

## What Has Inspired Me?

*Anthroposophy and Science* by Peter Heusser

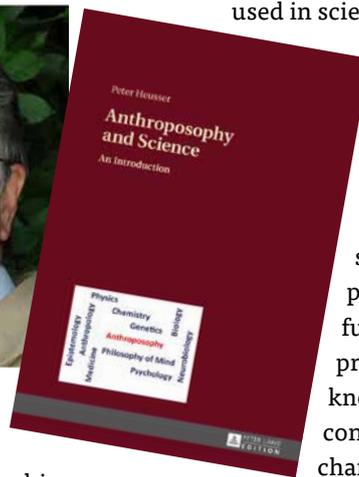
DR MICHAEL EVANS

Reading *Anthroposophy and Science*<sup>1</sup> by Peter Heusser impressed me deeply. The book signifies a remarkable milestone in exploring the relationship between natural science and spiritual science with a high standard of scholarship. Heusser reviews most recent concepts in physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, medicine, neurobiology, psychology, philosophy of mind, anthropology and epistemology, analysing them in their relationship to Steiner's anthroposophical spiritual science. I felt that to attempt this for any one of these fields would itself be a significant task, but to survey them all is a monumental achievement!

It is not only conventional natural science that is characterised by a reductionist materialistic worldview – it encompasses current culture as a whole. To penetrate behind these veils and explore alternative paradigms I found exciting and at times even disturbing! I was reminded of how deep reductionist science has conditioned my own consciousness, even in spite of fifty years immersion in anthroposophy.

The fundamental realisation expressed in Steiner's foundational text, *A Philosophy of Freedom* (more recently translated as *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*) is that experienced reality arises in consciousness through the confluence of sense perception and intuitive thinking. Interestingly, Heusser quotes the modern philosopher Nagel who points out that the world is unintelligible as sense perception without the dimension of human intelligence.<sup>2</sup> So intelligence plays a dual role – both thought and the laws of nature are 'givens', i.e. they are inherent within the natural world. The realisation that the universe is lawful and potentially understandable is of course implicit in ordinary science. But thought itself is not a physical object. Steiner equates thinking and intelligence with spirit. In doing this, we can say that spirit lies at the foundation of every layer of existence including the material world, phenomena of life, sentient beings (animals) and ultimately human beings who uniquely embody the capacity to make use of thinking, both as an instrument of self-reflection and of interpreting sense phenomena.

As the starting point of knowledge (epistemology) is thinking and perception. Theories of sensory physiology or neuroscience have no primary role in epistemology, as they are themselves the products of thinking and sense perception. Neither can atomic theory be assumed to be a primary reality (based on non-perceptible atoms), often



used in science as a basis for rejecting the prime reality of perception.

A fundamental and recurring quality of the book is the way Peter Heusser considers the various levels of complexity as manifest in the world. He points out that with successive higher levels of complexity new characteristics and lawfulness emerge which would not be predictable from the most complete knowledge of the characteristics of the constituent parts. Indeed many of the characteristics of the parts disappear or are 'sublated' within the more complex structure. The simplest physical and chemical example is water, H<sub>2</sub>O, a combination of hydrogen and oxygen. Detailed knowledge of hydrogen and oxygen, he points out, would never lead to a prediction of the characteristics of water and the laws of hydrodynamics. So the qualities of water cannot be reduced to the qualities of its component parts in spite of the fact that without hydrogen and oxygen water could not exist.

At a more complex level of organisation, proteins in living organisms, although composed of a series of amino acids, have characteristics that cannot be extrapolated from knowledge of the amino acids and their sequence. For example, their tertiary structure, which is critical to their function as enzymes, cannot be predicted from the amino acids and their sequence alone. So, on the one hand, new properties emerge – the concept of 'emergence' – and on the other hand the properties of the components submerge to a significant degree or are 'sublated' in the qualities of the new structure and its functioning.

Historically, the Swiss physician Troxler (1780–1866; he was Beethoven's physician) observed that behind the sense perceptible phenomena of life was a real but not directly perceptible 'something', behind feelings a real but not directly perceptible soul (Seele) and behind human self-conscious thought a real but not directly perceptible spirit (Geist). "He attempted to sketch out a medical anthropology that would understand development, physiological functions and pathological processes not simply as physical interactions but as the expression of a harmonious or disharmonious interaction of material-physical, bodily-living, soul and spiritual forces in an organ or organ system."<sup>3</sup>

Troxler went on to predict that at a future time a new sense would need to develop if the reality underlying phenomena of life and the development of cognition were to be understood. He actually called such a path of cognition 'anthroposophy', as distinct from anthropology, the name that Steiner would subsequently choose to encompass the results of his spiritual researches. Interestingly, Troxler became the first professor of philosophy at the University of Bern. I found it significant, biographically, that Peter Heu-

Heusser shared one of the first chairs in Integrative Medicine with responsibility for the subject of Anthroposophic Medicine at this same University of Bern.

Fundamental insights of anthroposophic medicine rest on asserting that alongside the physical material body (Körper), a living body (Leib), a soul (Seele) and a spirit (Geist) exist. Heusser describes these emergent phenomena with reference to other western thinkers. He points to advances in natural science that make sense of many of Steiner's puzzling statements as well as the many ways anthroposophy can holistically contextualise and make sense of the findings of natural science. Filling this out in detail is beyond the scope of this article.

Peter Heusser will be one of the keynote speakers at a seminar in London next June on The Natural Scientific Foundations for Understanding Humans as Autonomous Spiritual Beings. The seminar is organised jointly by the Medical and Natural Science Section (for details see page.42) It is for members connected to both Sections and the public. We hope it will attract open-minded academics, medical professionals and scientists.

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1. Heusser, P. *Anthroposophy and Science*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien, 2016. 368 pp.

2. Nagel, T. 2012 *Mind and Cosmos. Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*. Oxford University Press.

3. Heussler, p. 242.