thought in students, for instance Cole (2011) and Semetsky (2004). In such suggestions, it is possible to find both similarities and differences with Steiner's educational ideas, but they would take too long to go into here.

3.2.5 *The Freedom of Thinking*

Steiner emphasises that in creating knowledge, human beings are, in principle, free. In practice, there may be all kinds of internal or external blockages and hindrances, conscious as well as subconscious, which prevents this freedom. But such hindrances can be discovered and overcome. The history of human knowledge is partly the history of the overcoming of such hindrances, such as the dogmas of religion, the power of the church and superstitions.

Nowadays, we could add to this list the dogmas of science (Sheldrake 2012), and the Kantian 'meta-paradigm' of epistemology (Ergas 2016), which is perhaps at the bottom of all scientific dogmas. It is well known that Kant introduced the notion of

the 'thing-in-itself', about which we cannot have any knowledge because it is beyond space and time, the two basic categories of our sense experience. He did this to safeguard a place for religious belief or faith, a realm which could not be deconstructed by empirical science. For Steiner, the general acceptance of this idea was one of the major reasons why a science of the spiritual world has not been developed in the West. The philosophers of early Romanticism (Goethe, Hegel, Novalis, Schelling) all tried to go beyond Kant in this respect, but this cultural impulse died out in the nineteenth century. Kant's epistemology was therefore a constant target of Steiner's philosophical critique. In a lecture on education (1986 [GA 308], pp. 75ff), Steiner says that accepting the Kantian view is tantamount to accepting that we cannot know the human world, because human beings are, basically, spiritual beings. What then remains to know is only the physical body. A science of education and psychology working from such a standpoint can only become mechanistic and materialistic, and Steiner urges teachers to become thoroughly familiar with all the ways that materialism expresses itself in modern culture (1991 [GA 301]; p. 170).¹¹ In some respects, Steiner's thinking has recently found an interesting echo in Ergas (2016), who propose—independently of Steiner—that a Kantian 'meta-paradigm' has ruled science since the eighteenth century and has prevented the development of a science of the spirit in the Western world.

However, nothing prevents us to hold on to our beliefs and our dogmas. We are free to believe that the moon is a green cheese, if we are prepared to bear the consequences. This is because thinking is the primary expression of freedom in an inner, spiritual sense. Thinking carries the seed of human freedom, and it is a seed that has the potential to grow into action. The freedom of thinking is therefore the link between epistemology and ethics, because freedom is a condition for responsible action and ethics is not possible without responsibility. In relating epistemology and ethics, Steiner implicitly points to the moral nature of scientific

¹¹In an essay from 1893, Steiner, among other things, describes his monistic ontology and its consequences for education (1989 [GA30]; pp. 60–68). From the monistic standpoint, there is no separate reality 'behind' the phenomenal world that we experience; no Kantian 'world-in-itself' as it were, about which we can only postulate hypotheses. Knowledge arises out of relating one phenomenon to another, i.e. we do not have to leave the phenomenal world in order to (try to) grasp something 'behind' it. But this is what mainstream natural science does; it establishes a Kantian dualism between reality and the world of appearances. The knowledge that arises out of such an approach can only be abstract and general, *it cannot grasp the nature of an individual being*. When applied to education, it means that the individuality of the human person is nailed to the grid of general conceptual schemas and what should be the overriding purpose of all modern education—to develop the individuality and freedom of each child—is lost.

The monism that Steiner describes here has certain affinities with Deleuze's "doctrine of univocity" (Smith 2001), as well as with his immanentism (Goodchild 2001). Monism does not mean that "everything is the same"; on the contrary, with the supposition of immanentism, it is the only perspective that can understand the unique nature of each being (for an interesting exposition of this trait of Deleuze's thinking, see Smith 2001). This kind of monism is a basic characteristic of Western esotericism, as demonstrated by Iwersen (2007) (for esoteric influences on Deleuze, see Ramey 2012). In esoteric thought, there are no *principal* limits to human knowledge; only contingent ones.

research. He thereby prefigures views and perspectives in present-day human and social research, such as the history and sociology of science. In these developments, there is a more or less implicit recognition of the moral nature of knowledge construction (cf. Welburn 2004).

In his view of thinking as basically free, Steiner deviates from the traditional way in which the question of freedom is usually put: Do we have a free *will*? Somewhat counter-intuitively, Steiner says (in his autobiography) that it is thinking that gives power to the will, not the other way around.¹² Therefore, the will is free to the extent that it derives its power from free thinking. Steiner's ethics is based on this basic relation between thinking and willing.

3.3 Ethical Individualism

Because of its emphasis on individual freedom, Steiner called his moral philosophy ethical individualism. It has a certain anarchistic flavour in its strong opposition to anything that smacks of duty or discipline. According to Steiner, one characteristic of modern consciousness is a tendency to reject the existence of *universal* norms and values. Kant's idea that one should act so that the principle of one's action could be generalised for all humanity has therefore lost its validity (if it ever had one). Instead everyone can contribute the most to society only if they can express their innermost being. The very idea of moral laws or rules contradicts the basic value of freedom. However, there certainly are moral *values* or *ideals*, and they even have a certain objective nature, comparable to that of mathematical laws. Therefore, Steiner recommended the study of geometry in order to get an experience of the objective character of pure ideas, as a preparation for understanding the objective nature of moral ideals (moral preaching he dismissed as useless, see for inst. 1990 [GA72], p. 58]). But there are no objective moral *rules* that we have a *duty* to follow. Again, in opposition to Kant, as he understood him, Steiner says that because a truly moral action is based on freedom, there is love and joy in it, whereas Kant held the view that there cannot be pleasure in moral action, since it is based on duty, which implies a feeling of being compelled. In his rejection of this idea, Steiner follows Schiller and Goethe: Schiller ironically said that he often was troubled by feelings of pleasure in serving his friends, because this meant that he was not virtuous. For Goethe, duty meant to love the action that one commands oneself to do (cf. Steiner 1986 [GA 308]; p. 80).

Steiner does not comment on the fact that Kant tried in his own way to overcome the conflict between universal rules and individual autonomy by arguing that when our own reason proves to us the validity of the rule, the conflict is dissolved. Perhaps the difference between Steiner and Kant is that Kant tries to accommodate

¹²“Die Freiheit lebt in dem Denken des Menschen; und nicht der Wille ist unmittelbar frei, sondern der Gedanke, der den Willen erkraftet.” (GA 28, p. 333).

individual freedom to the existence of universal rules, whereas Steiner does the opposite: for him, individual freedom is primary and the existence of moral rules and values is accommodated to this basic principle. This view has much in common with Nietzsche. For instance, in his *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says that virtue should not be something external, like a cloak one puts on, it should be one's very own self, and that too much attention has been paid to those who 'equate virtue with spasm under a whip' (2006, p. 72). The first association to this quote is perhaps that of medieval self-flagellation, but it could also be a comment on Kant's view that duty cannot be enjoyable.

To see the primary expression of human freedom in thinking, and thinking/intuition as the faculty that grasps moral ideals and thereby starts the process that incorporates our personal values and virtues—makes them expressions of what we are—means that freedom is intimately correlated with individuality.¹³ Thus, the innermost core of a human being is not determined by any natural or biological laws. Steiner relates this to the issue of gender equality, pointing out that our perception of a person of the opposite sex is very much influenced by the biological differences, so that the other's uniquely individual qualities are often lost to us. This, he points out, is more detrimental to women than to men, because men tend to reduce women to the roles of mother and wife and therefore not allow them to choose their own destiny in life. This idea, that individuality is based on freedom, has some affinity with Sartre's existentialism, according to which we have freely chosen who we are, and to the extent that we do not recognise this we live in 'bad faith', blaming external circumstances for what is really our own responsibility (Sartre 1969; cf. Østerberg 2013). Furthermore, the thoughts expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The second sex* (1953) about how women are perceived through conceptions of 'the female nature' and not allowed to create their own 'individuality project' are very similar to what Steiner also said (Østerberg *ibid.*).

As mentioned above, it is by intuition that we grasp the prelinguistic aspect of concepts and ideas. Moral values and ideals are, basically, of the same nature as ideas; they are ideas about what is good, just or righteous. In thinking, we elaborate these intuitions and express them in words and moral discourse. Moral ideals have the power to awaken certain feelings in us, feelings of enthusiasm, desire and love. It is the nature of such feelings that they want to be expressed; they therefore easily flow into our will and become forces of action. A moral intuition is therefore only the first step towards moral action. Steiner introduces moral *imagination* and even moral *technique* as additional moral abilities needed to complete a moral action. Moral imagination means imagining ways in which the intuited ideal or value *could*

¹³It must be admitted that to say that "thinking is the primary expression of freedom" is somewhat of a simplification if the *whole* of Steiner's thought is considered; i.e. not only his philosophy, but also his anthroposophy. Steiner's concept of freedom is not as radical as that of for instance existentialism; it is embedded in certain ontological and historical-anthropological frameworks, which would lead too far to go into here. See Sparby (2016) for an interesting discussion of Steiner's concept of freedom related to that of Hegel.

be realised; moral technique is the capacity *to do it*.¹⁴ People's abilities in these respects vary; one person may have very strong intuitions but lack the ability to realise them; another may possess the technique to carry out the imagination of someone else.¹⁵

To be sure, the moral life of humanity is not based only on positive feelings of love and compassion. People also feel rage and the desire for revenge for injustices and crimes that have been committed against them. Still, one may consider such reactions as implicitly based on the love for justice and goodness. For some people, the love of ideals like non-violence and peace may also turn out to be stronger than the desire for revenge and guide their actions into more constructive channels. Such things are after all happening in the world, although we seldom here about them.¹⁶

Steiner was not a blue-eyed idealist; he was always aware of the complexity of things and did not simply preach love as the solution to all moral conflicts. It is obvious that what we call love may in some cases be very selfish. 'I love you' can mean 'I want to enjoy your company; I need you for my happiness' etc. On the other hand, such egoism may also express itself in care and thoughtful consideration for the other person, and then, it becomes selfless. This shows that we cannot capture the reality of moral life by neat logic based on abstract definitions of for instance egoism and altruism. Reality cannot be bottled up in ideas, systems or ideologies. In this stance, Steiner has something in common with the deep distrust of theoretical systems or so-called grand narratives that characterise present post-structural or deconstructive approaches to philosophy in general, and ethics in particular. A grand narrative reduces everything to 'the Same', that is, all differences in terms of for instance time, situation, individuality, culture etc. are made invisible and disappear into a general 'essence' that is the same whatever the context (cf. Critchley 1992).

Steiner's ethics can perhaps be summed up in the saying of Augustine: love (unselfishly), and do what you will. This points to the essential connection between love and freedom. If our moral ideals are grasped in the freedom of intuitive thinking, they inspire love and action. Naturally, Steiner foresaw the objection that letting everyone follow their own 'intuitions' of what is good would soon lead to social chaos. His answer is based on a deep trust that human beings would—eventually—agree, because they are essentially of the same nature. Another reason for this trust is that the world of moral ideals is not a subjective and arbitrary individual invention; it has an objective character. That is why moral ideals are first *intuited*, and not the product of subjective imaginations. One may see this reasoning

¹⁴Steiner is not alone in using the notion of moral imagination; see for instance Fesmire (2003), who discusses its significance in Dewey's work. Dewey, and others, tends however to assimilate what Steiner calls intuition into what they call imagination.

¹⁵The three stages from intuition, over imagination, to technique can also be applied to pedagogy (which is of course basically also a moral activity); we can have an intuition of a pedagogical ideal; imaginations of how it could be worked out; and techniques for realising it in practice; cf. Tyson (2015; 2016).

¹⁶See for instance <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/the-real-enemy-in-gaza/>.

as rather naïve: What about the atrocities of genocide and terrorism that we have witnessed over the last century? What kind of 'moral intuitions' make people become adherents of Nazism or terrorist ideologies? Are there any signs that humanity is developing towards a common agreement of what is good and just? Steiner would probably answer that the thinking that leads people to believe in Nazi or terrorist values is simply *not grounded in freedom* and therefore cannot arrive at the same conclusions that more sane thinking people reach. Somewhere along the line, such unfree thinking is stopped or twisted by subconscious presumptions, negative emotions or neurotic complexes. As for signs of increased moral agreement, the gradual rise and spread of values such as democracy and human rights is one example (disregarding here, as invalid, the leftist critique that such values are only Western and therefore ethnocentric and relative). Another is the form of activism based on non-violence and peace, which finds adherents across many ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

Steiner was concerned to establish a form of education that would help young people to grow into the potential freedom inherent in human nature, or that would at least not create unnecessary hindrances and obstacles for such a development. One of the overriding aims of Waldorf education can therefore be said to be freedom, in an inner, spiritual sense (Carlgren 1976; Oberski 2006, 2011). To be more precise, it is to prepare the growing human being so that when leaving school at the age of 18 or 19 (Waldorf education is based on 12 years) we are ready to take our own development in hand—if we want to—and continue the path towards ever-greater freedom, and love. Because the seeds of freedom are certainly not fully realised at such a young age—indeed, from one point of view, they are never realised in full.

3.4 Steiner's 'Philosophy of the Human Being'

Steiner's anthroposophy can be described as a philosophical anthropology based on the reality of the spiritual world. It is a wisdom (*sophia*) of the human being (*anthropos*). We will go deeper into Steiner's view of the human being in Chap. 4. Here, we will discuss Steiner's understanding of human nature from a more general philosophical point of view.

In one of his written works Steiner (1983 [GA 21]) deals with the relation between his spiritual understanding of the human being and more mainstream philosophical and empirical research. Here, he suggests the possibility of a general 'philosophy of the human being', which would *integrate* mainstream philosophical and empirical anthropology with anthroposophy. This suggestion is somewhat surprising since these two streams of thought are usually based on very different assumptions and presuppositions. The first explores and establishes empirical facts and common experiences, and *is quite justified* in disregarding all purely spiritual aspects of the phenomena studied, Steiner maintains. The latter, in contrast, is based on research in supersensible realms employing clairvoyant powers of perception

available only to an utter few. For Steiner, these two fields of investigation are nevertheless compatible, and he uses the analogy of a photograph and its negative to illustrate his point. A photograph is in many ways the opposite of its negative, still they are obviously compatible since they are of the same object. But whereas the photograph is rather factual or literal in character ("the camera never lies"), its negative needs a kind of transposition or interpretation; its images cannot be taken in a simple, literal sense.

Perhaps one could say that it is as if Steiner envisaged a synthesis of *mythos* and *logos*; of poetic symbols and factual prose, of empirical science and spiritual wisdom. *Mythos* is a highly imaginal language, it describes the world as it appears before intellectual analysis—*logos*—has abstracted some ideal 'essence' of phenomena. In performing this abstraction, the intellect removes phenomena from their context. In theology (*theo-logos*) this means that God is placed outside the world, while imagination—*mythos*—finds God *within* his creation. The idea of a synthesis between *mythos* and *logos* inspired the early Romantics at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, especially in Germany. Steiner's own descriptions of the world also have this character of mixing well established facts with poetic or symbolic images of the invisible, spiritual world 'behind' them. This cooperation between the rational and the imaginal faculties of the mind has been called 'seeing with two eyes' (Chittick 1998). It makes Steiner's discourse (his way of expressing himself in texts and lectures) full of 'freely floating conceptual structures' and 'dynamic semantic fields' (Kiersch 2010, p. 68)—that is, it is sometimes hard to pin down his *words* to a precise and permanent meaning, although the underlying *intuitions* may be clear and meaningful in themselves.

Steiner maintained that it is an imminent task of present-day mankind, especially Western humanity, to bring the intellect in harmony with spiritual knowledge. In the ancient past, human beings had spirit without intellect; then, the spirit gradually declined and the intellect grew. But now the spirit should be regained *by means of* the intellect. This is the way cultural life must develop in the future, or humanity will exterminate itself through ever more brutal wars (Steiner 2000b [GA 354]; p. 143). The view that intellect and spiritual knowing can work together seems to have been at least implicitly present already in Plato and Aristotle (Hanegraaf 2012), and it was certainly taken for granted by the esoteric streams within Islam, for example by Ibn 'Arabi, who recognised Plato as one of the ancient prophets. Ibn 'Arabi distinguished between two kinds of philosophy: as *love of wisdom* and as *reflective thinking*. The first kind admits that truth is achievable not only by way of rational, discursive thinking, but also in a direct, revelatory way (Coates 2011). Just like our ordinary senses reveal the physical world to us, so, Steiner would say, spiritual or clairvoyant perception—if we develop such powers—will reveal the spiritual world to us. The second type of philosophy is the modern, Enlightenment kind, which *only* recognises discursive, rational thought and which in the words of Diderot encourages all things to be 'examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings' (quoted by Coates, p. 38); i.e. a relentless questioning of all knowledge claims not based on rational logic alone.

The spiritual aspects and dimensions of the human being that Steiner describes in his books and lectures (see for instance Steiner 1992 [GA 293], which is often used in Waldorf teacher education), cannot be captured in rigid definitions and abstract concepts. They must be *experienced* in all—or as many as possible—of the forms of symbolism (cf. Cassirer 1979) that are available to the human mind. This is one reason why artistic work is always part of Waldorf teacher education. Concepts must be kept in a fluid state, and what first appear as dogmas must be melted in the fire of living thinking. ‘Human beings must dogmatise in order to know the truth, but they must never see the truth in dogmas’, Steiner said (2001 [GA 89]; p. 254; my translation). A so-called dogma is like a clothing that we give to a truth we have experienced; like a dress of words. In and for themselves such clothes are not the truth. Nevertheless, clothes are necessary for the truth's survival, both in our own life and in the life of humanity. Therefore, the accusation that Steiner education is based on a dogmatic view of the nature and development of the human being is based on a misunderstanding of the kind of discourse that Steiner deployed to transmit his insights. This misunderstanding may be present also among many of his adherents (Kiersch 2010).

Another, similar and equally justifiable approach is to take Steiner's ideas in a heuristic way. Steiner tried to open new ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the world in general and the human being in particular. He had to ‘translate’ his spiritual insights into more or less ordinary language, which meant finding words and analogies for realities that this language had never coped with, except in a purely mytho-poetic form. But the language of myth, poetry and fairy tales no longer awakens the same instinctive understanding in its listeners and readers as it did in former times. Modern human beings need a more rational discourse. To use Steiner heuristically means to see his words as provisional expressions of attempts to open new ways of understanding. This can be done in at least three ways: (1) one may come upon *new* hypotheses for ordinary empirical research; (2) one may *re-interpret* or find new significance in already established empirical facts; or (3) one may *re-discover* the insights of earlier times and cultures. An example of the last point is Rittelmeyer (2010), who relates the ancient and nowadays abandoned idea of the four temperaments (the sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic; a basic notion for the early school years in Steiner education) to modern psychological research (see further Chap. 4). Rittelmeyer has also published many books and papers that exemplify the first and second heuristic uses of Steiner's ideas (Rittelmeyer 2002, 2007 a.o.). His work is probably the most prominent example of what an *educational* ‘philosophy of the human being’ in Steiner's sense can look like (unfortunately very little of it is translated into English).

Thus, for practising teachers and educational thinkers Steiner's spiritual understanding of the human being and child development can be a source of inspiration for gaining new perspectives on education, relevant both for research and for daily teaching. It is an understanding that goes far beyond the present reductionist tendencies of cognitivist ‘datafication’ (Lees 2016), following in the wake of global neoliberal educational policies and driven by international league tables of educational testing (Ball 2012).

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