

Anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner Education

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Do you have to be an anthroposophist to be a Steiner teacher?

In my work with teacher education, I am sometimes asked questions, quite important but also difficult, about the role of anthroposophy in Steiner education:¹ “Do you have to be an anthroposophist to be a Steiner teacher?” “Is it important that teachers talk about anthroposophical matters with each other at a Steiner school?” And other questions similar to these.

The answers, it seems to me,² depend to a great degree on what one imagines terms such as “anthroposophy” and “anthroposophist” to mean. I think that by explaining something of how I understand them, I will also be able to outline the kind of answers that I have found enriching in reflecting on such questions.

Briefly put: anthroposophy is a Bildung-oriented worldview or a Bildung path and, it follows, an anthroposophist is someone who is especially engaged in a process of Bildung.

1 I will use the term Steiner education throughout for what is also known as Waldorf education. I understand this to encompass any educational initiative based more or less in Rudolf Steiner’s educational philosophy.

2 I will not be inserting the qualifying “it seems to me” in every sentence but only when I think it especially important not to be misunderstood. It can be generally assumed throughout. It should also be explicitly clear that the perspective developed here is one of several possible ones and that this in no way suffices to encompass anthroposophy entirely. One might consider this an educational perspective on anthroposophy, but even then I am sure there are others equally capable of illuminating certain relationships between anthroposophy and Steiner education.

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A longer discussion follows shortly, but briefly the concept of Bildung refers to a philosophical tradition within education that has roots all the way back in antiquity. Its literal meaning can be translated as "formation" or "cultivation" and it shares a common link with the tradition of liberal education. An easy way to understand the concept is to consider educational experiences that have been especially formative, meaningful, enriching and memorable. Such experiences are experiences of Bildung, and the Bildung tradition has aimed at providing education particularly rich in such experiences.

In this piece I will unpack the answer above and refer to some statements by Steiner that, for me, have illuminated how anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner education relate to each other. They represent both an argument and, perhaps even more, the presentation of an aspect of my own Bildung path as it relates to Steiner's work.

Anthroposophy and Bildung

To begin with, in a footnote to the fifth volume of his introductions to Goethe's scientific writing, Steiner wrote:

*"A concept is esoteric when it is viewed in the context of the phenomena from which it was won. Exoteric when it appears as an abstraction for itself."*³
(Steiner 1982 [1897], p. 377 my translation)

Towards the end of his life, he wrote in his *Leading Thoughts* that:

"Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe. It arises in man as a need of the heart, of the life of feeling." (1998a, p. 11)

Now, leaving these two statements aside for the moment, I will turn briefly to a characterisation of Bildung.⁴

3 *"Esoterisch ist ein Begriff, wenn er im Zusammenhang mit den Erscheinungen betrachtet wird, aus denen er gewonnen ist. Exoterisch, wenn er als Abstraktion gesondert für sich betrachtet wird."* I still remember when I was told this by Dietrich Esterl in a slightly different form during a conversation in 2005 and it opened up a whole new world of understanding for me. It took me, however, until 2016 to find the exact quote, since he didn't remember at all where he had it from and so there is a chance that he was thinking of a different statement by Steiner, since I haven't gone back to him to check. He said roughly that esoteric is that which is taken in its contexts, that which creates relationships, exoteric that which stands on its own, alone.

4 One might well object that I am treating Steiner's thought in an exoteric way (i.e.. devoid of Bildung) by separating brief statements from a wider context. However, they are then placed in a new context through the ensuing discussion and in how they are related to each other, and one, I think, which is faithful also to the original context from which they were taken if one takes the time to look into each.

Bildung is a rich tradition to consider, but quite central to it is the insistence that knowledge loses its value if it is atomized, abstracted and impersonal, in the sense of having no meaning for the person engaging with it. It argues that knowledge needs to arise in context. Furthermore, Bildung is at heart a biographical process, a path to self-determination, integrity and self-understanding, all as a result of a reciprocal understanding of the world. This biographical aspect of Bildung also means that Bildung cannot really be provided but only cultivated and afforded, i.e. it is, in the end, up to each participant in a Bildung process to ensure that it becomes just that. We cannot force it upon someone; and the more education is planned, regulated and compulsory, the more we must use our pedagogical imagination in order to bring about relationships where those we are working with (ourselves, our students and our colleagues) experience this work as a process affording Bildung. To be sure, there is an argument to made in the exact opposite direction, i.e. if education is almost entirely unplanned, unregulated and voluntary, we also need to spend a greater effort in order for it to afford Bildung. It is a short step from this to Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* but this would take me too far off course.

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Without doing violence to Steiner's first statement above, I think it could just as well be paraphrased as: Bildung is the result of concepts being understood in the context from which they have been taken. The absence of Bildung is when they appear in the abstract, each one for itself. It is fundamentally ungebildet (i.e. lacking in Bildung) to educate or be educated in such a way as to abstract concepts and phenomena from the context in which they emerge.⁵

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The spiritual that Steiner writes of in his second statement is a tacit or explicit condition for Bildung, especially when one takes the perspective that it can largely be understood as that which strives for and lives in relationships and participation. One of the roots of the Bildung tradition is also that of German mysticism, another that of German classicism (a period of late Classic and early Romantic thought in which, among others, Goethe, Schiller and Novalis are included) and both are deeply rooted in Christianity. Thus, it is only in a limited sense that the Bildung tradition can be thought of as secular. But one

⁵ An objection here is warranted since Steiner uses the term "esoteric" in more ways than this. It would be interesting to conduct a systematic study of the degree to which the other ways remain compatible with the concept of Bildung as I understand it here. We can take one of the most common: esoteric in the traditional sense of secret or hidden where the esoteric is that which if it is made public and becomes exoteric risks becoming profaned/desecrated by those who are uninitiated. But often this is precisely the case with our most deep and holy Bildung experiences. These are experiences in life that have been so formative and full of meaning that we may not be able to share them with anyone without experiencing a loss of magic and life in the narrative. From an educational point of view, one might say that every person's process of Bildung harbours a secret inwardness and as a teacher one needs to exercise deep care not to invade it. One might also understand this in the sense that a Bildung-oriented school needs to strive for an environment that does not unnecessarily profane our Bildung processes. A school is esoteric/Bildung-oriented to the degree that children and adults can engage in a mutual participation in each other's Bildung processes and exoteric/unBildung-oriented to the degree that everyone is left to him or herself with a Bildung process.

can still refrain from expressing it and simply write that: Bildung is a path of knowledge that wants to lead the human being towards a greater participation⁶ in the world-process (a lack of Bildung being synonymous with a distanced and abstract observation). It arises in man as a need of the heart, of the life of feeling (as long as school and other things do not extinguish it, this need seems to be present in most if not all children because it is a need, a deep desire for meaning).

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The point with becoming familiar with anthroposophy as a Steiner teacher (apart from establishing an awareness of the historical roots of Steiner education), from this perspective, is that it can contribute to one becoming a person who is more gebildet, i.e. a person whose participation in the world-process (including participation in the inner life processes of the children and youth one is teaching) is strengthened and increased, a person whose self-understanding is deepened and within whom the realisation is present that these are reciprocal. Participation enriches self-understanding, self-understanding leads to greater participation.

The risks inherent in our search for meaning

The way Steiner characterises the esoteric also implies that it can be recognised as an increased meaningfulness, whereas the exoteric rather moves towards the meaningless since meaning is to be found in the understanding of how things relate to each other. On their own, few (if any) things are comprehensible. However, the risks here should be obvious. It is characteristic of fundamentalism of all kinds that they carry with them a sort of rigid and almost total meaningfulness. Steiner once wrote in an undated notebook entry: “One should not be driven by a will to refrain from the knowledge-drama in favour of a knowledge-grammar.”⁷ (2005, p. 224, my translation). This is what happens when Bildung is reduced to a simple gathering of knowledge. Anthroposophy as a Bildung path needs to be experienced as a drama and thereby to become personal. In this one sacrifices its totalising explanatory value (i.e. those elements of meaningfulness that explain everything) in favour of a concrete participation in the world-process.⁸

6 I write participation here, following Barfield (1988) because I think it is a more accurate description of the kind of knowledge striven for both by Steiner and by the Romantic Bildung tradition.

7 “Man soll nicht auf das Erkenntnisdrama zugunsten einer Erkenntnisgrammatik verzichten wollen.”

8 I think this has been my personal experience. I began, quite unprompted, out of curiosity about the foundations of the pedagogy I was experiencing, to study anthroposophy at 17. The Bildung experience in the sense of a personal drama was, mildly speaking, intense. However, I reckon it took me about seven years to move past a constant back and forth between drama and grammar and I think this is one way in which fundamentalism originates (it also is easy to forget that grammar is descriptive and not prescriptive). One is initially so deeply affected by the meaningfulness that a revelation affords (and at an initial stage most, or all, knowledge is revelation) that one would like to impart it also to others. However, as stated, Bildung cannot be taught, and the more so the deeper it is, it can only be afforded, and this affordance must come out of one's being not out of one's teaching. Such being, on the other hand, takes a certain time to grow unless, I suppose, one is already ripe for it which I most

That Steiner education has its roots in anthroposophy means, as I understand it here, that it is an explicit and intensely practised pedagogy of *Bildung*. And *Bildung*, considered as a process (a movement), is something that can occur in all kinds of forms and contents. This is one of the areas in which I have found Steiner to be a source of intellectual and moral virtue. In one of his most beautiful lectures (in my opinion) he poses the question if, to participate in the Christ impulse, one must have knowledge of its historical background, its name (1998b, p. 178). His answer is an explicit "no" (ibid. p. 185), his argument being that the important question is whether someone has understood love and its meaning in the world (the title of the lecture), especially as it relates to wisdom⁹ and power.

This understanding can be found in people all over the world irrespective of religious or secular views. One can, to be sure, also find a lack thereof among some who insist that they participate exclusively in the Christ impulse. Fundamentalism, be it religious or secular, is, at heart, a confusion of wisdom and power on the one hand, and love on the other. Beiser (2004, p. 28-31), in discussing the Romantic view of *Bildung*, also emphasises the centrality of love both for the ethics of the Romantic poets and philosophers, and as mediator between reason and sensibility. I think there is a direct and quite beautiful and striking continuity here between Schiller's form and sense drives (wisdom and power), and his positing of play (love)¹⁰ between them and Steiner's argument.

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Conclusions

I think it is not very difficult, having said all this, to understand Steiner education in a corresponding way. A Steiner teacher then, is someone who has understood the meaning and importance of *Bildung* for the human being, no matter if he or she has ever heard of Steiner education. And for some who have this need of the heart and the life of feeling for *Bildung*, the need can also arise to deepen it through anthroposophy – but of course also through other traditions of *Bildung*. What is important is if they qualify as esoteric in

certainly was not. Above all, it requires an established habit of speaking about the drama of our process of *Bildung* rather than presenting its contents or grammar separately. This holds for its philosophical elements as well. However such presentations make us far more vulnerable than presentations of grammar, which perhaps also explains some of the violence that is exerted to defend ideas in principle. It is a way of hiding the intense vulnerability that these ideas embody for oneself. I still, to my retrospective annoyance, find myself now and again slipping back into ways of speaking that are grammatical, i.e. totalising, rather than expressions of drama.

9 A reasonable objection here would be that *Bildung* and anthroposophy are both much more concerned with increasing wisdom than they are with practising love. This objection cannot really be refuted in theory, but must be demonstrated in practice since it arises out of a concern that a knowledge-drama is substituted with a knowledge-grammar. The *Bildung* tradition also knows this. Consider, for example Goethe who writes in *The Fairy Tale*: Love does not rule, but it cultivates *Bildung* and that is more (die Liebe herrscht nicht aber sie bildet und das ist mehr) (1999, p. 98, my translation).

10 In a stroke of genius, the Swedish language even spells this out in its word for love which is *kärlek* meaning literally loving-play or in-love-play, *kär* meaning to hold dear, to be in love and *lek* play.

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This, for myself, has led to a wholehearted and ongoing engagement with anthroposophy.

Where does this leave me regarding the initial questions? Hopefully it is clear that I would stress the importance of discerning drama from grammar, that it is important to understand what Bildung is and that this is a conversation that needs to be alive in a Steiner school. Without it, that school might have individual teachers who provide a rich education but as a whole it will struggle because it is in contradiction to its deeper purpose. I think such a conversation does not necessarily need to be explicitly about, or limited to, anthroposophy, but it does need to be esoteric in the sense characterized by Steiner. A Steiner teacher needs to have a deep enthusiasm for Bildung (something my experience generally confirms but with some notable exceptions as I remember from my own days as a Steiner student) but this is hardly the same as requiring an active engagement with anthroposophy in particular.

I think this also provides us with some fruitful ways of considering Steiner teacher education. First, we assume, tacitly or explicitly, that those who are learning to become teachers are intent on a process of Bildung, and desire with all their heart and feelings to participate in an educational context (Steiner schools) where Bildung is the centre of attention. Perhaps being explicit about this would help some to orient themselves in their education. Furthermore it at least suggests that the anthroposophical study common to many (or all) Steiner teacher education programmes could be prefaced by a broader introduction to the concept and tradition(s) of Bildung.

Finally, I would also propose a caveat regarding a more focused and systematic development of Steiner education into new forms, particularly impulses for a renewal of the Steiner curriculum. Here I think that a more active engagement with anthroposophy as a path of Bildung is needed, quite simply because it is out of this Bildung path that Steiner education was once borne. In a sense anthroposophy constitutes the self-understanding that is needed in order to enrich the participation of a Steiner teacher engaged in systematic development. Lacking such self-understanding implies a risk of losing oneself in the richness and diversity of Bildung processes. But only being concerned with such self-understanding implies a lack of participation in the needs and the life of the current world-process. As Steiner expresses it, and he does this in several instances and he is by no means the first to do so, rather, I would say, he is speaking out of one of the deepest roots of the Bildung tradition (2005, p. 222):

*“If you want to know yourself
Look out into the world in all directions
If you want to know the world
Look around in all your depths.”¹¹*

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11 *Willst du dich selber erkennen
Blicke in der Welt nach allen Seiten
Willst du die Welt erkennen
Schau in alle deine eigenen Tiefen.*