

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY

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“... a true development of education must tend to nothing less than a superseding of the ‘Doctor’ principle”.

(Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*)¹

In the six months before his last public address in September 1924, Steiner was engaged in an intense creative process through his lectures; this work included shaping the foundations of eurythmy, biodynamics, anthroposophical medicine, speech and drama, the Christian Community and Waldorf education. During those months he also gave a number of talks to gatherings of young adults, many of whom were university students.

What Steiner achieved during those six months is what people have come to recognise most about anthroposophy; namely, its practical contributions to numerous spheres of life. He sought to bring the insights of spiritual science into the world, to relate them to the pressing needs of the time – which is exactly the role of a university. A university is not an esoteric school but an organ of social life. We could even speak of those final months before his last address as “a university in the making”.

It is well known that Steiner shaped his teaching according to what people requested of him. That’s how Waldorf education began in 1919 – when the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Company in Stuttgart approached him about helping with the education of the workers’ children. During the years after the War ended in 1917, up to 1924, numerous young people sought Steiner’s assistance with making their university studies meaningful. In the summer of 1920 the Union for Anthroposophical University Work was founded. These young people were not steeped in esoterism like those who had previously connected themselves with Steiner’s work; they had down-to-earth concerns. This led to several dedicated weeks of lectures and seminars – including a University Course in Berlin, in March 1922 – on how academic studies could be reimagined, events to which Steiner was a major contributor.

These young people didn’t bring something new about universities to the attention of Steiner; rather, they provided the stimulus and need for him to respond creatively. Scattered throughout his work, right from the time he achieved a doctorate with a dissertation on the philosopher Fichte, we find excursions of his thinking on the question of the university. For example, in

1898, at the age of 37, he wrote in *Magazin für Literatur* about the university and the demands of the present time.²

In 1905 he delivered a lecture on the need for the training of lawyers in terms of world wisdom.³ In 1919 he was talking about the requirement for universities to teach a genuine social science rather than an “insipid sociology”.⁴ In a lecture in 1915, Steiner makes the following observation concerning the philosopher Johann Fichte, who worked in the 1790s as a lecturer at the University of Jena:

[Fichte’s] purpose was to awaken spiritual activity and spiritual being. From the souls of his hearers, as they hung upon his words, he sought to call forth a self-renewing spiritual activity. He did not merely communicate ideas.⁵

Here Steiner was giving expression to something which later became the cornerstone to the whole development of his educational indications, for both schools and universities. Teaching cannot be something merely abstract and intellectual; ideas need always to be “saturated with the forces of reality” and “possess the strength to take hold of the will and to live on in action”.⁶

Steiner was thoroughly aware that modern universities have become centres of intellectuality with a fundamentally materialistic outlook. At times his normally reserved manner of social critique escaped him; on one occasion he spoke of “the banal and philistine monstrosity that is called academia”⁷, a perception balanced by his firm conviction that the university has the key role in awakening modern society to the spirit:

... academia, which has placed us in our current situation, is the only institution capable of counteracting the impending demise of Western civilisation.⁸

Such a conviction would naturally have aroused in him a great willingness to help when, as Steiner recounted in a lecture in July 1924, all the Year 12 students (18-19 years of age) of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart signed a petition along these lines:

... we dread having to enter an ordinary university or college. Could not the anthroposophical society also create an anthroposophical university? For we should like to enter a university in which our education could be as natural and human as it is now in the Waldorf School.⁹

He recalls that numerous members of the Anthroposophical Society also responded positively to the students by raising a large sum of money for the founding of such a university, money which was subsequently lost due to post-War inflation in Germany.

It's important to penetrate what Steiner means when he asserts that "academia is the only institution capable of counteracting the impending demise of Western civilisation". The university is a central organ in the life of modern society. It is like a "little city", focussing and intensifying those strivings towards understanding that are otherwise spread out in the aspirations of individuals throughout the social fabric. Most elements of life are researched and taught in universities. What happens in universities – through developing technologies, through medical practices, through social scientific research, the arts and so on – has a great impact on society as a whole. Most significantly, *the kind of thinking* practiced in the development of knowledge in universities has a constructive or destructive effect on the entire social life. This question of thinking is Steiner's primary concern.

Everything noted critically by Steiner about universities and academic life generally has heightened in our time to a very great degree. What it calls for is the fundamental transformation of the university. It is not merely a matter of developing courses with anthroposophical content but about the metamorphosis of higher education into a higher possibility of itself. For this it is important to understand what Steiner means when he says that the true aim of education must be to supersede the "doctor principle". The word 'doctor' comes from the Latin verb *docēre*, meaning 'to teach' and in the Middle Ages the first doctorate (*licentia docendi*) meant the graduate was licensed to teach. The doctor principle signified 'the one who knows', who is a repository of all available knowledge. The medieval doctors developed their thinking in purely logical fashion, even in questions of theology, due in large part to the rediscovery of Aristotle's works on logic, the *Organon*.

But the doctor principle doesn't only belong to medieval history; it is alive and flourishing in all modern universities in an intensified form, in the teaching and research methods of the doctors and professors. The computer is the most heightened expression of the doctor principle:

The computer has an encyclopaedic memory and works in a purely logical fashion to make information readily available through the Internet and other forms of interactive technology (in a transformed sense, the computer "professes" its store of knowledge) ... it is not going too far to say that the computer *is* the doctor in a new embodiment of itself – which means a pure intellect, nothing whatsoever to do with a bodily basis (the will) or a life of feelings.¹⁰

In the computer we find a greatly evolved logic; the medieval doctors relied on the basic principles of logic, which Aristotle had explored – in particular, the syllogism, a logical argument that applies deductive reasoning. In the computer, and now in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), newly-developed forms

of logic are employed.¹¹ We are today witnessing this doctor principle being extended in a most remarkable and disquieting way. A tight digital net of satellites spanning the globe is being put in place by various companies including Elon Musk's SpaceX-Starlink, Amazon and Eutelsat's OneWeb. The aim is to eventually beam 5G and 6G radiation onto every square centimetre of the Earth's surface in order to connect and surveil everything electronically. Meanwhile, governments the world over are edging toward requiring a digital ID to log on to the Internet. The attempt is being made on all continents to create "smart cities", all interconnected and controlled by AI. Not just cities, but the planet in its entirety, is being transformed into a vast computer.

What, we may ask, could possibly be the motive for setting up such a world-wide control grid? The answer given to the general population is: health and the common good. The whole planet, supposedly, needs to be controlled in order to be healthy. The name given to this by the United Nations is 'One Health', which is conceived as the total integrated system of human health, food, water, energy and environment.¹² The aim is to monitor and regulate every form and process of nature and human social life. The human organism itself will be part of this gigantic computer: transhumanism conceives human bodies and brains as elements of the all-powerful digital net. This is health defined in entirely materialistic terms, in terms of systems logic, the 'health' of a sophisticated mechanism.

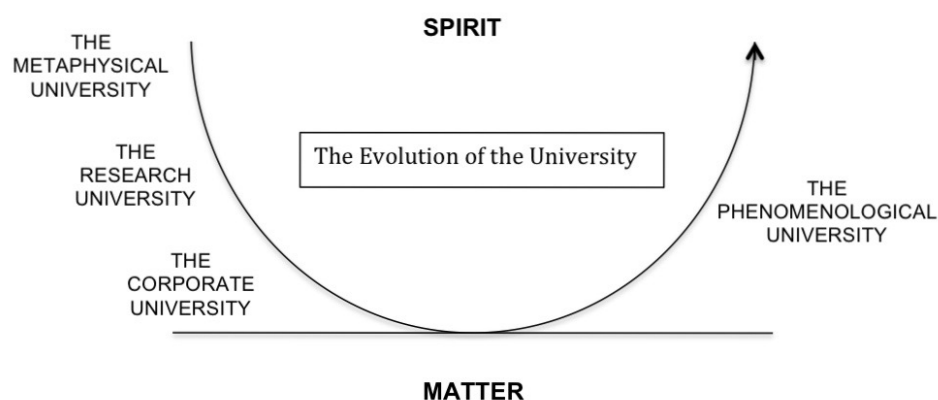
In this computerization, or 'logification', of reality, human freedom and individuality will count for nothing. Like an integrated circuit in a computer, all elements form an indivisible one. We must ask, as "mineral thinking", this artificial intelligence – a function of the silicon chip and electromagnetic processes – becomes an all-controlling reality, whether what is at stake is the continuance of Western civilization as we know it, a civilization which has been shaped through its long quest for freedom, democracy, rights and unfettered individual expression.

It seems imperative that a new form of university must supersede the doctor principle – this was Steiner's indication and warning. But that doesn't mean it will negate the reality of this mineral/material thinking. Rather, it needs to *transform it* through an imaginative thinking, just as a living plant takes up minerals into itself that then attain a new existence in the body of the plant organism, reaching its highest intensification as the flower. Just so, a thinking predicated on dead material can resurrect into a living, imaginative form of thinking. It is in this sense that the 'university' rises to a new possibility of itself.

Steiner makes this clear in his addresses during the University Course in Berlin in 1922, where he explains that phenomenology, properly understood, opens the door to anthroposophy. "...anthroposophy represents a viewpoint that is based on Goethe's understanding of nature. Anthroposophy is established on

the foundation of a phenomenological understanding of nature”.¹³ Phenomenology is to observe what one meets, the phenomenon, whatever it might be, without applying initial preconceptions as to its meaning. It means cultivating a thinking that doesn’t proceed abstractly, or merely theoretically through a hypothetical thought system. What exists as knowledge in anthroposophy (Steiner called it ‘living knowledge’ if it is lived with in the right way) can become as conceptual and “doctor like” as any subject in any conventional university. Then it can lose its life and moral creative capacity. Thinking learns to find its way back to the spirit *through* the phenomenon, through not only recognizing the matter or mineral dimension of existence but the force of life that imbues all, initially through what our senses bring to us, by “simply submerging ourselves in the phenomena”, by “remain[ing] within the phenomena, lovingly...”.¹⁴ Phenomenology means learning how to *read* phenomena, to understand them in terms of their own language, rather than meanings we too readily impose on them. It’s similar to how we learn to interpret a work of art: by opening ourselves to it, by fully entering into it. Steiner goes further: “then, in the essence of natural laws, the essence of thoughts is given to us, coming directly from the phenomena”.

The first universities in medieval Europe were "metaphysical universities"; all learning had a religious function and knowledge came only from the “great books” of tradition. Centuries later, in the time of Fichte and Goethe, we see the advent of the “research university”, unified by the power of the rational mind and with philosophy as the central faculty. Today universities are huge financial conglomerates, sometimes referred to as the “corporate university”. No longer is there a unity of knowledge within the unifying community of God; the outlook today is fundamentally materialistic. Moving forward from our time, the “phenomenological university” seeks the spirit in a way quite different from the “metaphysical university”. Through precise observation of the phenomena of our world, then through entering into these phenomena with an exact form of feeling, a pathway of knowing opens which allows students to awaken the “eye of the spirit”. Through phenomenology, “more appears than appears to appear”.¹⁵



In this way the doctor principle is transcended for the sake of the human future. Through its dedicated logic “the doctor” has sought to establish a total mastery of nature such that in the process, stage by stage in the evolution of the university, all forms of nature, all aspects of human biology and psychology, all disease appearances, all social phenomena, have been subjected to the same logical analysis which cannot “see” spirit so ignores it. The eye of the spirit opens when, beyond the wish to master and unify through an all-embracing logic, love (for that is surely what it is), a sense of wonder and of reverence, allows the phenomena to speak for themselves and become a revelation of spirit. Thinking then proceeds, not merely logically or analytically “in the head”, but as a heart-thinking through the human being acting as a whole.

A New University Initiative in the Southern Hemisphere

A few years ago, a group in Australia set about envisioning and researching the feasibility of a new form of university. One result of this process has been to produce and make available, from a newly created website, a downloadable 100-page feasibility document to promote this new educational approach. This research initiative is called the Indus Project and the university has provisionally been named the Indus University.¹⁶ Connected with this effort is a recently initiated newsletter, TRIUNE, to support “shaping a new form of university”. This is at present produced each month and is freely available on a dedicated website.

This fledgling initiative will be a “phenomenological university” in the sense Steiner uses that expression. The teaching and researching sphere of the university, which we term “the faculty”, will not be any form of business or legal association. The university itself, the faculty, is intended to be free of all governmental input – financial or otherwise. The means by which this can happen are set out in the feasibility document. The campus as a whole (in the completion phase of this university) is envisioned to have dedicated businesses forming the economic dimension and contributing gift capital to support the teaching and researching dimension.

Some of the other areas covered in the feasibility document are:

- philosophical foundations.
- legal basis and development.
- financial rationale.
- teaching and learning methodologies.
- the faculties.

- architectural and agricultural setting (in the completion phase).
- health, safety, environment and community.

From the executive summary of the Indus Project:

The Indus Project represents a revolutionary model for tertiary education, addressing the limitations of contemporary universities by fostering holistic human development and practical phenomenology. It seeks to prepare students for the future by nurturing their intellectual, emotional, and creative potentials, ultimately contributing to a more balanced and enlightened global society.

This initiative is currently at the feasibility stage and it is conceived as unfolding in three phases. The first is the Identification Phase, now complete with the production of the feasibility document. Although this document is related to a particular part of Australia it is applicable to any country in the world. It can be used freely by anyone. The second is the Outreach Phase – which this article is part of. If what is developed in Australia can link with related initiatives in other countries, a wonderful collaboration could take place. Students in this phase do not gather on a physical campus. The third phase is the Consolidation Phase, which is the creation of a physical campus and the bringing to fruition of everything set forth in the feasibility document. It is not possible to determine when this stage will be reached but the task lies before us as an imperative.

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For the feasibility study details:

<https://www.educationforsocialrenewalfoundation.com/>

To subscribe to TRIUNE newsletter and to see all previous editions:

<https://www.ateliersocialquest.com/subscription-s>

Endnotes.

¹ R. Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1972, p.44.

² R. Steiner, GA 31.

³ A lecture by Rudolf Steiner, Berlin, 18th May, 1905, GA 53.

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, "Social Basis for Primary and Secondary Education", Lecture III, 1919, GA192.

⁵ R. Steiner, *The Spirit of Fichte Present in our Midst*, Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co., London, p.29.

⁶ R. Steiner, *The Renewal of the Social Organism*, Anthroposophic Press, 1985, p.32

⁷ R. Steiner, *Problems of Society*, Rudolf Steiner Press, Forest Row, 2015, p.72.

⁸ R. Steiner, *Youth and the Etheric Heart*, SteinerBooks, 2007, p.11.

⁹ R. Steiner, *Human Values in Education*, GA 310, 24th July 1924.

¹⁰ N. Hoffmann, *The University at the Threshold: Orientation through Goethean Science*, Rudolf Steiner Press, 2020, p.44.

¹¹ In its earliest form (defined by Aristotle in his 350 BC book *Prior Analytics*, a part of *Organon*), a deductive syllogism arises when two true premises validly imply a conclusion. For example, Premises: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man. Conclusion: Socrates is mortal. Artificial intelligence combines a number of different advanced logics, including propositional logic, modal logic, mathematical logic, default logic, computational logic.

¹² See: https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1

¹³ R. Steiner, *Reimagining Academic Studies*, SteinerBooks, 2015, p.3.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.12.

¹⁵ R. Bernasconi, "The Good and the Beautiful" in *Phenomenology in Practice and Theory*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1985, pp.179-184.

¹⁶ The name "Indus" has no special significance in relation to the university. It was chosen as the provisional name of the university simply because of its connection with Admiral Sir James Stirling who explored the Swan River in Western Australia and suggested it as a site for a colony. This colony became the city of Perth. Stirling was later given command of the HMS Indus.