

THE EVOLVING TASKS OF WORLD INITIATES

The interplay and intersection between Steiner's and Schröer's lives has a deeply mysterious quality. When we follow the line of Steiner's incarnations, there is a natural progression between three incarnations in particular: those of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Steiner. Here lies the basis for the development of thinking in the whole of Western civilization. In anthroposophy, this thinking is redeemed and re-spiritualized. In this sense, Steiner's incarnation reaches a culmination in full congruence with the developments that preceded it. So why then does Steiner claim that his task lay in furthering the teachings of karma and reincarnation?

We have looked at this question from biographical and historical perspectives. We can find supplemental understanding on this issue if we look at what Steiner said in a lecture on *The Second Coming of Christ in the Etheric World*. Here we are told:

Just as the spirit of Moses prevailed in the epoch that is now over, so in our time the spirit of Abraham begins to prevail, in order that after men have been led to the consciousness of the divine in the material world, they may now be led out and beyond it. For it is an eternal cosmic law that each individuality has to perform a particular deed more than once, periodically—twice at all events, *the one as the antithesis of the other*. What Abraham brought down for humanity into the physical consciousness he will bear upward again for them into the spiritual world (emphasis added).¹

To understand how the words just quoted apply to Steiner, we will look at the individuality of a teacher of mankind, whose role it was to lead humanity through the loss of a primeval state of being. Such was the case of Adam/John the Baptist, the “oldest soul” of humanity, the one whose earliest life covers the beginning of the process of incarnation. Adam led humanity through the Fall, out of its primeval communion with the spiritual world. At that time the human being had to sever its state of union with the Godhead, and that process reached its lowest point at the time of Golgotha. The reincarnated Adam, as John the Baptist, was the one who asked us to change our ways because the kingdom of God was at hand. Through preparing for the event of Golgotha—which occurred at the deepest point of humanity's incarnation and estrangement from the spirit—the same individuality who had taken the plunge away from the bosom of the gods also prepared the way for a gradual re-ascent from the physical to the spiritual. Having been the first to descend, he could now show the way to inaugurate the path of ascent.

When looked at from the perspective offered in the abovementioned lecture, the two figures of Plato and Aristotle appear in a new light. Plato's philosophical work

¹ Steiner, *The Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric World*, lecture of March 6, 1910.

promoted a consciousness of the divine outside the precincts of the Mysteries. He spoke about the Mysteries, but outside of these. Dionysus had inaugurated the way of the Greek Mysteries; Plato, the reincarnated Dionysus, brought his philosophical teachings to Greece at a time in which the Mysteries were turning decadent. Even if his knowledge was still rooted in the revelations of the Mysteries, he showed humanity the way toward the new consciousness embodied in philosophy, which was emancipating itself from the atmosphere of the Mysteries. Plato also left the world the legacy of a divided worldview: matter and spirit now severed from each other.

Aristotle was never part of the Mysteries. In him the evolutionary process was continued in a much more specific way through rigorous cultivation of the faculty of thinking. To achieve this goal, Aristotle had to forgo knowledge of reincarnation and karma. He originated the concept of the new formation of souls at birth and the idea of eternal salvation or damnation. The last traces of knowledge of reincarnation still survived in Plato, although in a corrupted manner. Aristotle had to consciously close the doors to this knowledge because the faculty of thinking had to develop within the exclusive boundaries of life on earth.

More than two millennia later, the same two individuals could undertake a deed that is an antithesis of what they had done earlier: a restoration of a condition of humanity that had been lost earlier. Schröer could have re-inaugurated the Mystery knowledge to which he closed the doors in his Plato incarnation, and this would have led to the inauguration of the path of spiritual science. In so doing, he also would have healed the inner rift that lived in his soul where matter stood at odds with spirit. That rift is healed in anthroposophy, but Schröer recoiled from fully entering intellectualism. Steiner, the new Aristotle, restored the way to a conscious knowledge of our eternal individuality, rooted in the reality of reincarnation and karma. He could now Christianize these teachings. This was the knowledge on which Aristotle had to turn his back, by virtue of the necessities of world evolution.

A closer look at Goethe and the development of modern philosophy and thinking will further highlight Plato/Schröer's destiny and life task in relation to world karma. Much of this was presented by Steiner at a critical turning point of his life, in his book *Goethe's World View*.

The change that preceded Plato in Greek philosophy was introduced when philosophers started to mistrust their sense perceptions as a means to attain knowledge. Steiner traced this change to the Eleatic school of philosophy and to Xenophanes, its first representative, who was born in 570 BC. Plato expressed this inability to trust the senses by saying that the things we perceive have no true being. He describes them as in a process of "becoming," but never "being." Thus there is a schism between the mental picture of a world of semblance and the world of ideas in which eternity is found. Plato could not ascribe real being to the sense world on its own. The schism between a world of semblance in front of the senses, and a true world to be found in ideas, is what Steiner called the "one-sided aspect of Platonism," which was to color all of Western philosophy.

In the evolution of Western thought, the Platonist one-sidedness is present in one form or another up to the days of Kant. It was present even in the materialistic antitheses. Francis Bacon did not see anything but subjectivity in the realm of ideas; reality, he believed, stood in front of the senses and nothing else was needed. His was "Platonism in

reverse” and the foundation of modern science.

David Hume saw in ideas nothing more than habits of thought. Finally, Kant re-elaborated past philosophy without adding much that was new. He started from the premise that there are ultimate truths independent from experience, and a proof of these truths is given to us through mathematics or physics. Like Hume, Kant believed that thoughts do not stem from experience, but are added to it by the human being. He trusted scientific thinking up to the point where the human being asks the ultimate questions about freedom, immortality, and the divine. In the latter realm, he posited that only faith could offer us a response. This elaborate thought system was nothing more than an attempt to preserve a place for the highest aspirations of the human soul. Until the days of Kant, one-sided Platonism had been continued through the centuries. Even when the reverse stance was taken, as is most noticeably the case in Bacon and Hume, it was still the separation between idea and sense perception that unified different worldviews.

One-sided Platonism was completely foreign to Goethe’s nature. According to his deepest feeling, what arose in his spirit was what surged within him by virtue of nature’s power. He lived in the instinct that told him that all he needed to do was to live into things in order to extract from them what is present as the idea. There was no need to raise himself above them. He could not imagine perceiving an object in nature without the accompanying idea. “The reciprocal working of idea and perception was for him a spiritual breathing.”² And nature proceeded from the whole in the idea to the particular manifestation of it that presented itself to the senses.

The attitude Goethe had toward nature was carried into artistic ideation. He felt that artistic creation comes forth in the same way in which a plant is the expression of an idea. For him, art was inseparable from the spiritual element. That explains why he was often willing to wait a very long time in order to complete a work of art, rather than rush to finish it through some artifice of fancy. Goethe’s *Faust* could not be completed until the artist lived to sufficient inner maturity to grasp the spiritual ideas he had been struggling so long to bring into a perceptible form. And this is what Goethe wrote about art: “The great works of art have at the same time been brought forth by human beings according to true and natural laws, as the greatest works of nature.”³ In his journey to Italy, he was able to behold the spiritual component of the plant world—the primeval plant—just as he beheld the archetypes of great art from the Italian museums. Insight into nature basically did not differ for him from what he attained in art. And Steiner said about this process, “Goethe attains his worldview, not on a path of logical deduction, but rather, through contemplation of the being of art. And what he found in art, this he seeks also in nature.” In this realm, Goethe was erasing the sharp boundaries Plato had erected between art and nature, art and science. Art was for Plato the realm of fantasy and feeling; science resulted from concepts free of fantasy. For Goethe, the difference between art and the scientific perception of nature lay in the fact that art makes the idea perceptible, and through it, the artist seizes the ideas of nature that lie concealed within it. And Steiner concluded, “It is one and the same truth which the philosopher presents in the form of thought, the artist in the form of a picture. The two differ only in their means of expression.” However, ideas were not brought to consciousness in the form of clear

² Steiner, *Goethe’s World View*, Mercury Press, chapter “Goethe and the Platonic World View.”

³ *Ibid.*

concepts in Goethe's mind.

In all of this, we can see how important Goethe's work was for the redemption of Platonism. The ground for German classical culture had been prepared by the reincarnated Platonic souls themselves. We can fathom how important furthering this task would have been for Schröder/Plato himself. It would have brought balance to what lived in his soul, which manifested in his unwillingness to immerse himself in the intellectualism of the age, and whose ultimate consequence was feeble-mindedness in old age.