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INTRODUCTION

WOLFGANG ZUMDICK

FROM 1920 TO 1922, RUDOLF STEINER gave a series of public lectures in various locations—largely for audiences with an academic background—not least of all because, at the time, serious voices had already been raised trying to deny Steiner’s scientific credibility and to vilify his spiritual science as a psychopathological phenomenon. Critics such as the Berlin psychologist Max Dessoir alleged that the results of Steiner’s spiritual-scientific research were nothing more than psychic projections that “have a tinge of the pathological” (lecture in Basel, November 2, 1921).

After the 1911 Philosophers’ Congress in Bologna, where Steiner introduced the “epistemological position of anthroposophy” for the first time to a larger academic audience, he was deeply concerned with the scientific recognition of his research.[†] From the outset, Steiner saw himself as a scientist, and his scientific research—regardless of how strange its results may have seemed to the academic professors of that time—has proven itself on closer examination to have consistently been at the same level as the research of his time; indeed, Steiner defined his research by the standard of contemporary science. Thus, the misunderstandings that prevailed in many sectors of the scientific community about him and his work, as well as the prejudices he encountered again and again, must have been a source of disappointment and pain for him.

But there was another difficulty Steiner had to confront, especially in the years following World War I. More and more people felt drawn to his ideas, which rapidly accelerated the growth of the Anthroposophical Society. Particularly the defeat in the war, the failed October

Revolution, and the growing destabilization of the economy caused many people in deeply devastated Germany to long for a complete redesigning of the social sphere and for a more profound understanding of humanity and of existence.

The growing popularity of anthroposophy, much as Steiner must have welcomed it, also held risks. On the one hand, there was a growing number of people who wanted to represent anthroposophy to the outside world, or at least to profess it publicly, but who were intellectually not entirely up to the task; on the other hand, a certain personality cult sprouted up again and again, something that was anything but welcome to the founder of anthroposophy. Rudolf Steiner's letters to his wife Marie von Sivers (see GA 262) attest to the fact that he was very much concerned about these problems.

The lectures gathered in this volume were held in front of academic audiences in Switzerland and in Leipzig; they show the high level of objectivity and empathy with which Steiner responded to skepticism on the part of the sciences. Step by step, he presented to his listeners the fundamentals of the anthroposophical path of knowledge. Steiner was less concerned with presenting results from his spiritual-scientific research than with leading his academic audience to an objective understanding of spiritual science in a propaedeutic, conceptually transparent way. The central questions of his approach were: What are the tools and instruments required to orient oneself in the world of the soul and the spirit? How can we know that the spiritual world is an objective world and not merely a psychic projection? What authorizes the spiritual researcher to acknowledge what he has experienced "on the other side" as a reality that is independent of him?

Steiner addresses these and other questions in the lectures collected here in such a structured and readily comprehensible way that the lectures are well-suited as solid introductory texts, independent of the specific conditions under which they originated. To characterize the purpose of these lectures in one sentence, one could say that Rudolf Steiner was concerned here with nothing less than the establishment of anthroposophical spiritual science as a recognized scientific research method and practice.

Regarding some of the lectures included here, we have had the good fortune that not only Steiner's lecture but also the subsequent discussion was taken down in shorthand. Thus, for example, in the case of the Leipzig Anthroposophical Academic Course, which included a particularly long, intense, and controversial discussion, we can still feel the atmosphere, which probably also prevailed at many other similar public lectures and in which the entire spectrum of reactions is reflected—a spectrum that fluctuated between emphatic response and radical rejection. For instance, in Leipzig, Steiner faced an audience of professors who knew how to formulate their criticism of his research methods in a clear and unequivocal way.

Rudolf Steiner, thanks to the experience of many similar events, responded with enthusiasm but still always objectively and, above all, in a conciliatory tone: "Please do not take what I said with some severity in my reply as though it were meant in a hostile way. On the whole, I am pleased with everything that is objected to here because only if we can clear away these hurdles of objections can we actually enter into anthroposophy" (Leipzig, May 11, 1922). This is based on the conviction that there is a bridge leading from traditional, academic research to spiritual science, from the established natural sciences and humanities to anthroposophically inspired spiritual science, and that mutual understanding is as necessary as it is possible.