Super-sensible research

At some point, everyone who looks a little into a discipline influenced by Steiner, wants to know how he developed his confident assertions. The answers are thoroughly and systematically addressed in the literature created by or about Steiner and his work. But I'll give it a crack ...

Steiner began his public academic career editing WJ Goethe's scientific works. Steiner took a break in 1886 to write 'A theory of Knowledge Inherent in Goethe's World View', to clarify why he was adopting a fresh angle on Goethe's work. Steiner considered that Goethe had a coherent world view permeating his art and science, but that this coherence was not fully conscious even to Goethe. Steiner not only demonstrated his familiarity and dexterity with the historical and contemporary philosophical issues, but spelled out Goethe's epistemology or theory of Knowledge. He felt that although Goethe was a hero and foundation of the contemporary Germanic culture, the culture needed to understand its roots to benefit and thrive.

The cultural momentum was already in thrall to the idea that the real world is all 'out there' and the best scientists can do is to make a mental copy of this objective world for themselves and act upon that mental copy. According to this view the way to assure the integrity of this mental copy was to get the investigator out of the investigatory loop, because our sense organs are only transducers of a signal from the reality: for example, a London bus absorbs most of the sunlight, only reflecting the light at a frequency of around 430 000 GHz. This stimulates chemical and electrical neurotransmission at the back of the eye, and this electrical cascade is then represented, somehow, by the brain as 'red' which it projects onto the bus. The real experience 'red' is nowhere to be found in this objective web of events. The redness of red is an illusion and so, by extension to all sense impressions, we must try and bypass our unreliable senses.

Steiner identifies the two parents of this approach as a distrust of our sense apparatus going back to the Eleatic school of Xenophanes (570 BC), and a belief in a world beyond our immediate experience as can be deduced from a one-sided understanding of Plato's parable of the cave. This is cemented into Western philosophical thought by Kant in his postulate of the 'thing in itself' ('Ding-an-sich'). Simultaneously Steiner deconstructs thoughts like that in the example of the bus above; - we are encouraged by this thought to ignore the naive perception of the bus and to trust in a transcendent idea of a real source of the sense stimuli. However, we are using the naive realities of the eye and brain to make our case and if we are consistent we would need to step back and talk of the real brain in itself and the real eye itself behind those naive perceptions. If we do this we are locked into an infinite regression until we disappear up our own (real or unreal) backsides. We are then only able to take refuge in solipsism or a transcendent world view. It is a shock to most who grasp this thought that our modern approach to knowledge - 'objective' Science - has not succeeded in eliminating error and subjectivity, but is based upon a chimera at least as metaphysical as Tinkerbell.

According to Steiner, Goethe's partially formulated approach was different. Both felt that thinking was much cheapened in its characterisation in the inconsistent but dominant paradigm. Goethe's view gave thinking its full due and avoided inventing a metaphysical reality. The first step to 'getting' this view is to strip down our experience and see what part of it is actually given through our senses. This is a tableau of unconnected and seemingly random sense impressions. This 'appearance for the senses' is an incoherent mess. There is no possibility of discrimination between

a red bus, a sound, a pain, a mental picture, ourselves, a computer, an animal, wet, and the smell of parsley. One cannot ascribe priority between an attacking lion and a supine parsnip. Only thought can begin to interpret this 'dumb show of Nature'. Nature approaches us with equal validity from these two sides, as percept and concept, and the reality is only recreated by the thinking and perceiving human. Cognition is the matching of the two complementary sides of reality within the human being. Far from scratching together for as good a representation of Nature as it can, thought presents to us a vital half of reality without which we are totally adrift. Reality can only be grasped by staying in the loop, thinking clearly and using healthy sense organs. If this is unrecognised we will always see as objective what we have in fact 'thought into' the world.

Whilst that is the first redemption of the reputation of thinking, the second is to realise that thinking is able to be sufficient to itself. A thought does not exist in isolation. As a simple example the concept 'cause' cannot be defined without the concept of 'effect'. Once the one concept is juggled the other concept is found. In this way the thought world is a totality in itself, organically integral. Our brain is a sense organ for thought, not a squishy hard disk or multimedia calculator. We only need to direct this sense organ, with our interest and wonder, to uncover more and more of reality. A debate at the turn of the 19th century concerned the 'limits to knowledge'; Steiner's epistemology (theory of knowledge) suggests that there is no inherent limit to knowledge, and a healthy sense for truth will guide us as surely in the extremes of experience as it does in the routine and mundane aspects of life.

Several more things emerge from this. One is that we, the thinker and perceiver, are back in the loop of knowledge. If we are to try and deal with self-delusion and wish fulfillment, and all those other aberrations that objective science wanted to legislate out of the picture, we now have to do that more actively. We need restraint and integrity. Morality returns to the laboratory, not just as a constraint to how we exploit our discoveries in the market place, but in the actual process of knowing itself.

The tools we forge in the more mundane and prosaic levels of knowledge, are the same tools to be used for 'super sensible science'. The 'super-sensible' dimension refers to knowledge without an immediate sensory anchor. Some of the foot hills of supersensible thinking are so familiar to us that we probably don't think of them as unusual at all. If I ask you to imagine a hill with the sun shining on it, and if you are willing, you are already involved in supersensible activity. When we investigate inorganic Nature then all the necessary perceptual material is given to us. Discovery of the Natural Laws provides the essential building blocks of our knowledge of inorganic Nature and to investigate them we remain totally within phenomena.

> *Every natural law, therefore, has this form: When this fact interacts with that, this phenomenon arises. It would be easy to show that all natural laws really have this form: when two bodies of unequal temperature are in contact, heat passes from the warmer to the less warm until the temperature of the two is the same. If a fluid is contained in two vessels which are connected, the level becomes identical in the two vessels. If a body stands between a source of light and another body, it casts a shadow upon the latter. In mathematics, physics, and mechanics, anything which is not mere description must be a primal phenomenon.*
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> *All advance in knowledge rests upon the perception of primal phenomena. When we are able to remove an occurrence from its connection with other occurrences and explain it as the effect of definite elements of experience, then we have penetrated a step deeper into the fabric of the world.*

We have seen that the primal phenomena yields itself wholly to thinking when the factors concerned are brought together in thought according to their nature. But one can also create artificially the necessary conditions. This happens in scientific research. There we have in our control the occurrence of definite factors. Naturally we cannot ignore all related circumstances. Yet there is a way by which we may surmount the latter. We may produce a phenomenon under various modifications. We allow first one and another contributing factor to be active. We then find that one constant persists through all these modifications. We must retain the essential thing in all the combinations. We find that in all these individual experiences a factual component of these is constant. This is higher experience within experience. It is the fundamental fact, or primal phenomenon.

The experiment is intended to convince us that nothing else influences a definite occurrence except what we take into account. We bring together certain conditions whose nature is known to us and observe what follows from these. Here we have an objective phenomenon on the basis of subjective creation. We have something objective which is at the same time thoroughly subjective. The experiment is, therefore, the true mediator between subject and object in inorganic science.

So much for inorganic science. what of organic science?

It has been supposed that the methods of inorganic science should simply be transferred to the organic. The methods applied in the former field have simply been considered as the only scientific methods possible, and it has been thought that, if a science of "organics" is possible, it must be so in the same sense as physics. But the possibility has been ignored that the concept of the nature of science might be far broader than the definition "interpretation of the universe according to the laws of the physical world." Even today [1886!] men [!] have not come to recognise this truth. Instead of seeking to learn what constitutes the scientific character of the inorganic sciences, and then seeking for a method which might be applied to the living world without sacrificing the requirements resulting from this inquiry, the laws discovered at those lower stages of existence are simply postulated as universal.

But the inquiry should be, first of all, as to the basis upon which scientific thinking rests .... All this comes from the fallacious opinion that the method of a science is something external to the objects of that science, prescribed not by their nature but ours ... But in all this, the fact is overlooked that the objects may perhaps refuse to yield to the methods of observation which we would vindicate upon them .... Before everything else, we must direct out thought to this question: Whence do we derive the content of the general class of which we consider the single organic entity a particular instance? We know perfectly well that the specialisation is due to the external influences, but the specialised for itself we must derive from an inner principle. The fact that this specialised form has itself evolved we can explain when we study the environment of the entity. Yet this specialised form is, none the less, something in and of itself ....

But what is this fundamental element? It cannot be anything else than that which appears in the particular in the form of the general . ... a general form of the organism which includes within itself all particular forms. This general organism we shall call, after the precedent of Goethe, the 'type'... The Darwinian theory presupposes the type. ....

The type plays in the organic world the same role as that of the natural law in the organic. As the latter gives us the possibility of recognising each single occurrence as a member of a greater whole, so the type puts us in a position to

look upon the single organism as a particular shaping of the primal form. ...

An organics is possible which will be scientific in the strictest sense just as mechanics is scientific. Only the method is different. The method of mechanics is that of proof ... It is scientific because it completely permeates an occurrence with the concept: because it brings about a coincidence of experience and thought.

Through this method of proof, however, we make no head way in the science of organics. The type does not require that under certain conditions a definite phenomenon occur ... It determines only the conformity to law of its own parts. It does not point beyond itself like a natural law. The particular organic forms can be evolved only from the universal type-form and every organic entity which appears in experience must coincide with some one of these derivative forms of the type. Here the evolutionary method must replace the method of proof. ... No one else recognised as Goethe did that an organics must be possible apart from all vague mysticism, without teleology, without the assumption of special creative thoughts. But neither has any one else more definitely rejected the demand to apply to this field the methods of inorganic science.

The type, as we have seen, is a more complete scientific form than the primal phenomenon. Moreover, it presupposes a more intensive activity of our minds than that required by the other. In reflecting about the things of inorganic nature, our sense perception provides us with the content. Here it is our sense organisation which yields to us what, in the case of the organic, we lay hold of only by means of our minds ..... but in the type, content and form are intimately united one with the other. ... the task which is required of our mind is to participate productively in creating the contentual element while dealing with the formal..... It must create the content with the form. It must take upon itself an activity which is the function of the senses in inorganic science and which we call perception.

The mind itself must be perceptive on this higher plane. Our power of judgment must perceive in thinking and think in perceiving. Here we have to do with the perceptive power of thought as first explained by Goethe. Goethe thereby pointed out as a necessary form of apprehension in the human mind what Kant wished to prove to be quite unattainable by man because of the nature of his whole endowment.

Sorry for the extended quotation from 'A Theory of Knowledge Inherent in Goethe's World View', but it covers a lot of the disputed ground of the modern debate so well and unflinchingly. Using clear concepts it helps us to consider where the supersensible is necessary for everyday science. This barrier has been declared insuperable by Kant and we have swallowed it as a culture for so long that it seems to be a fact. Steiner says 'come on in', and opens the door.

Whilst all of the above is appreciable by an unprejudiced mind which has not yet moved along these lines, there are some aspects of Steiner's later work, including aspects of biodynamics, which uses the same method but in an unexpected way. The twist in this tale is that we have dormant abilities which, when harnessed, become as organs of perception. These are known to the hindu as chakras. The harnessing demands control of more than thinking and the perceptions they enable are fuller than our 5 senses allow.

We can develop these organs through our own activity; we can blast them open and use them in their tattered and distorted state by taking chemicals and doing extreme activities. Steiner himself advocates a more ordered approach involving crystal clear active thinking, control of action, and disinterested involvement in our

emotions, in order to unfold these chakras without losing our central core and identity. We do not get 'out of our heads', but bring our heads (and heart and will) along with us. Steiner details this in several books and in many lectures.

But note that these organs, when unfolded, reveal an aspect of reality as do our other sense organs and we reconstruct the complete reality through our thinking in the same way as with buses we see. Uncontrolled, this is madness and unwelcome clairvoyance (- or messy-voyance!?). Controlled, we hope, it allows us to experience so much of what Steiner gave in lectures after 1900.

> *It is evident from the whole bearing of this theory that the important matter in its explanations is to gain an answer to the question: What is knowledge? In order to reach this goal, the world of sense-perception on the one hand and that of penetration though thought on the other are first clearly realised; and it is pointed out that the true reality of sense-existence manifests itself through the penetration of both. In this way the question 'What is cognition' is in principle answered. This question is not at all altered if the question is extended to the perception of the spiritual [supersensible]. Therefore, what is said in this writing about the essential nature of knowledge holds good also for the knowledge of the spiritual worlds, with which my later writings are concerned. The sense world in its manifestation to human perception is not reality. It posses its reality in connection with that which reveals itself in man in the form of thought concerning this sense world. Thoughts belong to the reality of the sensibly perceived; only that which is present in the sense existence as thought manifests itself not externally in this existence but inwardly in man. But thought and sense perception are a single essence. While man enters the world in sense perception, he separates thought from reality; but the thought merely manifests itself in another place within the mind. The separation between percept and thought possesses no significance for the objective world; it occurs only because man takes up a position in the midst of experience. It is to him that this appearance thus occurs, as if thought and percept were two-fold. Nor is it otherwise in the case of spiritual perception. When this occurs by reason of processes in the soul which I have described in my more recent book 'Knowledge of the Higher World and its Attainment', this then forms likewise one aspect of (spiritual) existence; and the corresponding thoughts of the spiritual form the other aspect. A difference occurs only to this extent, that the sense perception reaches its consummation though thought in reality, as it were, in an upper direction at the beginning of the spiritual; whereas spiritual perception is experienced in its true being from this beginning downward. The fact that the experience of sense perception occurs through the senses formed by Nature, and that of the perception of the spiritual through spiritual organs of perception, first formed in a psychic manner, does not constitute a difference in principle.*
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> *In truth the idea of cognition I developed in this writing is not abandoned in my more recent publications, but is only applied to the spiritual experience.*

For this reason Steiner calls his work 'supersensible research'. Others label it as 'dogmatic declarations' and anyone who gives it the time of day, 'believers'. I prefer to think that when one is clear how the body of research was developed it ceases to be dogma and becomes check-outable (a 'critical' knowledge) both through the rational filters of those without direct experience, and by direct experience for those who make the effort.

However, and in my opinion, there are some people within Anthroposophy who exhibit cultish behaviour by taking on Steiner's words as dogma. He *was* an amazing man: philosophically grounded without being just a philosophologist, active and innovative in urgent arenas, a reliable guide in scary waters, steady enough so you would certainly let him babysit your kids, enigmatic enough so you would prefer him at your dinner party, a gentle slayer of sacred cows, and he inspires people. He's even reputed to have had a 'wicked' sense of humour! But, if you see Rudolf Steiner on the path - kill him.

Of the many inspired by this path, of interest is Dorian Schmidt who now trains others who are interested. In a recent workshop he guided us to 'look under the bonnet' of our thinking. He encouraged us to experience in detail not only having mental images, but our experiences when we are actively thinking and manipulating concepts in full consciousness. By undertaking various exercises in which we had to strain to work our way through the process, we became clearer of the arena in which these active thoughts are manifest. By extending ourselves beyond our body through directing our interest and by keeping this arena open we were encouraged to turn off our activity without losing consciousness. We were then encouraged to observe what then came into this arena. There are many exercises like this in the literature.

So, if you didn't get all that, a recap;- our thinking helps reveal reality to us, and is not just as good a copy as it can muster. It takes discipline to achieve this mastery of both senses and thought, but this exercise is what is needed to be adept with a fuller range of sense organs. This, if done right, is a reality attainable by anyone who can do the work on themselves, using the 'muscles' developed by their efforts.

(This is one of the many 'help files' from the Considera site. The original can be found at http://www.considera.org/help/helpsss.htm)