

## **Anthroposophy and Science, An Introduction by Peter Heusser**

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Over the past twenty years, the research landscape of complementary medicine has changed significantly. Already in 1992, the Federal Ministry of Research in Germany published the results of the study on “Unconventional Medical Directions.” In the late 1990s, a study by the Swiss National Science Foundation was published. In 2005, the results of the Swiss Complementary Medicine Evaluation Program were presented. In the USA, numerous studies were carried out by the Center for Alternative and Complementary Medicine and the National Health Institute. Chairs and professorships for complementary medicine have been set up at European universities; and international scientific publications based on the principle of peer review have been created. There are now professorships and chairs for anthroposophical medicine at three universities (Witten / Herdecke, Bern and at the Charité Berlin). The once hostile camps of modern medicine and alternative medicine are gradually converging, which is also reflected in the change in language. While 20 years ago the term “alternative” was still disparaging, today one speaks of “complementary” or “integrative medicine.” Leading American universities have set up Integrative Medicine Centers, which have joined forces in a research network that now has around 50 centers. Since 2009, there is a Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Witten / Herdecke.

But despite this positive development at the level of research and therapy, the theoretical concepts of the various anthropological and medical directions remain often misunderstood, while existing unrelated next to one-another. Real integration would not only mean that conventional therapies would be conventionally reviewed and included in mainstream medicine when they passed the exam, but that the different theoretical presuppositions of all these procedures would be integrated into a larger human theoretical framework of health and disease. Integrating procedures into therapeutic practice based on alternative philosophies will increase the number of applications but will not overcome reductionism of mainstream medicine. A real integration cannot only refer to technical procedures, it must lead to an extension of the image of man in conventional medicine, and therefore ultimately to the fact of deconstructing reductionism’s limiting framework.

This extension is only possible if there is an open dialogue between conventional and complementary medicine at the level of anthropological and epistemological theory. Anthroposophical medicine seems to offer a particularly suitable starting point for this discourse on the meta-level, for this medicine has attained a high degree of integration, within the hundred years of its existence, of what is otherwise seemingly disparate and incompatible. Anthroposophical medicine makes full use of natural-scientific diagnostic and, where possible, therapeutic procedures, but does not stop there, as it also includes the entire human being as a

being of soul and spirit in its practice. Anthroposophy, on which this medicine's expanded image of the human being is based, sees itself as an empirical science, standing on the same ground as scientific medicine.

The time is therefore ripe for a systematic introduction into the foundations of anthroposophical medicine. Peter Heusser presented this introduction as early as 2009, at the same time as the establishment of the first chair of anthroposophical medicine worldwide, as a postdoctoral thesis at the University of Witten / Herdecke. This was published as a book in 2016 in an updated edition. The general scientific foundations of holistic anthropology presented by Heusser are of importance not only for medicine, but for all areas of research and practice that have the human being as a subject – that is, the human sciences as a whole.

Heusser's investigation not only traces the epistemological foundation of Rudolf Steiner's concept of science and reality, but also applies this concept to central questions of modern science: the understanding of substance in physics and chemistry, the genetic, molecular biological, and morphogenetic basis of biology, neurobiology, psychology, the philosophy of mind, and ethics. Heusser expands the concept of matter in such a way that matter no longer has to be thought of in contrast to spirit, but implicitly contains it in its most elementary levels of complexity. Biological concepts such as gene, genetic information, gene regulation, organic self-organization, and morphogenesis are interpreted in such a way that it becomes possible to reconcile Goethe's idea of the "type" and Steiner's concept of the etheric with these concepts. The emergence of consciousness and the relationship of body and soul are explored, and an interpretation of the latest research and theories in these fields is presented, which makes the soul and mind appear as irreducible, emergent entities that play an autonomous role in the human anthropological fabric.

From the anthroposophical concept of science, the author develops a scientifically grounded, holistic image of man, which overcomes the reductionist naturalism in science and medicine. Man is not understood mechanistically as a genetic, molecular biological, or neurobiological machinery that causally produces organic, biological, and spiritual properties from physicochemical laws and forces, but as a self-differentiated entity of body, life, soul, and spirit. These four terms appear as autonomous, emergent systems of laws and forces that form a unity in the human organization in which they interact and condition each other. An anthropology is presented that not only coincides with Steiner's understanding of man and its related understanding of health and illness, but also incorporates the findings of empirical science. Health and disease are presented in this anthropology not merely as a consequence of molecular interactions, but also as a result of a harmonious or dissonant interaction of real processes of the physical, living, mental, and spiritual in the human organism. Based on this understanding, an extended therapeutic concept emerges that includes all these ontological levels of man.

Heusser not only deals critically and integratively with scientific research and its underlying theories, but also devotes some chapters to the foundations of anthroposophy as *empirical* spiritual science and the empirical examination of its application. His research aims to elucidate the theoretical foundations of that "ontological idealism" based on Steiner's discovery that the laws governing natural phenomena, while appearing in the knowing subject, are at the same

time objective principles operating in the things. This insight opens up a cognitive science that understands thinking as *a fact of experience*. Even though the contents of thought appear only through the activity of the knowing subject, the activity of the subject is itself determined by the contents of thought. The necessary participation of the subject in the realization of knowledge is thus no argument against the objectivity of its contents.

The recognition of this fact prevents constructivism as well as reductionism or identism. The laws that appear in the subject are the laws of “what is,” of beingness: this insight is the result of a science of knowledge that understands itself as spiritual empiricism. In cognition, the objective spiritual content of the world becomes accessible to man, which determines not only the cognitive activity, but also the natural process themselves. Therefore, mind cannot only work in human consciousness; it must also work in nature. Since cognition, in principle, aims at laws, it always brings to light, in all phenomena (ontological regions), the spiritual content that effects the lawfulness of the phenomena. Only insofar as matter is determined by spirit, does it become the object of scientific knowledge. A science that understands itself and does not deny its basis – that is to say, the cognitive activity of the human mind – can therefore only be idealism. Whether on the physical, molecular, biological, or psychological level, it is always the *active laws* to which knowledge is directed. Even if the *cognition* of these laws follows observation, their *activity* must precede the observed phenomena – otherwise the natural process would be completely random, chaotic, and science would not be possible. Since the acting law always precedes its appearance, all theories that want to derive the content of laws from empirical data are based on a misunderstanding. This insight has far-reaching consequences: for example, it is no longer possible to deduce psychic or spiritual processes from material processes of the brain, once the priority of the acting law has been recognized. It is never the mere substance that works, but always the law – i.e. the spirit – in matter. Higher organization or greater complexity is always a higher form of law that manifests itself in a conglomeration of substances – indeed, first organizes this conglomerate, to then appear in it.

Heusser expresses this preeminence of the ideal-spiritual over the material-physical as follows:

In the series of system levels from the elementary particle to the organism, each of these system levels is *emergent* in relation to its subordinate, i.e. their legitimate characteristics *cannot* be explained from the subordinate. From the point of view of ontological idealism, the properties of each system level are epistemologically and ontologically *equivalent*, both in terms of their phenomena and their laws. Hierarchically higher ordered emergent substances and structures are also “real” insofar as the subordinates are “sublated” in them. This results in the transition from the particularistic to a holistic understanding of substance and system.

The consequence of this indivisibility of phenomena and laws from subordinate systemic levels is that the subordinate cannot be considered *a cause*, but merely *a condition* for the realization of the super-ordinate. In other words, the super-ordinate – for example, the living versus the non-living, the soul versus the spiritual – is “causally realized by itself.” Once this basic insight

has been gained, it can be used to achieve a holistic understanding of substances and processes, and of the entire organism. This appears as an emergent system, as a structure of spatial and temporal laws that are able to organize the subordinate substances and forces in such a way that the organism reaches its realization as a spatial-temporal phenotype. Since the law of this organism is realized in time and at the same time remains identical with itself, the laws of the spatial (physical) order are subordinate to those of temporal (ethereal) succession. The organizing principle of the living is the idea of the organism, which Goethe described as a “type.” Consciousness, on the other hand, proves to the life of the organism to be another emergent phenomenon. The substance and organization of the living is a condition, but not a cause of the soul-life [consciousness, inner life – *Tr.*]. The soul-life is indeed based on its own laws, which realize themselves *in*, but at the same time also *against* those of the living. This manifests itself in the fact that consciousness acts as the antagonist of life, in that it is organically linked to degradation and devitalization. At the same time, the process of organic regeneration processes indicates that the soul-life (unconsciously) is involved in the formation of the organic substances and structures that are part of the conditions for its appearance (neuroplasticity). Finally, another level of emergent phenomena arises from the inner life of the soul, which again is realized within the laws of the soul and at the same time against it: the expressions of life of the human mind [spirit – *Tr.*], which transcends the subjective inwardness and is capable of cognizing the lawful content of the entire natural processes, and to determine itself, through this cognition of the world context, to free action.

Reality appears to objective idealism as active laws within hierarchic step-wise ordered structures, and which manifest themselves in the various kingdoms of nature as organizing and shaping forces. However, since the working of these laws – apart from the cognitive consciousness, in which the law of cognition at the same time perceives itself as an active agent – can only be recognized from its effects, a consciousness can be postulated, which is capable of perceiving laws active in nature, in such a way, as it perceives itself to be an active agent. Through this postulate, a view opens up onto that extension of human cognitive abilities, of which anthroposophy speaks as spiritual science. For what appears to the thinking consciousness *as a law*, presents itself to the perceiving consciousness *as being*. Spiritual science is the science of essence. It explores not only the lawful interconnection of the phenomenal world, but also the interconnectedness of nature-shaping beings, who appear, to thinking consciousness, as a hierarchy of laws.

Indeed this book, which is worth reading, puts forward groundbreaking investigations that round off research overviews about the formation of anthroposophical-medical theory, as well as on the evidence regarding the effectiveness of this medicine. “The empirical-scientific evidence for the safety and efficacy of anthroposophical medicine,” Heusser concludes, is “growing” and this medicine has “become increasingly established at universities for some 20 years. Linked to this is the need to clarify the scientific basis of anthroposophy even in academic contexts.” For this purpose the present book was written.

Heusser’s book was published in 2016 in an English translation: Peter Heusser: *Anthroposophy and Science. An Introduction.*

Cognitive science (epistemology), physics, chemistry, genetics, biology, neurobiology, psychology, philosophy of mind, anthropology, anthroposophy, medicine.

Original title: Peter Heusser, *Anthroposophie und Wissenschaft. Eine Einführung.*