

RUDOLF STEINER, THE CISTERCIAN ORDER AND KARL JULIUS SCHRÖER

The year 1888 was clearly a turning point in Steiner's life in relation to his faculties of karmic perception. Steiner had been touched by the poems of Fercher von Steinwand, and had an opportunity to meet the reclusive poet. In him he recognized someone whose strong individuality could not be explained by his environment. Steiner felt that, although advanced in age, Steinwand was the youngest in spirit of all the people around him. "His facial expression and every gesture revealed to me a soul being who could only have been molded at the time of Greek paganism and its influence on the development of Christianity at the beginning of the Christian era," is Steiner's comment in his autobiography.⁽¹⁾

Steiner had another decisive encounter with Wilhelm Anton Neumann, a learned Cistercian priest, in November of the same year. With Neumann Steiner had many long conversations, including a seminal one on reincarnation. Though interested in the topic, Neumann carried a split mind on the matter. His personal interest lay at odds with everything that dogmatic Catholicism declared outside the faith.

On November 9, 1888, Steiner gave a lecture on "Goethe as the father of a new aesthetics." Neumann, who had listened with interest, shared his intuition with Steiner that "The seeds of this lecture you gave today are to be found already in Thomas Aquinas!" Referring to this conversation in the lecture of July 18, 1924, Steiner commented, "And then came the remarkable thing that I was giving a lecture on one occasion in Vienna. The same person [Neumann] was present and after the lecture he made a remark that could be understood as the fact that at this moment he had full understanding of a modern human being and his relationship to his former incarnation. And what he said at that moment about the connection between two lives was correct, not wrong. But he understood nothing at all and was only saying it."⁽²⁾ Concerning this same lecture, Steiner told Friedrich Rittelmeyer, "...my own former incarnation dawned on me."⁽³⁾ This indicates that Steiner knew nothing of this incarnation beforehand. Knowledge of a previous incarnation came to him via a Cistercian priest. This is not surprising given the intimate karmic links he had with many of the people in the order, or in its immediate circles.

In *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4, Steiner makes repeated references to the Cistercians and the role they played from his early childhood. The reader may remember that they were also present in Aquinas' incarnation,

who had at his side the Cistercian Reginald of Piperno, and who died in the Cistercian monastery of Fossanova. In relation to the Cistercians, Steiner said, “*from my earliest youth, until a certain period of my life, something of the Cistercian Order again and again approached me. Having gone through the elementary school, I narrowly escaped—for reasons which I explained in my autobiography, *The Story of my Life*—becoming a pupil in a gymnasium or grammar school conducted by the Cistercian Order. Everything seemed to be leading in this direction; but my parents, as I have explained, eventually decided to send me to the modern school [Realschule] instead*” [emphasis added].⁽⁴⁾

The Cistercian presence continued in Steiner’s life in the years immediately following. Steiner recalls, “But the modern school that I attended was only five steps away from the Cistercian grammar school. Thus we made the acquaintance of all those *excellent Cistercian teachers* whose work was indeed of a high quality at the time.” That this was an important relationship for Steiner is further elaborated thus: “*I was deeply attracted to all these priests, many of whom were extremely learned men. I read a great deal that they wrote and was profoundly stirred by it. I loved these priests...*”⁽⁵⁾ And Steiner concludes, “*In short, the Cistercian Order was near me. And without a doubt (though these of course are hypotheses such as one uses only for purposes of illustration), if I had gone to the Cistercian school I should, as a matter of course, have become a Cistercian.*”⁽⁶⁾ It is worth adding a similar statement from *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6, “*I should have become a priest in the Cistercian Order. Of that there is no doubt whatever. ...I loved these priests and the only reason why I passed the Cistercian Order by was because I did not attend the Gymnasium.*”⁽⁷⁾

Later, in the years in Vienna, key friendships were formed in the circle of Maria Eugenia delle Grazie, where many important Cistercian figures gathered. Here it was that Steiner came to understand the karma of the Michaelic movement and the fate of the souls of the School of Chartres. “And to me those things were most important which revealed to me: it is indeed impossible for any of those who were the disciples of Chartres to incarnate at present, and yet it seems as though some of the individualities connected with that School became incorporated, if I may call it so, for brief periods, in some of the human beings who wore the Cistercian garment.”⁽⁸⁾

The circle of delle Grazie also formed an important link to Schröer, though one that could not be brought to fruition. That leaving this circle of people was a difficult decision is indicated in Steiner’s words: “I was now divided between this house [delle Grazie’s], which I so much liked to visit, and my teacher and fatherly friend Karl Julius Schröer, who, after the first

visit, never again appeared at delle Grazie's."⁽⁹⁾ In this context Steiner is referring to the task that he had to take from Schröer, and advance as his own—the further elaboration of Goetheanism, setting the basis for anthroposophy itself. We will now look at this last, most important karmic connection.

Schröer and Anthroposophy

Schröer's soul carried a deep respect for all that Goethe had achieved. He intuitively felt that his scientific work was far ahead of what science professed in the nineteenth century, but he recoiled from inquiring more deeply into the matter. Steiner had noticed that Schröer formed his ideas from a certain level of intuition, but had little interest in structuring his world of thoughts.⁽¹⁰⁾ "Had he attained intellectuality, had he been able to unite it with the spirituality of Plato, Anthroposophy itself would have been there," is Steiner's revealing conclusion in the last lecture in *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4. A similar conclusion is reached in his *Autobiography*: "Anthroposophy would really have been his [Schröer's] calling.... The very thing which he bears within him from a former incarnation, if it could enter into the intellect, would have become Anthroposophy; it stops short; it recoils, as it were, from intellectualism."⁽¹¹⁾

Noticing that Schröer shrank from his task, Steiner could only conclude, "But as I said, what else could one do, than loose the congestion that had taken place, and carry Goetheanism really onward into Anthroposophy." And he added, "I resolved at that time to live Schröer's destiny as my own, and relinquish my own path of destiny."⁽¹²⁾ Walter Johannes Stein, who published his memory of one of his conversations with Steiner, indicates that Steiner could return to his mission only after the Christmas Conference, "whereas everything that lay between was taken over from the path which Schröer should have trodden." This was made more explicit in reply to the question of what would have been Schröer's task. "The whole teaching of Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition, and everything up to the forms of the Goetheanum building," was the answer.⁽¹³⁾

Very early in life, Steiner had already built up all the soul faculties that equipped him for the fulfillment of his world task, offering the new spiritual-scientific teachings of karma and reincarnation from a Christianized perspective. He was in fact able to spiritually research a given individual's previous lives as early as 1888, if not sooner. But signs of destiny had already shown him that something else lay in store for him; something requiring his willingness to sacrifice. Had world karma proceeded in an

optimal way, Schröer would have had to redeem the fallen intellect. He would have had to thoroughly school his thinking faculties to attain the formulation of anthroposophy. Steiner would have simply brought forward what he could directly perceive in the spiritual world, like a new Plato working out of a world of ideas. His schooling of the faculties of the intellect had already been achieved in his Aristotle and Aquinas incarnations.

Had Schröer proceeded normally to developing the task that world karma had entrusted to him, the situation would have been as presented in Illustration 1. In the diagram, the crossover indicates that Plato/Schröer would have had to work in a more Aristotelian way, whereas Steiner could have worked in a more Platonic way. However, world history unfolded otherwise.

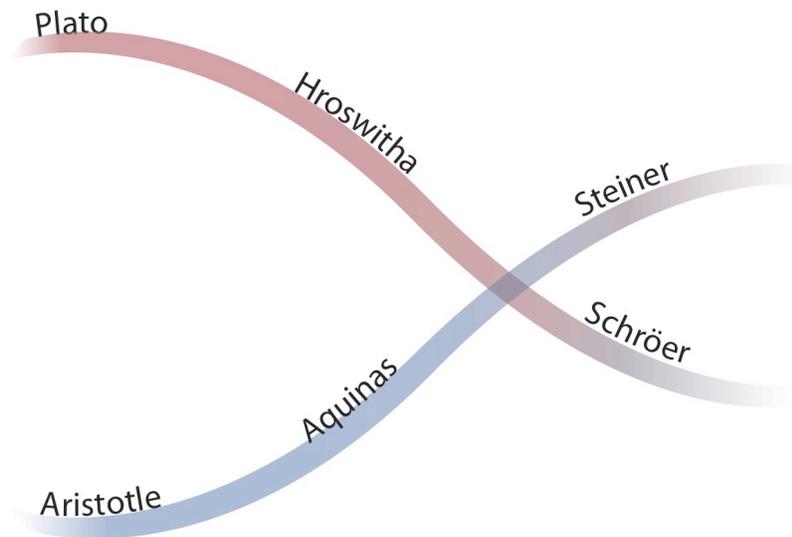


Illustration 1: Steiner and Schröer: ideal scenario [delete period]

The first step in Steiner’s path of sacrifice was brought to him from the external world. This meant, first of all, taking the way of the Realschule instead of the Gymnasium; and relinquishing the company of his most intimately and karmically connected circle of the Cistercians.

We have a crucial understanding of Steiner’s task in the Hague Conversation that Steiner had with Walter Johannes Stein in 1922.⁽¹⁴⁾ To the German anthroposophist Steiner confided how he had accepted Schröer’s destiny as his own. “By coming to that decision at that time, I experienced true freedom. I was able to write my *The Philosophy of Freedom* because I

experienced what freedom is.” And elsewhere, to indicate how personal had been the path to the writing of the *Philosophy*, he commented that the book did not aim at describing the only path to truth, but a path upon which walked one soul in search of the truth.⁽¹⁵⁾

Still in the same Hague Conversation, Steiner described the three levels of the experience of freedom in Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition. At one time, they may be experienced as a unity; later in life, three different phases in the ways of knowing may emerge. “To immediate experience, they [Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition] appear as a unity, but, with the passage of time, they can enter into consciousness as separate entities.”

The following are the three stages described in the letter:

Because one loves it, what one decides to do appears as a true Imagination. The second element that is woven into this unified experience is that higher powers admonish us to follow the impulse that is arising within us. ‘Do it,’ the inner voices say, and becoming aware of this is a perceptible Inspiration. Yet there is still a third element woven into this unified experience: through this free deed one places oneself within outer arenas of destiny into which one would otherwise never have entered. One encounters other people, is led to other places; what was first grasped inwardly through Intuition now approaches one externally as new destiny. This occurs when true Intuition unfolds.

Thomas Meyer concludes that after meeting with Neumann and receiving the ensuing revelation about his own karma, Steiner left Vienna with a heavy heart, and moved to Weimar. There he met different people, and entered into newly chosen activities; different activities from what would have been in line with the normally intended world karma. As outcome of the detour of the Goethe work, Steiner said, “Because my destiny brought me the Goethe task as part of my life, this [normal] development was slowed considerably. Otherwise, I would have pursued my spiritual experiences and described them exactly as they presented themselves to me. My consciousness would have widened into the spiritual world more rapidly, but I would have felt no need to work hard at penetrating my inner being.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Had Steiner not met Schröer’s destiny along the way, he could have brought forth his knowledge in a more “Platonic way,” directly out of the sphere of revelation. He would have been an even “better Platonist than Plato,” because he could have perceived much more exactly what lived in the spirit world.

Wiesberger completes this line of thought. Steiner renounced the state

of being through which the spirit world revealed itself through grace. A natural state of grace, which had endowed him with special faculties ever since his childhood, is contrasted with the other state of soul “in which, step-by-step, the soul develops an affinity with the spirit in order to stand within the spiritual of the world once it has experienced itself as spirit. Only in this actual participation does one experience how intimately the human spirit and the world’s spirituality can grow together in the human soul.”⁽¹⁷⁾ The “detour” in Steiner’s destiny occurred between 1882 and 1889 at first; then from 1889 to 1896. In the first period, Steiner was working on the Kürschner edition of Goethe’s works. In the second he worked on the Sophien standard edition and published *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

Steiner stepped into the Weimar period, meeting there what Schröer should really have made of his own Plato karma. And this is how Steiner characterizes the step he took: “I arrived in Weimar still influenced by the mood of my thorough study of Platonism. I believe that this helped me greatly to find my way into my work at the Goethe-Schiller archives. How did Plato live in the world of ideas, and how did Goethe? This question occupied me as I made my way to and from the archive building; it occupied me also, as I studied the papers of the Goethe estate.”⁽¹⁸⁾ This quotation is reflected in Steiner’s writing of *Goethe’s World View* in 1897. In Chapter 1, “Goethe’s Place in the Development of Western Thought,” some thirty pages are dedicated to characterizing the Platonic worldview in relation to the development of modern philosophy, and especially its theories of knowledge. And all of it is contrasted with Goethe’s worldview. In essence, Steiner, who stepped into the Schröer/Plato karma, had to thoroughly delve into Platonism, and into the relationship which had existed between Plato and the young artist who worked within his circle of influence, the future Goethe.

What Steiner said about embarking on Schröer’s task, he confirmed again after completing the writing of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, and therefore this specific task. “In a way, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path [The Philosophy of Freedom]* freed me of what destiny had demanded of me in terms of forming ideas during the first part of my life, and placed them into the external world; this took place through my experience of the natural scientific mysteries of existence. My next task could only be a struggle to form ideas of the spirit world itself” [emphasis added].⁽¹⁹⁾

When he compared his own views with those that formed themselves in Schröer’s spirit, Rudolf Steiner found more than the difference between the thinking of two individuals. He saw the individual standing within the great

relationships of historical streams, and he recognized Goethe's spiritual "type" as that of the Platonic school. Just as Goethe thought about the primal plant, so Plato had thought about the ideas that underlie sense-perceptions as their spiritual essence. And Rudolf Steiner found that Schröer, who, as a scholar of Goethe, lived in the realm of Platonic ideas, was no longer capable of finding the bridge that led from the realm of ideas to reality. He saw in Schröer the lonely heights of this super-worldly soul disposition. And that became for him a greater problem of humanity; he felt that finding a new bridge between the sensible and the supersensible was a necessity.

Aristotelian and Platonic Streams

Such were the thoughts that stimulated Steiner to occupy himself with Goethe's *Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*. He saw the realm of the lily, that is, of the spirit, as existing within the Platonic stream in such a way that contact with the present time could not take place in a living way. He saw the Green Snake, whose task is to form the bridge between the world of the spirit and the world of the senses, driven to the decision to sacrifice herself. The thought of this sacrifice lived in Steiner's soul.

In the end, one could say that the conundrum of "following my task/taking up someone else's task" disappeared, though not all the karmic consequences for humanity. In fact, the conditions were present in Steiner's sacrifice for a deeper apprehending of the polarity of freedom and destiny so central to an understanding of karma and reincarnation, and to the task that was his own. Steiner concluded,

Because of my connection with the Goethe work, I was able to observe vividly 'how karma works in human life.' There are two aspects of destiny that become unified in one's life. One arises from the soul's longing, and is directed toward the outer world; the other comes toward a person from the outside world. My own soul impulse was directed toward conscious experience of the spirit, and the external world's spiritual life brought me the Goethe task. I had to harmonize the two streams in my consciousness.⁽²⁰⁾

The conclusion to this line of argument brings us back to the initial parting of the ways in Steiner's karma at the time in which he chose to go to the Realschule, and to the conclusion that "this was also for very good karmic reasons."⁽²¹⁾ Steiner knew that had he not received a scientific

education, he would not have been able to rescue Goethe's heritage and to write *The Philosophy of Freedom*. We can thus come to understand that much of the tragic karma of the Anthroposophical Society results from the fact that Steiner had to embrace both Schröer's and his own task (Illustration 2).

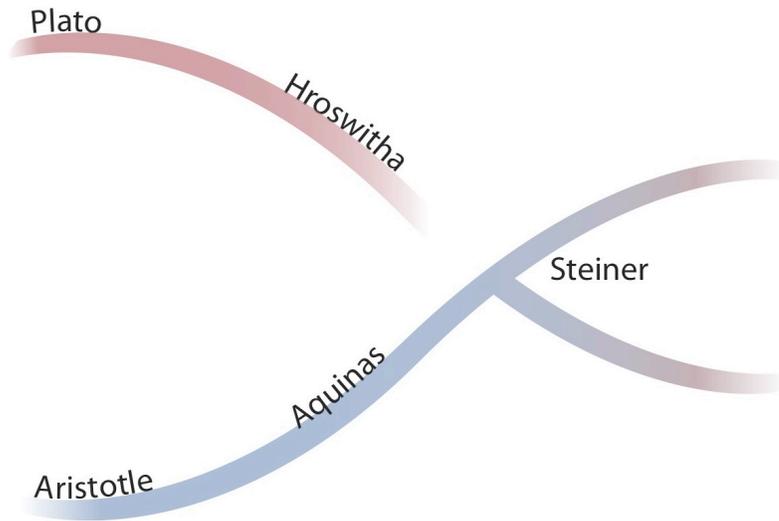


Illustration 2: Steiner and Schröer:
the final scenario

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 20. Friedrich Zauner has continued the poet's characterization and come to the conclusion, agreed upon by T. H. Meyer, that he was the reincarnation of Dionysius the Areopagite. This had played an important part in Aquinas' education. See *Rudolf Steiner's Core Mission: the Birth and Development of Spiritual-Scientific Karma Research*, T. H. Meyer, 2009 (translated 2010) (Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge, 2010) 44.
- 2) Rudolf Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 8, July 18, 1924 lecture (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1977).
- 3) Rudolf Meyer, *Rudolf Steiner's Core Mission*, 52 (Temple Lodge, 2010).
- 4) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4, September 12, 1924 lecture.
- 5) Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 14.
- 6) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4, September 12, 1924 lecture.
- 7) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6, June 18, 1924 lecture.
- 8) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3 July 13, 1924 lecture.
- 9) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6, June 18, 1924 lecture;
- 10) Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 9.
- 11) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4, September 23, 1923 lecture.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 27.
- 14) The Hague 1922 conversation between Rudolf Steiner and W. J. Stein is recorded in Thomas Meyer, ed., *W. J. Stein / Rudolf Steiner – Dokumentation eines wegweisenden Zusammenwirkens*, Dornach, 1985. It has been translated into English by John Barnes.

- 15) Rudolf Steiner, *From Symptoms to Reality in Modern History*, “Brief Reflections on the Publication of the New Edition of ‘The Philosophy of Freedom,’” October 27, 1918 lecture.
- 16) Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 27. Something similar to this statement is echoed in Chapter 15: “Initially, it was not my intention to attempt an interpretation of them [referring to the words of Goethe], as I did soon after in my introduction to Goethe’s scientific writings in Kürschner’s *German National Literature*. It was my intention to present independently some field of science, just as that science appeared to me in accordance with the spirit.”
- 17) Ibid, Chapter 15.
- 18) Ibid, Chapter 31.
- 19) Ibid, Chapter 25.
- 20) Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 27.
- 21) Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4, September 12, 1924 lecture.