

YOUTH AND
THE ETHERIC HEART

Rudolf Steiner Speaks
to the Younger Generation

Addresses, Essays, Discussions, and Reports
1920–1924

TRANSLATED BY CATHERINE E. CREEGER
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RUDOLF STEINER

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Toward Independent Scholarly Work

Address on the Recently Issued Appeal to Academic Youth[†]
Given during the First Anthroposophical Higher-Education Course
at the Goetheanum

DORNACH, OCTOBER 1, 1920

I am sure you will understand that because the contents of the recently issued “Appeal to Academic Youth”[†] are so closely associated with me personally, I cannot really speak to them in any way. Instead, let me speak to you today about the impulse emerging among today’s students to work toward new goals for academia and for society and culture in general. This appeal reminds me of another one that also originated in Stuttgart not long ago and called for the establishment of a cultural council.[†] When our work in Stuttgart began in 1919, it was initially based on the “Appeal to the German People and Culture,”[†] which I had formulated and released in March of the previous year, and on my attempts to provide guidelines for restructuring society in *Toward Social Renewal* (CW 23). A number of individuals supported this book’s perspective and social goals. Their intention was to show the world the real need for a renewal of cultural affairs, the need to imbue cultural activity with new impulses, and they saw the establishment of a cultural council as one of the most pressing issues.

As you know, *Toward Social Renewal* points out that the highest aspiration of our time must be to raise a subconscious goal of modern humanity to the level of conscious activity. I refer to the threefold reordering of the body social. Anyone with a bit of insight into the undercurrents of human aspirations will sense that this book is not utopian in the least. As the product of thirty to thirty-five years of observation, it essentially presents nothing more than what most individuals want (or, more accurately, *would* want if they followed their instincts and feelings) but have not yet confessed to wanting because they somehow fear raising it to consciousness.

We can see the need for new directions in all three domains of human activity—culture, politics and law, and economics. In my book, *Toward Social Renewal*, I attempted to demonstrate that the main obstacle to discovering these new directions is the idea that a monolithic state has to do everything. Over the past three or four centuries, this idea has become firmly implanted in our minds, and the state has gradually appropriated the system of higher education. But we must not forget that our education system actually developed directly out of cultural activity. Not all that long ago the reputation of higher education was based on the productivity of individual universities. Just recall how people spoke of the law school in Bologna, the medical school in Salerno, or any of the other important universities. The international reputation of the higher-education system was based on the unique accomplishments of individual universities. But through recent annexation by governments that have assumed more and more power, our system of higher education has been totally transformed to serve the outer needs of individual nation-states.

Originally, the universities themselves determined the extent and character of their relationship to the state. A historical recollection of that time should still be alive in anyone who feels connected to the spiritual striving for knowledge or to cultural aspirations in general. During the Age of Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was emphasized repeatedly that in the Middle Ages, scholarship existed to serve theological and ecclesiastical activity. You know I am no follower of Kant,[†] but this statement of his is worth mentioning: The time of academic disciplines serving as the trainbearers of theology is over.

Kant held that scholarly activity had become independent and was called upon to be the standard-bearer for all other aspects of culture. But it was only after such statements became popular (out of legitimate resistance to religious activity in academic fields) that the trend emerged that has now transformed our system of higher education into the servant of politics, the state, and the legal system. I ask you, is it better to carry the train of theology, which is at least a spiritual and cultural element, or to carry the train of the political system? This judgment will be left to times still to come. Roughly a century after

Kant's statement, the famous physiologist Emil DuBois-Reymond, then the president of the Berlin Academy of Science, said that the members of the academy felt very honored to be called the scientific security squad of the Hohenzollerns.† This statement is indicative of what I call "state occupation" of the higher-education system.

It goes without saying that the state's first concern is for its civil servants, not for scholarship. Recently the president of the University of Halle published an essay that sheds a very strange light on changes during his tenure.† He seemed to be somewhat informed about important events behind the scenes, because his very concerned and exhaustive editorial alerts us to a state plan to close a large number of German universities and replace them with training schools for civil servants. Such issues account for the rather pointed language of the Stuttgart call for a cultural council. State influence on the universities has not been limited to imposing unpleasant exams and deciding on the hiring of professors. It has even taken hold of academic disciplines themselves. It has taken hold of knowledge, of spirit itself. To rectify this situation, we issued this appeal to everyone we thought might have some sense or feeling for how to support and promote cultural affairs in general and the educational system in particular.

Initially, the well-meaning and warmhearted people who responded to this call hoped for insight and collaboration from the representatives of cultural activity, specifically, university instructors. This collaboration was not actively forthcoming, and what the instructors said instead was quite surprising. They said that if the threefold organizing of the body social was accomplished and the independence of cultural affairs guaranteed, university instructors would have to replace the minister of education and his civil servants in the administration of the entire educational system. They said they preferred to be subject to ministry oversight than to the decisions and actions of their own colleagues, about whom they had very strange things to say. While exploring the opinions of university instructors, we had plenty of opportunity to hear what A had to say about B and B about A. In the end, there were very few people left who would have been trusted with the administration of an independent cultural body. This experience was quite depressing. As you may know, the entire appeal,

in spite of its good intentions, turned out to be just a waste of paper, because we found virtually no cultural workers willing to advocate for the independence of cultural activity.

Even externalities reveal the changes in recent decades, though many people still have not recognized them for what they are. Let me simply emphasize that the result of an academic education was once an expression of the striving for scholarship and knowledge itself. The degrees granted by various schools and departments had something to do with striving for knowledge. But now it is evident that the system of state exams has infiltrated the process of getting a degree to such an extent that the scholarly content has been reduced to mere decoration.

Initially, of course, such issues are merely symptomatic. As symptoms, however, they clearly demonstrate that cultural affairs have been largely subsumed by external political activity. You can be quite sure that our present state system will kill off the universities because it does not need them as such, as havens of scholarship and knowledge. They will all be transformed into training schools for civil servants because that is all the state needs. That is the current trend. Such statements are always taken for doomsaying or false prophesy, but it is important to see where we are heading. Law schools are becoming schools for civil servants, and medical schools are attempting to turn healers into mere cogs in the state machinery. And what about philosophy departments? What are they good for if not to prepare people to be “instructional civil servants” rather than teachers? In democratic Germany, that model country, we do not even call our instructors teachers or professors anymore. These are superficial details, but they reflect the intrinsic spirit of academia. It is truly disheartening to discover that our teachers have absolutely no feeling for the importance of independent cultural activity.

When I hear the appeal coming toward us from students, I experience this state of affairs as a reproach. To put it bluntly, if old people are not going to make changes, then the young must feel it as their sacred duty to advocate for independent cultural activity, because if no one insists on a renewal of knowledge based on original sources, the situation will certainly be very bad by the time our civilization’s next generation grows up. It is indeed significant that Oswald Spengler,[†] a

highly intelligent man, applied a great deal of energy and disciplined scholarly methods to proving that Western civilization is heading toward barbarism.

Needless to say, all this is a tremendous burden on you young people, who cannot be allowed to become adults with blind faith in authority. You must have your eyes wide open to see what is going on in the institutions you attend to prepare yourselves for life. Apart from the portions of the appeal that relate to me personally, it made a good impression that followers, rather than old leaders, were taking a stand and making concrete statements about what they want. Tirades and rhetoric will not make cultural activity independent. Taking back what the state has absorbed is imperative, but it will happen only if our cultural activity possesses real energy. In the age of materialism, academia was impotent to resist being sucked in by the state. Similarly, sciences that remain materialistic will also remain impotent to resist being dragged into barbarism by the state ambition to absorb them. Only some positive force will succeed in extricating the spirit of science, the spirit of knowledge, from the quagmire of politics. Material science has fallen prey to unscientific forces, but it can be rescued by the intrinsic strength and character of spiritual science. Only spiritual science is in a position to establish an independent cultural life within the body social.

Of course, those of you who signed this appeal must realize that others will experience it as a breaking storm, especially since it comes from you. But it takes a storm to accomplish anything today. Without the will and the courage to make transformation happen where it is needed, we will not be able to move forward. Instead, we will fall into decline and barbarism. You must not expect your appeal to be accepted with good grace in all quarters. But surely you realize—all of you who signed it with full hearts and courageous souls—that an appeal received with goodwill would accomplish nothing. You must be prepared to fight for what you must want, for what is right.

Strange things have been known to happen when young, aspiring minds are drawn into the machinery of cultural affairs. I could think of many examples but will tell you only one—a little scene that took place at a university when a young philosophy instructor went to the

department chair, who thought well of him, to apply for promotion to a professorship. He suggested a subject for his inaugural lecture, but the department chair, who really did want to see him become an assistant professor, said to him, "That really won't do! I can't recommend you to my colleagues; they'd have my neck. You've written only about nineteenth-century events and personalities in philosophy. We can't make you an assistant professor until you've written about much older topics." "Well," said the young Ph.D., "what should I do now? I thought what I've written about Schopenhauer [born in 1788] and the development of aesthetics in the nineteenth century would be suitable. Surely the Viennese in the department will know whom I'm talking about?" "But you know," said the department chair, "what you write about isn't important; it just has to be something old and unfamiliar. Let's see if we can find some old, unknown Italian aesthetician." So they opened the encyclopedia to the letter G and found the name Gravina.[†] Neither of them knew anything about him, but the department chair thought he would be just the right subject for a professorial dissertation. So the young Ph.D. wrote on the very interesting subject of a totally unknown and insignificant Italian aesthetician [who was born in 1807], and then the department chair approved his assistant professorship. This all took some time, however—a year and a half, I believe—because it was no easy matter to show the accomplishments of this unknown aesthetician in the right light. This is an extreme example, but it is only one among many.

Let us consider the gradual disappearance of all freedom of choice with regard to dissertation topics. In the field of modern languages, for example, Wilhelm Scherer[†] systematized the entire topic-selection process. A student requesting a topic is simply assigned one regardless of his particular expertise or interest. The topic is chosen purely on the basis of its usefulness to some professor or other who wants to draw on individual dissertations for an exhaustive book on the subject. To a greater extent than we might believe, this outer practice is indicative of the inner process of our cultural life. I believe I am not mistaken when I say that the best thing you could do would be to counteract this mindset with a fresh new approach to scholarly work. You could form study circles that would do real, basic, original research using all the

aids and sources available to you. My advice to you, should you want it, would be to form local groups of students who want to work out of this spirit. If scholarship and knowledge are to flourish again, interdisciplinary efforts will be needed. Chemists, physicists, philosophers, law students, historians, and philologists will all have to contribute to work on common themes. If you wish, those of us involved in the higher-education courses in Dornach will help establish an independent committee of people who have lectured on various branches of knowledge enriched by Anthroposophically oriented spiritual science. This committee would suggest topics to be addressed next, not in the way that dissertation topics are now assigned but simply on the basis of what is needed in the general cultural life of humanity. The ultimate choice, of course, would always be up to the individual. Committee members with some experience would suggest what is needed, and individuals would be free to choose topics they feel especially suited to address. This arrangement would permit ongoing collaboration and independent cultural and scholarly exchange between the pioneers of an independent higher-education system here in Dornach and students who are interested in and enthusiastic about the impacts of spiritual science on Western cultural life and civilization.

This is a rough description of an initial positive way of using academic work to transform the words of your appeal into a reality. It is not yet time for more detailed advice. But you can rest assured that those who are already working out of Anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, both here and in Stuttgart, will be ready at any moment to put all their energy into promoting, supporting, advising, and collaborating. In short, they will do whatever is necessary to help enthusiastic students everywhere to contribute to our monumental ideal, to the great, intense, and comprehensive task of using renewed spiritual research based on original sources to guide human spiritual life—and thus human culture and civilization in general—toward an ascent or dawn, not the decline or dusk that many believe to be inevitable.

Having promised you that I will do everything in my power to encourage intense yet harmonious scholarly collaboration, let me now answer the question that was addressed to me: What is the first

positive step that I would advise you to accomplish? If we truly work together in this way, students themselves will accomplish what their supposed leaders unfortunately cannot. If these leaders do not prove to be such leaders, then a good training in freeing yourself from all faith in authority is what you must go through, if you want to have as your foundation free scientific work. If you stand on this foundation, I can predict that you will work very well together with spiritual science and with the intentions of those in Dornach and Stuttgart. I speak to you today out of this conviction.