

**VIRAL ILLNESS
AND
EPIDEMICS
IN THE WORK OF
RUDOLF STEINER**

Selected, Edited, and Translated by
Daniel Hinds



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Foreword

This volume is intended as a phenomenological walk through Rudolf Steiner's *Collected Works* following the theme of infectious diseases and epidemics. But rather than pluck out a few sentences from sources decades apart to arrange them neatly in one place, I have selected longer passages, including, to the degree possible with excerpts, the lead-in and related concepts. They are arranged in chronological order. Along the way you will find references to typhus, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, smallpox, leprosy, yellow fever, malaria, encephalitis lethargica, meningococcal meningitis, and bubonic plague. The discussion of these maladies is not comprehensive. They mostly serve as examples in Steiner's larger project: helping modern culture reorient its thinking away from purely materialistic explanations of the phenomenal world to a viewpoint that sees the spirit actively working in everything that happens in the world, even events that appear to be tragic.

Rudolf Steiner's thought is both complex and highly original. It is also highly self-referential. That is, he often elaborates concepts already established in his other works. This is especially noticeable in lectures he gave to an invitation-only audience of people already at home in the foundational concepts of his thought. In those lectures he presupposed a familiarity with terms and concepts already elaborated elsewhere; he makes little effort to explain the terms along the way, terms not easily summarized in a short footnote. Expressions such as Old Moon, Intellectual Soul, and Ahriman are found in the excerpts collected in this book. The audience for these lectures would have had an expansive understanding of what was referring to. If the reader would like to be as prepared as the original audience to understand these references, there are two books to recommend. Between them, they lay out the full scope of Steiner's worldview and explain his terminology. These two books are known in English as *Theosophy*, and *An Outline of Esoteric Science*. Written by Steiner in 1904 and 1910 respectively, they were intended for the general public, and presupposed no prior acquaintance with his worldview.

A second challenge for readers today are the sources for

the texts of Steiner's lectures. Especially before 1913, these are based on personal notes made by audience members. The notes have been reconstructed by various editors into a coherent text. In published form these texts appear deceptively authoritative. This project has been the work of a century, and the *Collected Works* in German provide an excellent and comprehensive resource for serious students of Steiner. The editors of many of these early lectures were personally present when the lectures were originally held. But this does not change the fact that the text we are reading today is a complete fabrication, a reconstruction of the themes into sentences and paragraphs that have, at best, a general correspondence with the words Steiner spoke on that day. This changes after around 1913, and from then on we are usually dealing with a generally accurate word-for-word transcription of words that Steiner spoke. In addition, a handful of excerpts in this book are from written passages. These can be treated as authoritative.

The excerpts in this book are arranged chronologically. While there are many ways to arrange the material—for example thematically, in order of published history, or by keyword—a chronological presentation allows the reader to trace the development of Steiner's thought over time, as well as get a sense for how the material was presented in different contexts to different audiences. The downside to this approach is that there is a certain amount of repetition, and there is not a lot of apparent order in the sequence of themes addressed. But seeing the selections in chronological order offers quite a bit of insight into how Steiner's thought evolved.

One approach to creating an anthology of Steiner's work on a given theme is to aggressively trim the quotations so that they get right to the point. This has the advantage of making it easier for the reader. The danger is that enough of the context is removed that the reader can easily get a distorted impression of Steiner's thought or claims. This is particularly an issue with discussions of technical and medical topics such as those covered in this book. The reader may form the impression that on a given topic Steiner made short and concise statements without qualification. In this anthology I present Steiner's thoughts as closely as possible to how they have come down to us in the original German. Where we have

a word for word stenogram, I have translated the text fully, including all the asides, digressions, and rhetorical flourishes. Where the basis for the text is reconstructed listener's notes, this is indicated as well. I have also included duplicate references. Where Steiner covered the same topic more than once (which was not often for this theme) I fully reproduced all statements. Clarifying insertions are included in square brackets [like this].

The importance of reading the full transcript is nowhere more evident than in the sentence "But bacilli, as such, are of course in no way connected with disease." This highly misleading quotation from his October 20, 1918 lecture has been circulating widely on the internet of late. It is a rhetorical flourish that came mid-paragraph in a passage where Steiner explicitly acknowledged that pathogens are implicated in disease both before and after that sentence; he was mainly trying to argue that the pathogens were not the ultimate cause of illness. Pathogens are merely the *mechanism* by which illness spreads between people. As we will see, the recognition of pathogens as a real phenomenon is a fundamental theme in Steiner's work for twenty years leading up to that sentence and for the seven years after.

Rudolf Steiner studied at the Vienna Technical Institute during the 1880's. This was the most prestigious scientific university in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Steiner's parents hoped that after graduation he would get an engineering job at the railway where his father worked. During his four years at the university Steiner learned the foundations of all the sciences as they then existed, especially because he earned his living tutoring his fellow students across the full range of topics, including science. Tutoring his classmates so they could pass their exams meant that Steiner essentially got a double education, learning the topics well enough to teach them. While at the university, philosophy was his passion, but science was his day job.

During the remainder of his life Steiner was an avid reader and followed the advances across all fields in a way still possible for a well-educated lay person in those days. While there certainly were some areas where he was sure the researchers of his day were on the wrong track, the more important point is that he was up to date on the advances in

virtually all fields. For virology this is evidenced by his remarks in a 1909 lecture about the discoveries related to mosquitos and yellow fever (a viral illness). That research had been done in Cuba and publicized starting six years earlier.

The field of virology was still in its early stages. Pasteur's discoveries of the existence of harmful bacteria became widespread during the 1860s. The advances that followed in the area of hygiene, pioneered by Joseph Lister, Ignaz Semmelweiss, and others, revolutionized human health care and the entire field of medicine. At the same time the limits of germ theory were broadly debated, sparked by the realization that these germs were actually present everywhere, and yet most people were not constantly sick. The great debate between a pathogenic view and a focus on susceptibility goes all the way back to the immediate reaction to Pasteur's findings, and influenced Steiner's thought considerably.

As to the pathogens themselves, bacteria that were first to be investigated. The differences between bacteria and viruses were not yet fully clear, to say nothing of protists (the pathogen responsible for malaria) or prions. Viral illnesses were well known, of course, but that viruses were a different class of organism was not fully established during Steiner's lifetime. As a result, people of that era referred to all infectious microorganisms as "bacilli." This is potentially confusing, as the meaning of that word today is much more specific. Today the term *Bacilli* (plural of bacillus) refers to a taxonomic class of bacteria that includes two orders, *bacillales* and *lactobacillales*. These are responsible for a range of illnesses, but by no means the full range of infectious diseases. So to translate Steiner's references to *Bazillen* literally could easily confuse the educated reader, who might reasonably assume that Steiner was referring to these two orders of bacteria, or perhaps bacteria in general. In Steiner's day the term included all infectious microorganisms, both viral, bacterial, and otherwise. Given that "bacilli" was at the time a generic term for all harmful microorganisms, it makes more sense to translate it as "germs"—as imprecise as that may be. In a few places I've used "microorganisms" if that fit the context better.

For layout, introductory comments are in a san serif font

like this. Paragraphs in this font are the words of Rudolf Steiner.

I hope the reader will find here many ideas to stimulate further thoughts and research.

Daniel Hinder

On Cholera. A private letter, 1892

September 1st, 1892

Contained in volume 39 of the *Collected Works*

In a private letter to his parents and sister, young Rudolf Steiner assured them he was safe. Steiner was living in Weimar at the time, working as a researcher at the Goethe archive editing Goethe's scientific writings. The medical literature at the time distinguished *Cholera nostras*—common diarrhea usually from food poisoning—from *Cholera asiatica*, an intestinal infection caused by certain strains of the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae* and usually acquired by drinking contaminated water. Cholera was responsible for as much as 95% of the infant mortality up to the late 19th Century in Europe, and was a big reason life expectancy in European cities from the medieval era to the 1860s had been around 30 years. Poor public hygiene led to regular outbreaks throughout Europe until improved sanitation, and in particular the introduction of sewer systems, and later wastewater treatment plants, eliminated them. Steiner would speak of the value and limitations of sanitation later in 1909. The relevant paragraphs from the letter:

I'm not worried about cholera. I don't believe that Weimar could be seriously affected by it. Weimar is reportedly the healthiest city in Germany. Even if there are a few cases here—not even a mild case has occurred so far, not even vomiting—no one can be affected who lives a sensible life.

In Hamburg, however, the disease rages in the most terrible way. Every day 200-300 people die. In Berlin there have been few cases of *Cholera asiatica* so far. And only this variant is contagious. *Cholera nostras* is just as dangerous, but it is not contagious. In the newspapers from Austria I have so far only found cases in Lemberg [Lviv]. Hopefully the epidemic will not leave Galicia [a district in the north east of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire, today in southeastern Poland and western Ukraine, and thus far from Steiner's family near Vienna].

Susceptibility as a Result of Etheric Habits in the Previous Life, 1906

October 15th, 1906

Contained in volume 96 of the *Collected Works*

This passage repeats an idea Steiner had previously presented six months earlier in Stuttgart. This time the audience was composed of the regular attendees of his private lectures in his then hometown of Berlin. As with the excerpt from the January 29th, 1906 lecture, the text was reconstructed from listeners' notes.

Now what is formed in the etheric body forces its way into the physical body in the next life, so that not only good inclinations, character traits, and efficient habits of life have an effect on a healthy physical body in the next life, but also unproductive traits, bad habits, and corrupt inclinations are expressed in the organism of the next incarnation as a tendency towards sickness. This is not to be understood as if a specific illness is the result of a certain characteristic, but rather as a disposition to illness. Certain dispositions to disease always lead back to certain character and temperamental traits in the previous life. A person who has lived a life with corrupt character traits possesses an organism in this life that is more disposed to physical diseases than that of another person. A person who was endowed with healthy characteristics, with an efficient temperament, is reborn with a body that can be exposed to all kinds of epidemics without being infected, and vice versa.

So you see that things in the world are connected in a complicated way according to the law of cause and effect [karma]. To mention one example, there is a case that corresponds to the results of certain spiritual research. It may seem shocking at first, but in a Theosophical branch it is all right to say it. Someone had developed in his life a very selfish sense of acquisition, a true greed for external wealth. This was not that healthy striving for riches which can arise from the altruistic intention to help in the world and to develop a selfless activity—that is something else—but it is the egoistic acquisitiveness

which causes a certain constitution of the etheric body and develops the acquisitiveness beyond the necessary amount. Such a person is very often born in the next life with a physical body that shows the disposition to infectious diseases. It has been found in numerous cases through occult insight that people who are easily infected by certain epidemics in the present life were possessed of a pathologically heightened sense of acquisition in their previous lives.

Approaches to Public Health Regulations, 1920

April 7th, 1920

Contained in volume 314 of the *Collected Works*

This lecture was presented to the general public in the evening of the same day as the previous excerpt.

Now I would like to present by way of reference a certain sentence that is a quite definitely the result of spiritual science. In life we see so-called epidemic diseases appear, diseases that affect whole masses of people and are therefore a social issue at the same time. Ordinary materialistic science studies their effect on the human physical body. But it knows nothing of the immense importance—especially for epidemics and for the dispositions towards epidemic diseases—of man’s abnormal relationship to waking and sleeping. That which happens in the human organism during sleep is something which to a high degree predisposes a person to the so-called epidemic diseases, if it happens in excess. People who prepare processes in the human organism by sleeping too long—processes which should not be there because sleep should not interrupt waking life for so long—are predisposed in a completely different way to epidemic diseases, and they also experience epidemics in a completely different way. Now you can judge for yourself what it means to explain to people the correct distribution of sleep and waking. You cannot do that by making rules. At best, you can tell people not to send their children to school when they have scarlet fever. You cannot hold lectures when there is an outbreak of influenza; but people resist, because today people incline towards “freedom”, by which I mean that the sense of respect for authority is not as great as it used to be. That is why people resist rules. I am not saying that they are not right to be reluctant. I am not saying anything against what is happening in this regard. But you cannot possibly dictate to people in this manner: “You have to sleep seven hours.” Still, that is more important than the other rules. People who need to sleep seven hours should do so, and those who do not need seven hours

should sleep less, and so on. Yet such things, which are so intimately connected with the most personal aspects of human life, really have a great social impact. It really depends on the most intimate aspects in a person. How this social effect occurs—whether a greater or lesser number are withdrawn from this or that profession—which may or may not have an effect in a completely different place. Hygiene—public health—does indeed have an enormous impact on social life. Regardless of what one thinks about infection or non-infection, in epidemics this element intervenes in social life. You cannot be effective in this area by means of external regulations. You can only be effective if you bring to a lay public a human partnership with doctors who understand prophylactic measures, who can explain to the general public in an enlightening way; where a lively cooperation for the preservation of health between the expert and the layman who understands human nature can occur.

Final Thoughts

The preceding excerpts, drawn from material spanning over 40 years, display a consistent position on the part of Rudolf Steiner. One recurring theme is his constant urging of his audience to resist simple mechanistic and materialistic explanations for disease and epidemic outbreaks—what you might term the “pathogen invasion” model. While he is by no means the first, his efforts to balance that model with a focus on susceptibility while at the same time broadening our focus to include a much wider range of causes for this susceptibility than we typically consider. Still, he allows that in some instances—but by no means most—an infection could have no karmic prior cause.

Another recurring theme is his continuous work to harmonize his efforts with what is known scientifically, and then to then extend scientific understanding beyond the boundaries of the physical world. Steiner did not place his own views in opposition to science, but as a necessary contextualization for scientific facts. As much as science has broadened and deepened our understanding of both biology and medicine in the intervening century, the fundamental scientific understandings of infection, disease progression, and healing have not changed. Asymptomatic carriers, unusually vulnerable individuals, and those who make a full recovery are all phenomena that are both well-established and fundamentally mysterious. Science can confidently say that the wide variety of responses to exposure to an infectious microorganism can be attributed to genetics, epigenetics, and environmental influences. Steiner does not disagree, but points out that all of these factors are actually secondary mechanisms. He prefers to explore primary causes: explanations for why particular individuals possess such a wide variation in genetic makeup, epigenetic influences, and environmental experiences. And for this he sees a complex interaction of a range of spiritual beings in conjunction with individual destiny and a progressive world evolution.

Steiner’s approach remains entirely valid even today; in harmony with science but extending understanding into the

realm of the working of spirit. This approach can be distilled to a mantra, which Steiner has done: Nowhere is there matter without spirit, nowhere is there spirit without matter.³⁴

Those looking for answers to the big questions of viral illness today will have found many intriguing and far-reaching perspectives to broaden their understanding. There is a lot of material that potentially has a bearing on thinking about contemporary issues of vaccination, public health measures to impede the spread of epidemic diseases, and the ethical and karmic considerations related to the adoption of such measures by a society. As is so often the case with Steiner's thought, there are no easy answers. I will leave it to each reader to decide if and how any of this is applicable to their current context.

³⁴ GA 40, p. 136

List of Volumes Appearing in this Book

GA/CW	Title in German
30	Methodische Grundlagen der Anthroposophie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Philosophie, Naturwissenschaft, Ästhetik und Seelenkunde 1884-1901
34	Lucifer-Gnosis; Grundlegende Aufsätze zur Anthroposophie und Berichte aus den Zeitschriften «Luzifer» und «Lucifer – Gnosis» 1903 – 1908
39	Briefe Band II: 1890-1925
57	Wo und wie findet man den Geist?
93a	Grundelemente der Esoterik
94	Kosmogonie. Populäre Okkultismus. Das Johannes-Evangelium. Die Theosophie an Hand des Johannes-Evangelium.
95	Vor dem Tore der Theosophie
96	Ursprungsimpulse der Geisteswissenschaft. Christliche Esoterik im Lichte neuer Geist-Erkenntnis.
97	Das christliche Mysterium.
98	Natur- und Geisteswesen - ihr Wirken in unserer sichtbaren Welt
99	Die Theosophie des Rosenkreuzers
100	Menschheitsentwicklung und Christus-Erkenntnis
102	Das Hereinwirken geistiger Wesenheiten in den Menschen
107	Geisteswissenschaftliche Menschenkunde
120	Die Offenbarung des Karma
127	Die Mission der neuen Geistesoffenbarung. Das Christus-Ereignis als Mittelpunktsgeschehen der Erdenevolution
140	Okkulte Untersuchungen über das Leben zwischen Tod und neuer Geburt. Die lebendige Wechselwirkung zwischen Leben und Tod.
143	Erfahrungen des Übersinnlichen. Die drei Wege der

Seele zu Christus

- 144 Die Mysterien des Morgenlandes und des Christentums
- 154 Wie erwirbt man sich Verständnis für die geistige Welt? Das Einfließen geistiger Impulse aus der Welt der Verstorbenen
- 177 Die spirituellen Hintergründe der äußeren Welt. Der Sturz der Geister der Finsternis. Geistige Wesen und Ihre Wirkung Band I
- 185 Geschichtliche Symptomatologie
- 196 Geistige und soziale Wandlungen in der Menschheitsentwicklung
- 223 Der Jahreskreislauf als Atmungsvorgang der Erde und die vier großen Festeszeiten. Die Anthroposophie und das menschliche Gemüt.
- 261 Unsere Toten. Ansprachen, Gedenkworte und Meditationssprüche 1906–1924
- 266 Aus den Inhalten der esoterischen Stunden, Gedächtnisaufzeichnungen von Teilnehmern. Band.1, 1904-1909; Band.2 1910-1912; Band.3, 1913 und 1914; 1920 – 1923
- 293 Allgemeine Menschenkunde als Grundlage der Pädagogik.
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- 312 Geisteswissenschaft und Medizin.
- 313 Geisteswissenschaftliche Gesichtspunkte zur Therapie.
- 314 Physiologisch- Therapeutisches auf Grundlage der Geisteswissenschaft.
- 316 Meditative Betrachtungen und Anleitungen zur Vertiefung der Heilkunst.
- 319 Anthroposophische Menschenerkenntnis und Medizin.
- 348 Über Gesundheit und Krankheit. Grundlagen einer geisteswissenschaftlichen Sinneslehre.