# THE PHILOSOPHY OF RUDOLF STEINER

## An Introduction

Thomas Redwood

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By

Thomas Redwood

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*For Annie*

*Without normal common sense all thine efforts are in vain.*

-Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Abbreviations Used For Key Texts

This book primarily refers to the core texts of Rudolf Steiner. To make referencing simple for the reader, the following abbreviations of these core text titles (with page numbers) are cited in brackets after each reference. All other references are footnoted.

*The Philosophy of Freedom*: *PF*

*Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment*: *KW*

*An Outline of Esoteric Science*: *ES*

*Theosophy*: *TH*

*Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*: *ECA*

*The Kingdom of Childhood*: *KC*

*Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy*: *MAT*

*Rudolf Steiner, an Autobiography*: *AUT*

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# INTRODUCTION

# HOW TO APPROACH RUDOLF STEINER?

> Without normal common sense all thine efforts are in vain.
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment*

Nothing in the educational world that I am aware of requires a more substantial introductory explanation than Steiner education and the philosophy that informs it. Easy to dismiss as anti-intellectual New Age nonsense, when taken seriously it is a profoundly complex and difficult subject to become familiar with, requiring new concepts not just of what learning is but also of what human thinking is and, indeed, what we human beings are.

Since the establishment of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919, Steiner education has spread from Germany and is now practiced in over 1200 schools and 1800 kindergartens in over 70 countries. According to the Waldorf World List (published in May of 2020) there are 252 Steiner schools in Germany, 115 in the Netherlands, 39 in Belgium and 46 in Sweden. There are 60 in Australia and 12 in New Zealand. There are 43 in Hungary, 21 in Russia, 25 in the UK and 123 in the USA. In recent years Steiner education has extended to countries in Asia, Africa and South America. There are 35 in Brazil and 15 in Argentina. There are 12 in South Korea, 4 in the Philippines, 3 in Thailand and 7 each in Japan, India and China. The numbers in China are likely to grow fast though. China has 37 kindergartens. In Africa there are schools in Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt, Namibia and South Africa, which has 15.

Such numbers shed light on something of a contradiction. These figures indicate that Steiner education is increasingly becoming a part of the mainstream globalised cultural landscape. And in a superficial sense this is true. More parents are clearly choosing Steiner schools. And more teachers are clearly choosing to become Steiner teachers. The contradiction is that none of these increases in Steiner education's popularity amount to there being more people who are genuinely and comprehensively informed about what Steiner education is (or should be) and indeed what the philosophy of this man Rudolf Steiner in fact was. The number of highly educated people who have asked me if Steiner Education is the same as Montessori education indicates to me that even the basic principles of Steiner education are things that most people are entirely ignorant of.

There is good reason for this public ignorance. It is certainly justifiable. A definite "separatism" in Steiner circles has existed since the inception of the Anthroposophical Society and has contributed to the fact that the philosophical principles of Rudolf Steiner remain not only misunderstood but fundamentally unknown to the broader public. This is compounded by the fact that Steiner educators (and others who apply Steiner's indications in agriculture and medicine and so forth) are often not adept in explaining these philosophical principles in a way that makes sense in the terms of contemporary intellectual discourse. Many of the greatest representatives of Steiner's philosophy "practice" without necessarily being able to "explain". There are indeed many teachers who practice the principles of Steiner Education in a deeply committed, honest and real way, but who are not inclined or able to articulate Steiner's principles in precise language, not least because these principles are very difficult to put into words.

There have of course been many efforts to meet the need for an accessible introductory outline of Steiner's philosophy and broader Anthroposophy. There is, just for starters, the vast and cavernous library of texts by Steiner himself, which introduce the key ideas of Anthroposophy in a myriad of ways. Alongside this veritable mountain of Steiner's core introductory texts and published lectures, new readers can find the many further studies of leading Anthroposophic writers, like Ita Wegman, Owen Barfield, Albert Steffen and Peter Selg**.**

For any serious student these texts should remain the foundation of study into Steiner and Anthroposophy. But, as I will elaborate on later, they come with problems. These core Anthroposophical texts are, as a rule, written by Anthroposophists for Anthroposophists (or at least those with a clear grasp of those questions which inform Anthroposophy). In almost every case these essential Steiner texts have been published by Anthroposophic printing houses, in small numbers, and remain both practically and conceptually quite inaccessible for the new reader.

Another point of entry is via the large number of useful secondary texts concerning specific practical applications of Steiner's philosophy like education, medicine, agriculture and art therapy. These texts (designed for interested parents, teachers, farmers, artists and so on) are generally more accessible. Education texts like those by Torin Finser and Steven Sagarin's impressive *The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States* relate Steiner's ideas on child development to the specifics of Steiner education. A brief perusal of the *Steiner Books* website (steinerbooks.org) will show just how many such education books there are. There you will also find the many practical introductions to biodynamics (such as the Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's authoritative *Pfeiffer's Introduction to Biodynamics*) and an expanding cosmos of Anthroposophical family health guides, self-development books, children's stories and more.

Of those more general introductions (books designed to outline Steiner's work and core philosophy for the general reader) it is notable that many of the best are highly personal accounts inspired by the author's own contact with Steiner, such as Albert Steffen's classic *Meetings with Rudolf Steiner* and A.P Shepherd's *Rudolf Steiner: Scientist of the Invisible*. These books are valuable testimonies of the personal meaning Steiner's philosophy can awaken. But their candour can also be potentially unsettling for a newcomer used to more critical distance from authors. Gary Lachman's more recent *Rudolf Steiner: An Introduction to his Life and Work* is a unique and particularly useful book in this respect, being a conscious attempt by the author to provide a neutral distillation of Steiner's life and essential work for the general contemporary reader. Lachman is neither entirely dismissive

of Steiner's ideas and accomplishments, nor is he wholly in allegiance with them (as all Anthroposophic publications are). This kind of balance is rare and difficult to maintain, as Steiner tends to provoke emphatic affiliation or total rejection from those who encounter his work.

Look further to the *Rudolf Steiner Archive* (www.rudolfsteinerarchive.com) and *Rudolf Steiner Book Centre* (www.rudolfsteinerbookcentre.com.au) and you will see no shortage of texts dealing with Steiner's ideas. Indeed, Anthroposophy's predilection for published material may well be its biggest flaw. For, in many respects, it is the sheer fecundity of published materials by or about Steiner that creates problems for the new reader.

So why, you might well ask, add to the gargantuan list with this book? The answer may seem counterintuitive. Amid the overgrown forest of Anthroposophic texts, I think there remains a need for a simple entrance and pathway into Steiner's philosophy. This pathway takes the form of a basic introduction to the essential foundations and key ideas of Steiner's philosophy and broader Anthroposophy. And that is quite simply the goal of this book. My aims here are not to comprehensively cover the many branches of Anthroposophy, but simply to approach Steiner's key philosophical ideas with clarity and accessibility. But let this not be read as a reductivist, uni-dimensional approach to Steiner, for such an approach should never be undertaken and could never succeed. Much like a great poet (like Blake or Goethe) Steiner shatters, engulfs and obliterates reductivism and simplistic categories with spiritual ideas and a way of thinking that demand of us a transformation. Indeed, when dealing with a Steiner idea, no single explanation can ever suffice. A multiplicity of views is required and a multiplicity of interpretive voices is vital. Different people will take different doorways to Steiner, and whatever knowledge is to be found inside may well assume a different form from reader to reader. In this simple introduction I do not pretend to offer the complete picture, or the final word, but just some basic intellectual foundations for an elementary and academic understanding of this important thinker.

This is a book about Steiner's philosophy, about the key ideas that inform that grander thing called Anthroposophy and its practical branches (in education, agriculture, art, medicine *etc*). It is an attempt to find a language

for Steiner's core philosophy which is accessible, a language as free as possible from the esoteric and mystical concepts that Steiner often used and which deter a great many people. It is also a book that seeks to practically distinguish between the philosophical principles needed for an appreciative understanding of Steiner and the wider and far more complex spiritual ideas that Steiner introduced as Anthroposophy. This is a book premised on the following three convictions:

1) That Steiner's philosophy can and should be explained in clear modern terms;
2) That Steiner's key ideas need not and should not be the province of a select counter-culture;
3) That Steiner's philosophy is fundamentally a useful and insightful philosophy that can be integrated with other classical, traditional and progressive knowledge systems.

To understand why Steiner has been so radically alternative to the mainstream, we also need to appreciate why mainstream academic institutions and the principles of Steiner's philosophy have for over a century been simply too different and antagonistic to work together. In the latter part of this book, I will explain why this antagonism is being overcome through a gradual opening in Western knowledge systems to different ways of knowledge. It is highly significant that the apparently very strange ideas that Steiner had on education are increasingly concurring with contemporary research into cognition, developmental pedagogy and holistic learning. Such concurrences affirm my own conviction that universities are increasingly ready to appreciate how the key principles of Rudolf Steiner's broader philosophy cohere with contemporary ways of understanding the world and ourselves. This requires a degree of negotiation, diplomacy and even compromise between various and often very different ways of looking at the world. We will need to look for correlations rather than discrepancies, similarities rather than differences. But such negotiations, translations and attempts to find the common ground between different languages, discourses, knowledge systems and cultures are of course a part of our great challenge in the age of globalisation.

I am going to do my best to keep things clear and simple, but I am also out of necessity going to ask you at times to take small leaps of faith, or at least stretches of your imagination. In order to distil the key principles of Steiner's philosophy I am going to need to discuss some ideas that may very likely appear strange at first, ideas that can seem threatening to someone unfamiliar with such a way of understanding human life. It is not my intention to promote Steiner's philosophy as some kind of religious answer in this book, but neither is it my intention to present it sceptically. The goal of this book is simply explanation, and such explanation requires a degree of willing understanding on our part. The currently popular substitution of "critical" or "analytical" thinking for comprehension is not entirely suitable here, for (as I explain in more detail in Chapter Two) Steiner's philosophy requires of us a practical dimension of development not achievable through sheer analytical observation. To follow through with the ideas on offer in this book you will need to enter with a flexible open-mindedness and a genuine desire to engage in and even discover a different kind of thinking. This will involve concepts that may at times be uncomfortable. Aspects may seem initially New Age or mystical and definably "unscientific". What I ask then is that you remain scientific in yourself, that you show respect for different ways of thinking to your own, and that you come to your conclusions not by making critical judgements based on your own normative intellectual framework but by following through objectively with the whole experiment. I ask that like any good scientist you keep your senses and your mind open to possibilities.

So, who was Rudolf Steiner?

In a time when people can become celebrities on the back of a single book, a single idea, or even nothing at all, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) remains remarkably unknown in the world. There are few people whose scale of achievement and influence is so out of proportion with their fame. Steiner wrote scores of books, gave thousands of lectures, revolutionised education, agriculture, medicine, and yet he remains thoroughly marginalised in the intellectual world. Steiner's cultural marginalisation is particularly noteworthy in contemporary academia. Steiner pioneered developments in numerous fields (epistemology, education, agriculture, medicine and many more), published on a vast scale, addressed many of the central

philosophical questions of modernity and yet he remains for the large part totally ignored in universities.

Why this should be is a question that is both very complicated and at its heart quite obvious. Aside from the general ignorance and the ill-informed prejudice that Steiner was an esoteric quack or a delusional cult leader, the reason for Steiner's absence in the academy was and remains fundamentally premised on a core disagreement. In many ways, much of this book is about that disagreement. So, let me introduce the problem.

Within mainstream academic frameworks (or discourse) the core premise of Steiner's philosophy is not only unacceptable, it is *incomprehensible*. There is, if I can describe it in the simplest way, a *fundamental point of disagreement* between institutionalised academic ways of describing reality and Steiner's way of describing reality. We are going to try to understand what that point of disagreement is, and how if understood from its key epistemological principles, Steiner's version of reality is perhaps not that strange or crazy at all. But that's for a bit later...

I remember my own amazement, disbelief even, when I first discovered Steiner's vast body of work in an Anthroposophical Bookstore. By this stage I was a painfully serious twenty-six year old post-graduate student of philosophy. If I had a religion, my worship was at the temple of Western intellectual thought. I had read far and wide some of the most obscure philosophical and theological thinkers I could lay my hands on. I was particularly interested in German idealist philosophy, and I had even become interested in mysticism. All this being so, I had still never read a word of Rudolf Steiner. Then one day a very open-minded friend introduced me to an Anthroposophical bookstore. And I was... stunned. Here was an Austro-German philosopher of the highest order who explained mystical concepts in clear philosophical terms and whose influence had seen the development of special schools and hospitals and farms and a host of other amazing things. Yet I was completely unfamiliar with him. I was silent, baffled. How had I not encountered Steiner before? Many people have

expressed a similar sense of amazement felt on first discovering this invisible philosopher giant.

I had to know more. The kind old German woman who attended the bookshop showed me the loaning library in a small room out the back. For a lifetime membership of twenty dollars I could borrow four at a time. So, of course, I signed up and randomly borrowed four. One was an enormous book about the history of Western philosophy, another was a lecture cycle on the Book of Revelations and the third was about the Gospel of St. Luke. I don't remember the fourth, I probably never read it. I flummoxed through these texts, reading bits and pieces, here and there, feeling curious and astonishing insights into the soul and the universe but more or less totally lacking in the education needed to make any broader and more meaningful sense of them. Some of it read like a scripted answer to the kind of philosophy I was searching for. Other parts reminded me uncomfortably of the New Age crackpots I did my best to avoid. For whatever reason though, I persisted. The fragmentary insights I was gaining were enough to make me search for the bigger picture. In time I joined a Rudolf Steiner study group and later became involved in Steiner schools -both as a teacher and then as a parent. Over these years I was gradually introduced to better ways to study the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner.

My basic education took many years. And though it followed no formal system and was frightfully lacking in foundational principles, I now realise that I was very fortunate. Very few people experience the same kind of positive, structured and rigorous introduction to Rudolf Steiner that I enjoyed. There are indeed a wealth of stumbling blocks which can deter the curious student before any real progress is made, and a great many of these problems can be attributed to Steiner himself.

For all his efforts, Steiner was certainly not a populist by nature. He was passionate about communicating with people, but he did not present himself or his spiritual philosophy in a way that easily resonates with the prevailing values and thinking of the modern, secular age. His philosophy belongs to that equally benevolent and dubious category of "spiritual", but it does not bear the innocent charms of those spiritual teachings who hark to a simpler premodern time. As a Theosophist, Steiner embraced a kind of "maximalist"

spirituality, invoking a dizzying array of religious traditions, knowledges and symbolisms. At the same time, as a philosopher he connected his spiritual ideas with the core concerns of modern thinkers, from Descartes, to Kant and Hegel, to Marx and Nietzsche, and so on. Because of this balance, Steiner is a definably spiritual thinker who appeals to our need for inner development, yet he is also a definably modern and highly complex intellectual thinker who explains his ideas in terms of the overwhelming intellectual context of modern philosophy, science and art. When we engage with Steiner, "hard-headed" intellectualism is required at the same time as a kind of "open-hearted" spiritual attitude, and this can make for an extremely difficult challenge for the newcomer (who may well be very developed in one practice, but less so in the other).

The most obvious problem for the new reader is Steiner's difficult way with words. His way of explaining things is often convoluted, abstract and impenetrable. Many people, even committed Steiner teachers, have expressed to me that they simply "cannot read Steiner". And it is not hard to see why. What he means by such key terms as "imagination" (*Fantasie*) or "mental picture" (*Vorstellung*) can baffle even the most ardent of readers, while his explanations of phenomenological processes (like thinking) can read like an exercise in tautological redundancy. Take an example from *The Philosophy of Freedom*, where Steiner writes:

> What is impossible with respect to nature, namely, creating before knowing, we do accomplish with respect to thinking. If we wanted to wait with thinking until we knew it, we would never come to it. We must resolutely proceed with thinking, in order afterward, by means of observation of what we ourselves have done, to come to knowledge of it. (*PF*, p. 37)

Steiner's work is full of such passages. Though a key point is being made here, the newcomer has little chance of grasping it. This is difficult, elusive philosophical discourse, born out of the great but often mystifying tradition of German Idealism and made all the more challenging by Steiner's unique phenomenological framework. As with the German Idealist philosophers like Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer who came before him, Steiner discusses abstract notions of the mind and the spirit with a strange matter-of-factness,

as if such things as mental and imaginative processes and were concrete and self-evidently before us. The activities of the soul are described almost as if they were physical activities. It often feels in reading such explanations that the reader has already to have grasped the concept in order to comprehend the sentence. This being so, an inordinate amount of time can be spent simply trying to ascertain what Steiner is saying in any given sentence or paragraph. And this of course makes the task of comprehending the greater conceptual arguments outlined in his books nearly impossible.

The relevance of translation is very important here too. Steiner wrote and lectured in German, a language that is often regarded as having a particular talent for discussing abstract philosophical or spiritual ideas in definite conceptual terms. German language, it could be said, accommodates the idealist discourse that Steiner uses more accurately then English. Accurate translations into English are therefore often impossible, because English simply does not have the vocabulary to fully translate what Steiner is explaining. The most famous and possibly most relevant example of this problem is the German word *geist* (as in *zeitgeist*). “Geist” is a word that is essential to Steiner’s work, as it is to many German language philosophers. But when translated into English it can mean either “spirit” or “mind”. Both are correct translations. (Perhaps the closest translation is “ghost”.) This forces us to acknowledge that what the German language philosopher refers to as “geist” is a concept we do not exactly share in English, or at least do not have an exact word for. Such discrepancies of translation are very significant, because Steiner uses the word and others like it all the time. This is not surprising, as he bases his whole philosophy on the relationship our mind has with spiritual experience.

“Geist” is just one example. But we can see that even at a core level of a single word English readers are already prone to a fundamental misinterpretation of Steiner’s philosophy simply because of the problems of translation. It is overwhelming to consider how much of Steiner’s published work remains lost in translation. (In the first Steiner study group that I was a part of we were lucky enough to have an extremely erudite and rigorous German scholar who read the original German language while we read the English. Every few words he made us stop so he could explain, often at length, the inadequacy of the translation we were reading.) Consider the

difficulty simply in translating the title of Steiner's first book, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit,* which we will look at closely in the first chapter. It has been translated into English as *The Philosophy of Freedom* (deemed too open to misunderstanding), *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (closer, but an unusual choice of words) and *Intuitive thinking as a Spiritual Path* (more to the point, but hardly an accurate translation). And all this before we even begin with the task of comprehending the broader philosophy outlined in the book.

Another major problem facing the new reader is the convoluted relationship Steiner's work has with its cultural and historical context. Steiner may have been "ahead of his time" in many ways, but he was also deeply enmeshed in and entirely responsive to his time. He was not like some philosophers who present their ideas in an abstract way as pure theory and can therefore be applied somewhat independently of their context. On the contrary, Steiner (especially in his lectures) is addressing an audience of that time and place; namely, central Europe before, during and after the First World War. Steiner's work thus assumes a sophisticated cultural and historical familiarity of his reader today. This extends as much to our grasp of his references to ancient Greek philosophy, medieval scholasticism and Christian mysticism as it does to his discussions of the political and intellectual developments of his day. A big challenge is sheerly keeping up with the wild plethora of references he throws into his work. He is not dissimilar to James Joyce in this respect, often referring to and connecting insignificant and now forgotten details of early 20$^{th}$ century Europe with core Judeo-Christian, ancient Greek, ancient Indian and other mythological and religious concepts and narratives. When, for example, he discusses in lectures contemporary debates around perception or cognition, Steiner often refers to obscure theories influential in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, but long since forgotten. Most of the names Steiner raises of once influential neuropsychological theorists, physicists and epistemological philosophers are all now unknown. Likewise, in the political realm, he often refers to the most quotidian of events of his day: changes in education policy, developments in transport infrastructure, new systems of office management.

Then there are his painfully outdated references to ideas of "national identity" and a kind of national "folk spirit", which bring us to a major ideological hurdle: Steiner's relationship with the culture of racial supremacism and occultism which arose in middle Europe and which later manifested in Nazism. There have indeed been numerous charges of racial supremacism laid against Steiner, often in news media stories attempting to discredit Waldorf schooling. And from a distance the claims may seem to have some merit. Certainly, the emphasis on Germanic folk traditions in Waldorf schooling would seem to share uncomfortable outward similarities with the culture of German ultranationalism. Likewise, Steiner's oft repeated descriptions of the different spiritual identities and destinies of ethnic groups, or *volk*, across Europe and the world should prompt concern. In a post Nazi world, the very idea that an ethnic group would somehow have a singular identity or historical purpose is of course not tolerable.

Any similarities between the work of a philosopher and the doctrines of Nazism must be taken very seriously. Nevertheless, in the case of Steiner, I suggest that any connection is merely geographical and historical and that no meaningful convergence found between the core principle or goal of Steiner's philosophy and that of Nazism, something well evidenced when we recognise that Anthroposophy (including Steiner education) was outlawed by the Nazi state. To put a very complicated problem in a very simple way, the points of similarity between Steiner's work and Nazi doctrine are, I think, points of superficial resemblance rather than points of agreement. They have little to do with any convergence of agenda or ideology, and much more to do with the fact that Steiner used conceptual terms for concepts like race and cultural identity that were later appropriated by the Nazis and which are now forever associated with them.

Nevertheless, that Steiner even discussed the concept of a racial hierarchy calls the credibility of his philosophy deeply into question, and rightly so. It is correct that in certain passages from Steiner's voluminous work, some evidence can be found of his apparently racist world conception. For example, Steiner appears to specify "modern thinking" as specifically European when he writes:

> …the faculties that use the brain as their instrument were enhanced to the point where modern science, technology and so on, became possible. This material culture could originate only among the peoples of Europe. (*ES*, p.114)

Passages like this suggest that Steiner believes the innovations of modern science and the industrial revolution are inherently related to the ethnicity of European peoples; in other words, that "modern progress" is somehow essentially European. And, when read out of context, this certainly provides evidence of some kind of racial supremacism on Steiner's part.

But to actually make sense of Steiner's explanation, a far bigger picture is required. This indeed part of the enormous challenge when approaching Steiner without an adequate framework to make sense of his concepts. Put very simply, in the above passage Steiner is describing the development of a new form of thinking in Europe, at the turn of the modern period. He is explaining that the conditions in Europe at that time enabled this development in thinking to take place, which made possible the Scientific Revolution. He is not claiming this development had anything to do with the intellectual or cultural superiority of Europeans or with evolutionary advancement. Quite the opposite, in fact. He is arguing the development of this modern thinking in Europe was an evolutionary mis-development. This will be more substantially explained in Chapter Five. For now, we can say that even if Steiner is isolating Europe as the place where modern scientific thinking and industrial culture first significantly developed, he is by no means extending this observation as a token of European accomplishment or superiority over other peoples. Such thick normative concepts are, frankly, well beneath the kind of thinking required by Steiner.

It is fair to exercise a considerable degree of contextual caution and even scepticism regarding the references to race and evolution in Steiner's work, but equally unreasonable to form conclusions and project normative frameworks without engaging in a study of Steiner's foundational principles: the first political principle being the need for a social and ethical model arising from individual freedom. Studied as a unified philosophy, we

will see that at its core Steiner's political orientation can only be regarded as passionately anti-fascist and, more broadly, anti-totalitarian.

When we take such a serious intellectual approach to Steiner, regarding him as a philosopher rather than as a strange cultural figure, the real problems relate not to his ideological or cultural associations but more to our ability as students to follow his arguments. This is primarily evident in the problems created by his self-referencing and his tendency to refer to his earlier key ideas with very different language and tone.

Steiner is indeed much like a poet, a philosopher who allowed his autobiographical development to shape and direct the paths his work took. He "built" or, perhaps more accurately, "grew" his philosophy over the years from the core principles of *The Philosophy of Freedom* in the 1890s to the many branches of Anthroposophy in the 1920s. Although the approaches he employed changed radically over these years, the core principles remained consistent (something not evident from an initial comparison of two very distinct books such as *The Philosophy of Freedom* and *An Outline of Esoteric Science*). For this reason, understanding the concepts of Steiner's later work is really dependent on familiarity with the principles and ideas laid out in his earlier books, something easier said than done. The abstract and impenetrable ideas about mind and freedom laid out in *The Philosophy of Freedom* are not self-evidently integral to the practical nature of Steiner's later work, like the pedagogical principles outlined in his education lectures. Likewise, the very strange esoteric notions of spiritual bodies introduced in *An Outline of Esoteric Science* are not obviously related to the instructions concerning meditation in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment.* Finding the conceptual connections across Steiner's work is a major challenge. One of the aims of this book is to establish the conceptual continuity and development of Steiner's ideas in a simple and practical way.

Put simply, Steiner expects a lot of the reader: an ability to follow his difficult idealist and Germanic discursive style; a familiarity with the obscure historical, philosophical and religious references; and a familiarity with his own body of published work. The problems do not end there, however. In fact, this is just the beginning. These linguistic and contextual

challenges are of course made all the more difficult by the unusual esoteric aspects of Steiner's teachings.

Steiner may have insisted on a scientific approach, but there is no denying his deep strangeness and mystical associations. His work is full of esotericism, specifically Christian esotericism, and this could hardly be more challenging for a secular intellectual culture. The title of Steiner's most comprehensive book, for example, is *An Outline of Esoteric Science* (formerly *Occult Science*) and it includes a detailed description of the invisible aspects of a human being, going on to describe the spiritual evolution of humanity and indeed the Earth itself. In another key text *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* Steiner openly describes his own clairvoyant experiences and gives instructions on how we can all develop such clairvoyance, or what he called "supersensible perception" through meditative practice. This is all before we get to any of the heavy esotericism. In his many lectures Steiner returns again and again to the great tropes of esoteric, occult and new age literature: topics like Rosicrucianism, Atlantis, ancient initiation rites, The Grail mysteries, the Angelic hierarchies, the list goes on. Added to this are all the unusual names and spiritual categories he defines: names like *etheric body*, *astral body*, *sentient soul*, *Saturn-Earth*, *Sun-Earth* and *Moon-Earth*.

There is simply an enormous amount of extremely unusual subject matter and terminology for a newcomer to take in, and more often than not the experience can be a deeply alienating one. Even if the step is made to overcome apprehension and engage with the ideas, it is very easy in the face of all this esoteric data to become focussed on mere rote learning of all these strange names, categories and esoteric subjects. The study of Anthroposophy easily becomes reduced to this: the listing of names and knowing nods.

Making sure we get all the esoteric names right often comes at the expense of working with the core philosophical principles and spiritual practices. At its worst this preoccupation with rote memorising falsely distinguishes intellectual esoteric content from other kinds of intellectual content in a way

that makes the student succumb to the delusion that they are somehow spiritually developing because of their intellectual rote learning. This modern delusion is of course the bread and butter of the New Age book industry and precisely why, when we need a "spiritual lift", we buy the book on Celtic mythology or fairies or whatever. None of this has anything to do with the spiritual philosophy put forward by Rudolf Steiner.

Steiner, in fact, insisted at the end of his life that the resemblance his terminology has with older religious and mystical traditions had no essential bearing on the meaning of his spiritual philosophy. When he used ancient esoteric terms, he explained, he was looking for ways to best describe his clairvoyant perceptions, which modern language had no concept for. So, when he used terms like "lotus flower" or "atman" or "archai" he was not necessarily referring to the ancient knowledge systems these terms originated from, but to modern concepts best fitting his clairvoyant perceptions. In his own words:

> To begin with they were perceptions without names. Later, I needed words in order to describe and communicate them, so I went looking in older accounts of spiritual matters for ways to express these still nameless things in words. I made free use of the words I found, so my usage almost never coincides with the ancient meaning. (*ES*, p. 7)

Whatever else, this is certainly an effective way to confuse the task for new readers and students. Steiner invokes an ancient esoteric terms to describe entirely different phenomena! We are left only to wonder how different our task would have been had Steiner chosen instead to develop his own modern vocabulary. Nevertheless, the key point to take from this passage is that applying ancient symbolic meanings to Steiner's philosophy is a misunderstanding. For Steiner, any spiritual knowledge is built on a foundation of perceptual and cognitive experience, before any elaborate esoteric language or conceptual content is introduced.

In this book we are also going to focus on philosophical principles and spiritual practices before considering the esoteric content. The goal here is not to deny the fact that Steiner spoke about many strange esoteric concepts (he most certainly did) but to approach these esoteric concepts "from the ground up" as it were. Intellectually testing esoteric concepts (as one might

test the water in a hot bath) will not work. If we want to practically approach Steiner's philosophy we need to remain realistic about our limitations. "Without normal common sense", Steiner wrote of spiritual development, "all thine efforts are in vain". (*KW*, ch.2, n. 5) Such realism involves being rigorous and honest so that we can genuinely understand the principles of Steiner's philosophical picture of the human being as a physical, living, emotional and intellectual organism. From such a place we can develop a comprehensive understanding of Steiner's philosophy. Sometimes there will be the need to discuss Steiner's concepts as hypotheses. More often, however, Steiner's various discussions of esoteric subjects (which he generally gave in response to requests for such discussions) will have a minimal role in this study.

So, where to begin?

If we are to take a "ground up" approach, where do we start with Steiner? Well, let's begin with where not to start. Steiner's bibliography is, to put it mildly, complete chaos. Of the many hurdles to a clear and simple understanding of Steiner's philosophy, the disorganisation of his voluminous published works is perhaps the greatest.

Having been relatively aloof and, by his own admission, slow-developing as a young man, Steiner experienced an enormous transformation in his social sense of purpose in middle age. From the age of around thirty-five to forty his inner experiences burst forth and he became powerfully driven to communicate his spiritual philosophy as widely as possible. Over the subsequent twenty-five years from 1900 he published his own journal, then became the General Secretary of the German Theosophical Society and published numerous books, then started his own spiritual society, The Anthroposophical Society, all the while continuing to write, teach, travel and lecture extensively. The results of his drive can be found in the overwhelming number of titles on the Anthroposophical bookshelf. Steiner left behind a bewildering array of information both in scope and content. He wrote a considerable number of books for general readership, and it is these books he intended for new readers. But these texts are dwarfed by the huge

number of lectures which were imperfectly transcribed and then published, originally just for society members but soon for the general public. There are over 6000 transcribed collected lectures and they cover topics as far ranging as agriculture, the relationship of capitalism and socialism, Egyptian, Babylonian and even ancient Aztec theologies, Pythagorean geometry, The Bhagavad Gita, the origin of the Moon, Darwinism and the rise of materialist evolutionary theory, bees, Newtonian theories and their relationship to modern consciousness, modern aesthetics and the role of Art in modern life, the mysteries of Atlantis, the doctrine of reincarnation in early Christianity, the causes of the First World War, the structural intelligence of beavers, the evolution of the solar system *etc*. The list goes on and on and on...

It is clear that Steiner did not want many or even most of these lectures published for general readers. He was definitely uncomfortable about their publication and his compliance with the wishes of others to have them published seems only to reflect his kind-hearted and social nature. But has it led to some problems! I have met some self-identified Anthroposophists who seem to think it almost blasphemous to accuse Steiner of any significant mistakes. Such is his authority. But, if nothing else, it was clearly a serious mistake that his literature was not managed more carefully and systematically during his lifetime.

It would seem the ramifications of his overloaded, disorganised and potentially very confusing literary legacy only fully dawned on Steiner in his final year as he became ill. In the final pages of his unfinished autobiography he comments:

> It is especially necessary to say a word about how my books for the general public on the one hand, and the privately printed courses on the other, belong within what I elaborated as Anthroposophy... The approach I adopted in these lectures was not at all suitable for the written works intended primarily for the general public. (*AUT*, p. 387)

Perhaps he had hoped to edit and organise the published lecture cycles as he slowed down in old age. But ill health caught up with him, and in the weeks before his death at sixty-three years the unlimited publication and proliferation of his lectures loomed as a grave problem. Steiner literally did

not have time to go through all of his published lectures and edit them for serious transcription mistakes. Moreover, he realised he had no way of influencing who could read them or how they would be introduced to the knowledges being discussed. These highly specific and esoteric lectures, often given in the context of some special training or event, taken out of their context, incorrectly transcribed, then inaccurately translated and read a century later by a fresh-faced newcomer... this spelt only confusion and very likely rejection of Steiner altogether, all the more so when the text is more or less randomly selected from a bookshelf of thousands of other lectures.

Let's put this problem in basic terms: Steiner's key ideas simply cannot be understood when read as fragments of information or taken out of context. And we need to know the basics of his philosophy if we want to comprehend his more complex ideas. At the very least, essential philosophical principles need to be carefully worked through and understood. Referring eclectically to random lectures on bees, Nietzsche or Saturn will not achieve this. Indeed, even restricting ourselves to his specific lectures on education is not a good starting point, for they too come with the expectation that you will have already learned the basics (precisely because the people he was speaking to when he gave the lectures had learned the basics).

The best starting point to make sense of Steiner's complex esoteric ideas is in fact to look at the philosophical premises Steiner explained *before* he made the decision to discuss spiritual matters in explicit and direct terms; that is to say, to look at the philosophical premises he articulated before 1900. By getting a better appreciation and understanding of these premises, when Steiner was trying to explain himself in a more popular modern form of philosophical discourse, we have the best chance of understanding the key ideas that he later developed into his philosophy and broader Anthroposophy. The challenge of this is that the language he did use in these earlier years was highly abstract and relies on a familiarity with a core epistemological problem in modern philosophy. So, let's have a try at understanding that first.

# CHAPTER ONE

# *THE PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM*: WHAT IS INTUITIVE THINKING?

> That is indeed what matters most: that we learn to do our own independent thinking! There is no way of getting into the spiritual world without developing that capacity.
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Soziales Verständnis*, (Vol. IV, Lecture 2)

Rudolf Steiner developed the key ideas of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (which I will here refer to as *The Philosophy of Freedom*) over the course of his early life. He wrote the book in the early 1890s when still in his early thirties. This was long before he involved himself publicly with the Theosophical Society or with anything explicitly esoteric. Yet, as Paul Marshall Allen notes in his foreword to the 1963 English edition of the text, despite the fact that the book employs almost none of the esoteric terminology that he would develop later, Steiner famously said of *The Philosophy of Freedom* very late in his life that it would "outlive all of my other works".[1]

It is a comment that has tantalised Anthroposophists for its esoteric implications. What did Steiner mean by his statement? Was it that future generations with some form of developed consciousness would unlock the book's secrets? Or was it more simply that the book is the only original philosophical text of Steiner's that is "abstract" enough to be successfully translated and comprehended across different cultures, historical periods

[1] Steiner, R. in Allen, P., "Foreword" in Stebbing, R. (trans) *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity: The Basis for a Modern World Conception* (New York: The Rudolf Steiner Publications, Inc., 1963) p. i

and ways of thinking? I heavily incline toward the latter explanation. Throughout his subsequent decades of work Steiner repeatedly stressed that everything of conceptual importance in Anthroposophy could be traced back to *The Philosophy of Freedom*. If we are to accept this (and I think we should) we can regard the book as a concise outline of the key ideas that would form the basis of Steiner's philosophy and what he later called *spiritual science*.

Let this not disarm you for the book's challenges. *The Philosophy of Freedom* is conceptually demanding both in style and content. It is very ambitious. The book is written in an informal and personal tone, quite unique for philosophical discourses of its day. But the gravity of Steiner's concern is anything but casual. The philosophical problem Steiner seeks to resolve in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is nothing less than the core epistemological problem of modern philosophy: *how can we freely know reality through our thinking*? In other words, he wants to answer the question: can we ever know reality directly or are we always restricted in some fundamental way to our own personal mental construct of this reality?

Steiner approaches this enormous question in two stages. Firstly, he follows in the German philosophical tradition of Kantian and Hegelian Idealism by placing the thinking individual at the centre of his philosophical explanation. Ideals like freedom cannot, for Steiner, be defined as things-in-themselves, but only in terms of how the individual experiences them. Freedom, in other words, is described in terms of human experience. Steiner therefore attempts to define freedom by describing the human experience of "freedom" as a mental activity. "What is it like to think freely"? he effectively asks.

We could call the method Steiner uses *phenomenological*: concerned with describing the conscious experience of something rather than the object itself. Throughout this book I will use the term "phenomenon" in this way: to refer to the human experience of things as phenomena, and not as objects independent of human experience. Although Steiner is not "officially" a phenomenological philosopher, as Andrew Wellburn notes "there are many

parallels to Steiner's in the work of the great Phenomenologists".[2] The pioneering phenomenological work of Franz Bretano, in particular, had a definite influence on the young Steiner, who attended Bretano's seminal lectures in Vienna in the 1880s.

Although it would be inaccurate to place Steiner firmly in the phenomenological school, when used more loosely the term phenomenological usefully defines Steiner's agenda to approach freedom as a form of *mental activity*. The mental or conscious activity of the individual is the key here. The individual (ideally) experiences freedom through thinking as a spiritual phenomenon, which has no reality outside or apart from the thinking individual. The thinking individual is thus the stage upon which all the key questions of *The Philosophy of Freedom* play out. It is only by contemplating (and indeed becoming) the thinking individual that we can find answers to Steiner's questions.

Steiner understands that if we want to define the reality of a thinking individual, we first have to define what thinking really is. So, he asks, instead of knowing freedom directly, *is there a way of knowing thinking*? Can thinking be known as something "unto itself" and if so, can this be defined without fundamentally separating thinking from the rest of what we call "the world" or "reality" (the reality we "think about")? The second key question follows from this: if humans can indeed be free and ethical as individuals, is an answer to these earlier questions necessary? *Do we have to truly know what the reality of thinking is in order to be free in our thinking*? This is the starting point for understanding Steiner's notion of freedom.

You may want to read over those last four paragraphs again. There is probably no humanistic philosophical problem more challenging and apparently tautological than this. And as you can already see, the way Steiner goes about it from the outset is already extremely abstract. There are few, if any, reliably tangible reference points in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. The book's questions are indeed primarily questions to be solved in the mind. Steiner had a remarkably adept "matter-of-factness" in the way he

[2] Wellburn, A., *Rudolf Steiner's Philosophy* (Edinburgh, Floris Books, 2011) p. 48

discussed very abstract ideas, and this is often a source of great difficulty for his readers. But usually, if we can boil what he is saying down, we can find that the core idea is fairly simple in essence. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner is trying to define an ethical ideal or social value ("freedom") but he does this by concentrating on the epistemology of human thinking and reality: What is the relationship of reality and thinking? What is the nature of thinking? He is essentially asking: "How can we be free in reality through our thinking"?

If we can get a grip on it, Steiner's approach does point to a really clear and apparent problem… and the more we think about it the more significant it gets. Thinking and freedom seem to be at odds. It is indeed a great paradox in the modern age that we both elevate freedom as a social value and yet find ourselves at odds to define what freedom is in our thinking. (If you doubt this, try defining freedom in its own terms without relying on negatives, of "what freedom isn't".) Writers defend their words by it, politicians justify wars with it, but what is freedom? For all our freedom, Steiner asks, why it is that our modern way of thinking renders us conspicuously unable to grasp the concept of freedom itself. If freedom is the highest social and philosophical value of the modern age, why can't we define it intellectually without immediately invalidating it, by categorising it and therefore limiting it? Why is it that our very ways of modern analytical rational thinking, using definitions and categories, seems to be at odds with the highest value of our society, this great but elusive ideal of freedom?

There's the rub. Modern freedom is a paradox. It is the most important social concept for the modern age. It is the integral theoretical principle of modern science (expressed as "uncertainty"). It is the core value of Liberalism. It is a term almost synonymous with modern conceptions of creativity. And yet it is also a concept that seems to elude philosophical definition. Only the poets, it would seem, can express such ineffables as "freedom" and "love" in terms which connect as something like "objective truths". Shakespeare's varied expressions of human freedom and love remain touchstones for what "freedom" and "love" are, not least because the poet finds so many varied embodiments through which to express these concepts. The ideal is defined,

but then changes, again and again, through endless transformations. The poet in this respect is more liberated than the philosopher, being able to intuit the essence of an ideal in a moment, a voice or an image, without locking it down into a fixed philosophical formula or dictionary definition.

When considered philosophically, as a concept, the boundaries of freedom in modern liberal societies have generally been defined negatively within a conceptual framework of rights. Isiah Berlin helpfully defined this as "negative freedom". You are free, classical liberal philosophers have tended to argue, when your choices are not controlled by regulatory laws that restrict your liberties. The negative liberal concept thus defines freedom as the rights of an individual to choose the direction of their life without restriction. Whatever content individuals choose to fill their free life with (including their own definition of what their freedom is) is secondary and symptomatic of the essential liberty established by negative freedom itself. This negative, rights-oriented freedom of classical liberalism of course remains the most successful philosophy of freedom to be implemented in human societies.

But Rudolf Steiner isn't satisfied with this negative concept of freedom. He wants to put forward something quite different. Our goal in this chapter is primarily to understand what his different idea of freedom is.

Firstly, at the level of translation we must first recognise the core etymological difference between what Steiner means by freedom (*Freiheit*) and the more common English use of the word, which equates most directly to liberty. As Steiner explained to an audience in Oxford in 1922:

> Therefore today we need above all a view of the world based on *Freiheit*. One can use this word in German, but here in England one must put it differently because the word "freedom" has a different meaning. One must say a view of the world based on spiritual activity, on action, on thinking and feeling that arise from the individual human spirit.[3]

[3] Steiner, R. in Wilson, M., "Introduction" in *The Philosophy of Freedom* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1964)

This explains the use of "spiritual activity" as a substitute for "freedom" in some translations of the text. Freedom here is not a condition arising from a lack of regulations or controls. It is an activity, or, perhaps more accurately, a spiritual state of being resulting from an activity.

Let us unpack this etymological nuance more deeply. To begin with, Steiner (like many philosophers before him) finds that a core problem with negative freedom is that it requires nothing active of the individual. It exists purely as potentiality. Take a universal liberal maxim:

> "All people are equally free to become President".

Aside from questions about eligibility, we should ask what this hypothetical "freedom" actually entails (other than the possibility that someone born in the United States might in the future take the steps necessary to become President). Or take another example:

> "All people are free to develop free thinking".

Here we see the problem of negative freedom more acutely. The negative principle refers to the possibility of attaining freedom, not to the freedom itself. For Steiner, defining freedom in reference to the yet to be realised potential of an individual to attain some form of power is entirely insufficient. It is simply not adequate for us to define freedom as a universal abstraction, a precondition to any situation, a "right" we have regardless of whether we have done anything to experience it or not. Steiner asks why we cannot come to terms with a more specific idea of freedom, one in which the individual's role in the attainment of freedom is more than an abstracted free agent. In other words, unlike liberal philosophy, he wants to define what freedom is, instead of what it is not.

Steiner was not the first philosopher to attempt such a definition. In contrast to the liberal philosophers of the Enlightenment period, Hegel in the early 19th century famously promoted an influential and very troubling definition of freedom; it being for him a result of an individual's harmonious spiritual identification with their society, in this case the totalitarian Prussian state of

the early 19th century. For Hegel, the potential freedom referred to by liberal philosophers became actual freedom only through the individual's realisation of their role and position in the social order. In other words, freedom is realised and fulfilled as social duty to the collective or state. The legacy of Hegel's argument and the philosophical justification it gave to totalitarianism is well known. And given the profound influence Hegel has on Steiner, it is worth asking: to what extent was Hegel's infamous concept of freedom an influence on *The Philosophy of Freedom*?

Although Hegel's influence on Steiner is profound in many ways, the Hegelian concept of freedom as state "duty" or "identification" has no relevance for Steiner. (It is actually far more influential on Marx.) Both philosophers propose a concept of freedom as a realised "state of being", but Steiner differs radically from Hegel in that he is an emphatic individualist. His philosophy of freedom is the first, or at least the first modern European philosophy, to propose a practical concept of human freedom as a spiritual activity that respects and can only be attained by the individual. Freedom in Steiner's sense has nothing to do with political affiliation. It has to do with individual development of thinking, which for Steiner is a spiritual activity. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner proposes to define freedom as an objective spiritual reality by showing how it can be attained subjectively by an individual.

Instead of just consoling himself with the idea that freedom can never be defined, Steiner turns the microscope on modern thinking itself. In a brilliant about-face he explains it is thinking, not freedom, which is the source of the philosophical problem. Specifically, it is a kind of thinking (or rather a *relationship to thinking*) intimately related to the modern scientific method and which remains dominant in modern analytical philosophy. It is this dominant modern way of thinking that Steiner seeks to describe and critique in *The Philosophy of Freedom* before offering a different way of thinking, which he calls *intuitive thinking*.

So, what is this dominant modern analytical way of thinking and why does Steiner consider it a restriction on our capacity for freedom? In many respects this book (and indeed Steiner's life work) is an answer to that

question. But to even begin to answer it, Steiner requires us to observe and contemplate our own thinking. This is no easy task.

For Steiner, the dominant influences in the modern age have powerfully inhibited our conscious capacity to experience and directly know our own thinking. He explains that these influences can be accurately observed in the most influential of modern philosophies and theories (Descartes, Locke, Darwin, Marx, *etc.*). Treated symptomatically, these influential philosophies and theories tell us things of profound importance about our age. Engaging with the great modern philosophical, scientific and artistic texts and theories is for Steiner a way to observe and clarify the problem of how human thinking has radically changed over the past few centuries. We could say that Steiner approaches the history of philosophy as symptomatic of historical changes in human thinking.

Steiner proposes, in general terms, that the premise from which most dominant modern theories begin (including epistemological theories of knowledge) is an unquestioned assumption of a pre-existing and irresolvable division of things. Put simply, modern thinking tends towards an analytical activity of thought and therefore divides "reality" into two or more parts. We use these divisions all the time: mind & matter, body & spirit, subject & object. In their simplest form (subject / object) we could call the divisions we use oppositional. Oppositional discourse informs the way we think and indeed the ways our modern institutions operate. Our democratic systems of government and judicial processes are clear examples of this oppositional way of working through processes.

Steiner does not consider these divisions a problem necessarily (he agrees that oppositions and categories are a part of reality) but he does suggest that the assumption of a fundamental or essential separation inherent to reality forms the basis of a great deal of confusion, especially when it comes to the question of human thinking and freedom. Human beings may organise and make sense of reality in oppositional terms, but this should not be confused with spiritual knowledge of that reality. At the outset of his book Steiner acknowledges the unusual perspective he is taking:

> May the question of the freedom of our will be asked at all by itself, in a one-sided way? And if not: with what other question must it necessarily be linked? ... What does it mean to *know* the reasons for one's action? One has given this question too little attention, because unfortunately one has always torn into two parts what is an inseparable whole: the human being. (*PF*, p. 9)

This short passage lays bare the course Steiner takes in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. In contrast to many modern philosophers, Steiner wants to answer this question of what freedom is while treating all reality, including thinking, as a totality. In this sense he is a holistic philosopher (albeit an unusually systematic one) taking on the enormous challenge of readdressing the premises of a modern rationalist philosophy and science that finds an implicit and irresolvable duality or separation between the thoughts we have about reality and reality itself. However, in another sense he maintains a dualistic (or dialectical) perspective by acknowledging that the only way we can discuss these matters is in terms of the relationship between ourselves and the world. So, let's consider how he negotiates this problem.

In the early stages of his book Steiner proposes there are essentially two traditional approaches to forming a philosophy of reality, the *dualistic* and the *monistic*. Both, he stresses, begin with an acknowledgement of the fundamental relationship between our knowledge of the world and the world itself, a relationship between "the thing being known" (the world, the object) and "the thing knowing it" (you, the subject). We have to acknowledge this relationship if we are to develop any substantial intellectual theory of anything. For example, you have to acknowledge that an object doesn't simply appear before you. It appears before you because you are perceiving it. You bring your perception to the object. You then have to acknowledge that in trying to explain the object you rely on a vast range of associated concepts. Your knowledge of the object then relies on the subjective perceptions and concepts that you bring to it. These are just the rules of the game. Our attempt to explain things must acknowledge the relationship between the world and our own observation and thinking. Even for a philosopher like Steiner, this relationship has to be acknowledged for a philosophical explanation of reality to get anywhere beyond the holistic consolation of "everything is one".

What matters for Steiner is that once we acknowledge this relationship between our thinking and the world, we develop our philosophy to reconcile the division between subject and object not simply categorially define the division as unresolvable. We should, he argues, seek to know reality as a whole, of which we are a part, and not simply rest assured that we are always separate from the rest of reality. For Steiner this is the very task of philosophy. The relationship between subject and object must, he insists, be the very thing our thinking, our philosophising brings together or synthesises. In other words, we do not philosophise on the world to remain separate from it, we philosophise to engage with the world and become one with it. As he writes:

> Total reality appears to us as a duality. The activity of knowing overcomes this duality... the world is given us as a duality, and our activity of knowing elaborates it into a unity. (*PF*, p. 100)

The term monism, as Steiner uses it in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, is the philosophical conviction that through thinking we can access or meet with reality, that through our thinking we can know reality in a direct sense and become into a unified relationship with that which we know.

In contrast to monism, Steiner describes a conflicting and in the modern age extremely influential philosophical tradition, which he labels dualism.

> Confronting this [monist] view there stands the two-world theory or dualism. This latter assumes not just two sides of one unified reality, merely kept apart by our organisation, but rather two worlds absolutely different from each other... each of which has its own laws. (*PF*, 100-101)

From the dualist perspective, an object of inquiry and our experience-based knowledge of that object are insurmountably divided and fundamentally different. We can never truly bridge the gap between an object and our hypothetical knowledge of it. We can from a mental construct of the object (a thought about it, an idea of it, a logical explanation for it), but that construct remains fundamentally our own and not the object's. In short, for dualism there is an absolute difference between conscious ream of human

thinking and the hypothetical world of empirical reality. We will shortly explore this dualist notion further in relation to the German philosopher Kant's epistemology.

This essential distinction between monism and dualism is an ancient one, stretching back at least to the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece. The distinction between a unified reality and a divided one has rippled throughout occidental philosophy ever since. It has also clearly informed religious, theological and mythological belief systems, from Zoroastrianism to modern Christianity. We need only refer to the medieval Christian map of reality (with its separation of the divine and the corporeal) to see a powerful dualism at work. The divine world of the medieval Deus and the corporeal world of the flesh are fundamentally separate –and they will be until the end of time, according to scripture, until the great synthesis of Heaven and Earth. Conversely, we can recognise in a great number of far older spiritual systems a monistic view of reality. In many Indigenous or traditional religious systems the divine isn't "somewhere else", underground or in the clouds, in a transcendental sphere, but all around in a spiritualised nature. In such religions the empirical world is often a creation, a "thought" or a "dream" of the divine world.

Steiner frequently encourages us to recognise that modern secular philosophies promote certain models of reality inherited (sometimes unknowingly) from earlier religious philosophies and theologies. He wants us to recognise the continuity modern philosophical ideas have with older religious ideas. For Steiner a modern philosopher may distinguish their philosophy from religion, may even oppose religion, but may likely still apply a model of thinking (or a way of thinking) inherited from a religious tradition. Indeed, modern European philosophy is full of such examples. Rousseau, Marx, Descartes, Kant and many more all define their philosophies in more or less secular terms and yet all employ models (epistemological, historical or moral) derived from Judeo-Christian philosophy and theology. Tracing the religious ancestry of philosophical concepts, values and morals was of course something Nietzsche famously pioneered, partly in an attempt to rid his own philosophy of what he believed was Christianity's corruptive influence. Though he too could be said to carry the Christian philosophical torch in his own tormented way.

It is quite possible that Steiner's own clarity on this problem was brought into focus through the time he spent with Nietzsche's work and indeed with the dying Nietzsche himself. (Steiner indeed wrote a book on Nietzsche not long after completing *The Philosophy of Freedom*, entitled *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom).* However, the key influence on Steiner's approach is clearly Hegel's historicism and dialectical philosophy of history (which will be considered in more detail later). For Steiner (as for many Romantics and traditionalists) the cherished ideal of moderns to liberate philosophy from religious culture is substituted with a very different attitude, stressing both the continuities and the differences our modern conscious experience has with the philosophies and theologies of earlier religious times. Steiner in no way wants us to "revert" to a premodern culture. That is in fact impossible for him. But he does insist that we remain aware of and maintain our cultural and intellectual heritage. Another way of putting this is to say that for Steiner the emphasis on our connections with earlier religious philosophies is necessarily balanced by our distinction as consciously modern beings. More on that in Chapter Five.

A big part of Steiner's agenda in the first half of *The Philosophy of Freedom* is to demonstrate how the dominant modern epistemologies (of Descartes and Kant, in particular) are, like medieval Christian theology, premised on a dualistic approach to reality. Steiner seeks to address how this dualism lays the foundations for what he views as a modern misconception about the nature of thinking and its relationship to the perceptible world. To do this he demonstrates how the most influential philosophical ideas about thinking in the modern age are premised on a misconception concerning what thinking actually is. So, let's consider the two most important sources of this modern misconception in brief.

If you know anything about modern philosophy you will know Rene Descartes' phrase *Cogito ergo sum.* I think, therefore I am. (Or, perhaps more accurately, I am thinking, therefore I am). *Cogito ergo sum* is often celebrated as the first distinctively modern scientific philosophical statement. It is often considered the first time a modern European philosophical premise was expressed in a way completely liberated from the

shackles of religious doctrine. The philosopher Rene Descartes was claiming the individual's natural capacity to think rationally without any reference to religious dogma or doctrine. It is indeed a powerful and elegant statement of free thought, free speech, free inquiry. But what does it mean? Steiner explains:

> A firm point has been won from which one can seek... the explanation of the rest of world phenomena... The feeling of having such a firm point caused the founder of modern philosophy, Descartes, to base all human knowing upon the statement: *I think, therefore I am.* All other things, everything else that happens is there without me; I do not know whether as truth, whether as illusion and dream. There is only one thing I know with altogether unqualified certainty, for I myself bring it to its existence: my thinking. (*PF*, p. 34)

There is probably no modern idea more famous and influential, a fact made all the more remarkable by how truly radical it is. In declaring his first principle, Descartes was essentially saying that the only thing you can rely on as being real is your own thinking. Everything else remains in doubt (*Cartesian doubt*). The liberation from doctrine comes with an extraordinary responsibility. Your thinking is not only the primary but the only tool of measurement you have been given for making sense of the universe. The rest is hypothesis. Good luck.

Descartes' first principle is partly so influential because it expresses the philosophical cornerstone for modern scientific theory, a cornerstone composed essentially of the analytical intellect and doubt in everything else. Doubt is of course integral to the scientific method, as integral as analytical observation. Through experiment and repetition we can seek to minimise the variables in order to develop the most reliable theory, but the theory always remains theory, always in doubt. According to Descartes' first principle there really only is one thing that can be relied on as invariable: the rational intellect itself.

Rudolf Steiner certainly does not reject these fundamental Cartesian tenets of modern scientific thought. But he does seek to articulate potential epistemological problems with it. For starters, the problem Steiner finds with the Cartesian first principle is that, despite its practical applications in

the scientific method, Descartes is not particularly precise in what he means by "thinking". Thinking is prioritised by Descartes, but described in somewhat absolute terms as a universal faculty rather than as an activity. For Steiner, the danger of this is that if a complex philosophy of knowledge is built from Descartes' first principle without a developed agreement on what this "thinking" is then we may very well find ourselves convinced of laws that are built on a false premise. This, Steiner argues, is precisely what happened with the theory of human knowledge put forward by the most influential philosopher of the modern age, Immanuel Kant.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant proposed what was for its time was the most complex theory of knowledge ever devised. It has certainly become the most influential. In terms of the question Steiner seeks to address in *The Philosophy of Freedom* (on the relationship of thinking and the world) Kant, we might say, wrote the book on it. To understand Steiner's proposal in *The Philosophy of Freedom* we really need to first understand Kant's epistemological model of the relationship of the mind and the world. As Wellburn notes, "One sometimes wonders in reading Steiner that one almost ought to first become a Kantian in order to be liberated [by Steiner] from his bonds".[4] *The Philosophy of Freedom* is, indeed, very much a holistic (or monist) response to Kant. It is therefore necessary for us to have at least a basic understanding of Kant's theory in order to understand Steiner's very different approach.

In the most essential sense Kant posited a division in reality. There are two realms according to Kant: the *noumenal* realm (the world outside of our mental experience) and the *phenomenal* realm (our perceptions, thoughts, concepts of the world). The noumenal realm is almost certainly real according to Kant (Descartes had doubted even this), but it is only, as it were, "broadcast" to us in the form of a mental experience. For Kant, we receive "pictures" of the noumenal world in our minds as *mental pictures*, in similar way to a television receiving pictures. With a television the fundamental gap and difference between the transmission source and the

[4] *Ibid*, p. 54

reception device is obvious. For our reception of the world the gap is less obvious. But, Kant argues, the gap is nevertheless there. It is the reception only, the mental picture we have of the world, which for Kant is the basis of our experience and knowledge of the world. We therefore experience and know reality only in terms of the "phenomenal". The intellectual categories and concepts we apply in forming knowledge of the world are phenomenal categories. The phenomenal categories we use may "fit" or "match" the noumenal and enable us to form coherent theoretical knowledge of reality. But we can never access "noumenal" reality directly. For this reason, our knowledge of the world can only ever be (as Descartes had established) *theoretical*, our "best guess" at what reality is. Steiner explains:

> The Kantian view now predominating... limits our knowledge of the world to mental pictures, not because it is convinced that there can be nothing apart from our mental pictures but because it believes us to be so organised that we can experience only the changes in our own self and not the things-in-themselves which cause the changes. (*PF*, p. 59)

This is a concise and accurate distillation of Kant's immensely complex theory. Indeed, Kant would no doubt have agreed with Steiner's summary. Nevertheless, Steiner intends this description as a clear exposure of the fundamental problem with Kant's approach, a problem that among other things seems to undermine the very ethos of Enlightenment free thinking that Kant championed.

Steiner puts forward that Kant's dualist epistemology arbitrarily imposes limitations on human thinking. It is not simply that Kant is wrong about the epistemological relationship of thinking and the world. More importantly, Steiner argues that Kant limits the potential of human freedom in his epistemological theory, because he posits a dualistic universe in which human beings are necessarily confined, by our own natural limitations, to only one realm (our mental pictures) and are thus divorced from a direct or "unified" knowing of total reality. We should note here that Kant acknowledges this limitation quite openly and consciously. "This is just the way it is", Kant's philosophy effectively states. Kant presents the dualistic universe of noumenal/phenomenal as a law of nature, a necessary reality which he is simply explaining in terms of an epistemological model. Put

simply, to Kant's way of thinking this dualism simply makes sense. It is the most and indeed the only reasonable conclusion to come to. Nevertheless, in assuming the dualistic split, Kant also has to acknowledge that at the core of his philosophy he sets absolute limits on human knowledge and therefore on human freedom.

This Kantian "split" between the world and the mental pictures we can know of the world troubled Steiner greatly from a young age. He first read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at around the age of fourteen, in the 1870s, and the book had a formative effect on his ability to clarify his own thinking. Steiner recounts in his *Autobiography* the excitement he felt when he first saw Kant's book in a shop window.

> Then one day I passed a bookshop. In the window I saw Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*... I did everything I could to buy this book as soon as possible… I read many passages more than twenty times. I strove for insight into the relation between the creation of natural phenomena and human thinking. (*AUT*, pp. 42-43)

Still in his teens, Steiner was too young of course to formulate a complex rebuttal of Kant's philosophy. But from what he could understand he nevertheless already felt an essential point of disagreement:

> I felt that thinking could be developed into a power which takes hold of the things and processes in the world directly within itself. I was convinced that the actual *reality of things* must enter into one's thoughts. A "subject-matter" that remains outside thinking as something one can only "reflect upon", was to me an unbearable idea. (*AUT*, p. 44)

This early intuitive disagreement with Kant's idea of an essential split between our mental life and the outer world became clearer to Steiner a few years later when he gained a scholarship to begin higher studies in Physics at the *Technische Hochschule* in Vienna. Here Steiner was presented with scientific theories in a rigorous enough way that he could ascertain their epistemological premises; that is, the "model of reality" they were assuming in their theory. Consistently, he observed that it was Kant's dualist model which informed the scientific theories. He recalls:

> At that time the external physical world was presented as processes of motion in matter... if such processes come in contact with man's sense of heat, he will experience a sensation of heat. *Outside* him are waves in the ether; if these come in contact with the optic nerve, they will cause sensations of light and colour to arise *within* him... This point of view I met with everywhere. It caused my thinking unspeakable difficulties". (*AUT*, p. 67)

What caused Steiner such difficulties? It was precisely the *dualist* epistemological model, developed by Kant, separating mind and world, which had come to inform the way scientific theories of the 19th century explained physical reality. The noumenal "cause" and the phenomenal "effect" were considered absolutely separate. The mental experience of light, for example, was considered as something essentially different to the cause of the experience, the objective hypothetical light itself. For Steiner, even as a young man, this was entirely the wrong way to think about such things. It would, however, take him some twenty years to fully articulate how significant his disagreement was.

So, with this disagreement with Kant in mind, we come properly to *The Philosophy of Freedom*. This was not Steiner's first book, but it was his first attempt to substantially outline his own philosophy, one powerfully informed by his study of Goethe's scientific writings. Unlike Kant, Steiner attempts in *The Philosophy of Freedom* to explain reality (including our metal experience of reality) as a unified whole, not as something that is essentially and irreconcilably divided into separate realms. In doing so, Steiner also accepts that modern philosophy must begin from Descartes' first principle, even if that principle is not followed in the same way that most other modern philosophers have followed it. Following the alternate road of Goethe, he presents human mental experience as an interactive element in the world. So, let us consider what Steiner presents.

Some "spiritual" or "New Age" philosophers distrust thinking (in particular, rationalism) and refer instead to notions like feeling or "oneness" as a truer experience of reality. This is not the case with Rudolf Steiner. As Hugo Bergman notes in his useful introduction to the book's 1963 English translation: "Steiner's Anthroposophy… differs from the 'mystical' schools

in the extremely high value it accords to thinking".[5] Steiner's challenge to us is primarily a challenge to our thinking. It is a challenge not just to the content of our thinking (the thoughts we think about) but to the activity of our thinking (how we use our capacity to think). Whatever his spiritual or mystical concerns may have become in his later life, for Steiner the human capacity for thinking must be the first step by which we come to our answers. And this applies even if we want to understand thinking itself.

Our unique challenge as humans is that the only way we have of knowing the reality of the thinking is through our own thinking. As Steiner states: "If I want to clarify what the relationship between thinking and consciousness is, I must think about it". (*PF*, 40) In this sense Steiner follows the Cartesian first principle which establishes that thinking is the primary tool for making sense of reality. But this comes with a significant question attached, a question that by now is becoming hopefully obvious: if Steiner respects Descartes' premise of modern thinking and at the same time presents his holistic philosophy as monistic, how does he get out of the unbridgeable gap that other modern philosophers have consistently found themselves in, the gap between thinking about reality and thinking itself? *How does he bridge the gap between our own thinking and the world*? Well, let me introduce Steiner's answer by asking you an important but often neglected question.

Is thinking real?

Is thinking real in the same way that a stone, or a bird or the blood in your veins is real? Thoughts buzz around inside your head, don't they? Sometimes your thinking is clear and calm and logical. Sometimes it is upset and frantic. If you have a stressful job or family life your thinking can become distressed. If you take active steps like meditation or long walks on the beach your thinking becomes calmer. In a nervous or exciting situation, like an interview or a first date, your thinking can race through multiple answers or scenarios in a matter of seconds. If you are in love or

[5] Bergman, H., "Introduction: Rudolf Steiner as a Philosopher" in Stebbing, R. (trans), *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity: The Basis for a Modern World Conception*

heartbroken, your thinking can dwell on one person in a way that can make you feel sick. Thinking responds to all sorts of stimulants and sedatives. Alcohol relaxes it. Coffee stimulates it. Thinking can clearly be powerfully affected by all sorts of chemical substances. Then of course there's this other aspect to it, when you fall asleep and your thinking enters into what we call a dream state, producing mental experiences so powerful they can carry on in your waking life.

So, your thinking. Is it real?

I acknowledge this is not a conventional question to ask, and probably not one for a first date or a job interview. But given that the founder of modern philosophy Descartes premised his whole explanation of reality on thinking and given the most influential modern philosopher Kant insisted that thinking belonged to a phenomenal realm totally separate from the noumenal world, then we have to concede that it is a very significant question. Because if thinking isn't real, a real category of reality just as the material world is a real part of reality, then we are forced to conclude that either thinking simply does not exist (a rather ironic instance of Cartesian doubt) or that it exists in a "separate" realm from the rest of reality (like Kant's dualist idea). If we choose the latter and say that thinking exists in a separate realm, we are forced to endow it with a reality that is essentially different from the rest of reality. We are forced to give thinking something of a "fictional" or "illusory" quality, a bit like a movie that we become absorbed in (experience, engage in, follow, feel) but that ultimately we do not consider to be actually real in the way that the rest of the world is real. Other people cannot experience our thoughts after all (or so most of us assume). So, it would seem to make sense to understand thinking a bit like our own private movie that plays out in the confines of our subjective mind; real, but not real in the way that everything else is real.

It sounds reasonable enough. But Steiner is nevertheless profoundly uncomfortable with this picture. From a very young age something deeply unsettled him about this explanation of reality. Why should we, he asks, accept an explanation of reality that requires us to believe in two realities? Why should we accept that our only means of knowing reality is through a mental experience that is not in itself a part of this reality? Although the

dualist model seems reasonable enough, if we stand back a little and observe the model we can acknowledge that the assumption of two essentially different realities has at least a tinge of medieval superstition about it. The medieval world had its Heaven and Earth, we seem to have the World and the Mind. Are we not being asked by philosophers like Kant to accept something we cannot know?

In his first step towards an irrevocable break with the modern academic philosophy of his day, Steiner asks in *The Philosophy of Freedom* a question earlier suggested by Goethe. Why should thinking not be regarded as an important part of a total unified reality? He writes:

> One must only ask of those who think this way, what right they have to declare the world is complete without their thinking. Does not the world bring forth thinking in the head of man with the same necessity as it brings forth blossoms from the plant? Plant a seed in the earth. It puts forth root and stem. It opens into leaves and blossoms. Set the plant before you. It unites in your soul with a definite concept. Why does this concept belong any less to the whole plant than leaf and blossom do? (*PF*, p. 75)

So here we come to our first really big Rudolf Steiner idea. *Thinking is a part of reality.* Steiner affirms that when you think you are participating in the phenomenal process of reality. Thinking exists as a part of the world and it has evolved out of the same evolutionary process that has led plants to photosynthesise and frogs to jump. Thinking is a reality that has evolved in humans. Thinking develops in the human being in the same way that the body develops through stages of life. And because thinking is a part of reality, we can, according to Steiner, scientifically know this reality. This is our first premise for understanding Steiner's philosophy. Thinking is to be approached as a scientifically knowable living reality.

This is a monumentally unusual concept to come to grips with. Fortunately, Steiner goes to great lengths to help us understand what he means. One of Rudolf Steiner's great merits as a philosopher is that he not only isolates the most central, abstract and even tautological of problems, he also provides practical instructions on how to resolve them. He challenges us to ask, why

do we find it so difficult to conceive of thinking as something "real"? Why do we have this inclination to consider thinking as taking place "in a different reality", as Kant did? The surprisingly obvious answer he offers is this: *because we are thinking about it*. In thinking about thinking we are doing the very thing we are trying to define, and so we endow it with a different nature to everything else we think about. Everything else is an object for our thinking. When we think about thinking we are dealing with something that is both the object and the subject of our thinking, thus we attribute to it a different nature from everything else. It is a bit like when we use the word "I". When you and your friend see a cat and refer to "that cat" you are of course referring to the same object. When you and your friend each use the word "I" though, you are each referring to different objects.

So now we are entering more complex terrain. Thinking about our own thinking. The explanations Steiner gives in *The Philosophy of Freedom* are lucid, though they will probably not make things clear enough for the general reader. Steiner indeed remains highly academic and abstract in his explanations in this book. We find statements like the following:

> We must first of all look at thinking in a completely neutral way, without any relationship to a thinking subject or a conceived object. For in subject and object we already have concepts that are formed through thinking. It is undeniable that *before other things can be understood thinking must be understood. (PF,* p. 41*)*

If we can find the appropriate way to read this passage the core idea is accessible enough. Steiner is saying that to know the reality of thinking we need to experience thinking without any actual "thing" to think about. We must through some disciplined form of mental activity come to know the activity of thinking itself.

So how is this done? Well thankfully these days it is not as unusual a proposition as it was back in Steiner's day. Today we are far more conscious of mental experience as a reality, as shown in the ways we discuss mental health and the increasing acceptance in Western culture that if we practice certain meditative techniques we can observe and monitor our own thinking for our well-being, generally referred to as mindfulness. Mindfulness as well as many other techniques for meditation may all be said to in different

ways cultivate, strengthen and focus our ability to not only think more clearly but also to observe our own thinking. Steiner, we will see in the next chapter, suggests other meditative practices to cultivate a more objectively conscious or observational relationship with our own thinking.

Back in the 1890s in an academic culture where Kantianism and scientific materialism reigned supreme, Steiner was reduced to talking about these ideas in a rather dry academic language. And so, what he offers in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is an extremely academic description of what thinking is when experienced mindfully or objectively. This is what he describes: Fundamentally "thinking" for Steiner is not something that takes place "all in the head" or the "subjectivity" of the thinker, as it did for Kant and many others. Rather, *thinking is the meeting point between the things we perceive in the world* (wahrnehmung) *and the concepts we have for them* (begriff). This is a fundamentally phenomenological perspective, whereby thinking is approached as a *process* of active engagement with the world. "Thinking", in Steiner's words, "out of man's world of concepts and ideas, brings this content to meet the perception". (*PF*, p. 84) For Steiner thinking occurs when we conceptualise from our vast "library" of concepts in order to rationalise our perceptual experience (which can be anything from a tree, to a printed word, to a feeling).

Let's take an example to see how this makes sense. When we see a beautiful long-legged creature gallop before us, we use concepts to form a thought that is then expressed in words: "That is a beautiful horse". We do so because we meet this graceful vision with concepts (expressed as words): "horse", "beautiful", and so on. The way we use words to articulate our thoughts is very relevant here. We could say that our use of language to describe the world is, in Steiner's sense, a powerful example of "articulated thought" because it literally brings the concept (the general concept of "horse") to the perceived phenomenon (that particular object, that particular horse). Our use of language in this sense becomes meaningful and real when we bring forth the fixed universal forms we have access to (our conceptual vocabulary) in order to make sense of and give order to the perceived world. The way language works is a clear expression, for Steiner, of the dynamic

that applies to all human thinking. Thinking is the meeting of the concept and the percept.

But where do the concepts we use to think about the world come from? This is a very important question. Steiner refers to a "conceptual world" that is unique to human mental activity, and yet at the same time insists on an explanation that does not attribute thinking to a separate phenomenal world of mental pictures, as Kant does. So where do the concepts come from if not from the subjective activity of the thinker? Has Steiner not simply transferred the location of Kant's thinking activity (making it a phenomenological world process) while still preserving the dualist model? Is the conceptual world Steiner describes still a purely subjective world? Many of Steiner's contemporaries thought so, and because of their assumptions fundamentally miscomprehended *The Philosophy of Freedom*. For us, to genuinely appreciate what Steiner means by a "conceptual world" will take subsequent chapters and significant work. Approaching the "conceptual world" is the intellectual gateway by which to comprehend what Steiner means by "spiritual".

For now, let us simply note that for Steiner concepts alone are not thoughts. Concepts are the forms which we access in order to make a thought from our perceptual experience. The thought "beautiful horse" is in this sense not something entirely subjective but rather the "meeting place" of the conceptual and the perceptual. It is a very different model to explain thinking from what Kant described. Thinking for Steiner is not simply a reception of reality, like a television. Thinking is a participation in reality (literally as a phenomenon). The dualist separation of mind and world is therefore rejected because thinking is explained according to a different model, or rather, a different relationship. We could also say, with extreme generality, that thinking is the point where the objective and the subjective meet. In Steiner's words, "Thinking encompasses both what is objective and what is subjective". (*PF*, p. 235) In this sense thinking is the real interaction between your mind and the world, in the same way that we might say your sense of sight is the real interaction between your eye and light.

This is a fundamental philosophical premise for understanding all of Rudolf Steiner's subsequent work. Steiner does use the dualistic language of

describing two worlds (he refers to the conceptual and the perceptual worlds, the spiritual and the material worlds), but he locates the human activity of thinking in the unification or synthesis of these realms. Unlike a Kantian, who argues that we bring conceptual meaning to a perception all in the space of our own subjectivity (i.e. that the thinking still has no interaction with outer reality), Steiner boldly insists on the phenomenological reality of our thinking. "The mental picture is an individualised concept... [it] stands between perception and concept". (*PF*, p. 96) In order to develop this idea Steiner needed to re-define exactly what we are talking about when we talk about thinking. This is what he develops in *The Philosophy of Freedom* into his extremely important concept of *intuition*, which we must now consider.

If I were to ask you which had more life, your feelings or your thinking, what would you say? What gets your blood pumping more, Ludwig van Beethoven or Ludwig Wittgenstein? Football or calculus? Talking to your lover or talking to your accountant? It is fairly obvious. Despite the importance of thinking in our lives, it is feelings that seem to have a more tangible and even more powerful reality for most of us. Feelings can make us uncontrollably bounce around in joy, or slump in sadness, or roll on the ground in laughter. They can compel people to act in ways that defy their better judgement. Look at what they do to small children! Feelings are palpably real to us. We can, as we significantly say, *feel* more or less alive because of them.

This is not the case with thinking. It is not all that common to tell someone that you "think alive". Even though we regard thinking as very important, we nevertheless regard thinking as, well, a bit cold and lifeless. Steiner understands this confusion. As he writes in his later text *Theosophy*:

> Many people are inclined to under-value thinking and to place higher value on the warm life of feeling or emotion. Some even say it is not by sober thinking but by warmth of feeling and the immediate power of the emotions that we raise ourselves to higher knowledge. People who talk in this way are afraid they will blunt the feelings by clear thinking. This certainly does result from ordinary thinking that refers only to matters of utility. In the case of

> thoughts that lead to higher regions of existence though, what happens is just the opposite... The highest feelings are, as a matter of fact, not those that come of themselves, but those that are achieved by energetic and persevering thinking. (*TH*, p. 11)

Steiner proposes that the reason we don't experience thinking as "living" in the same way we experience feeling as living is because we are not engaging in the reality of thinking at all, but rather what he calls "*only the strongly manifesting shadow of thinking's reality*". (*PF*, p. 131) It is a particularly modern predicament, he claims, that humans have come to think in a way that does not engage fully with the world, that does not engage in the process that comes naturally to it, instead remaining somewhat enclosed within its "own world" and is thus experienced as an "unreal" reality. This, Steiner, argues, is precisely why we find the idea of a separate mental world so persuasive.

So how do we understand this important notion of "the shadow of thinking's reality"? Take for example the habit many of us have of getting lost in our own heads. We all lapse into thought now and again and lose our awareness of our surroundings. We all at times stare at our partner, or our manager as they move their mouths, while a completely different conversation takes place in the space between our own ears. This tendency to drift off and have a conversation with ourselves is a clear symptom of *the shadow of thinking's reality* that Steiner refers to. It also explains a lot about the dualist tendency to describe mental experience as taking place only within the confines of our own subjective reality. The inner dialogue, the voice that can gain such volume it blinkers you from the outer perceptual world is, according to Steiner, not the reality of thinking at all. This is the symptom of misdirected thinking. The dialogue with yourself is not deep thought, but the shadow or the reflection of real living thinking.

In extreme cases of such thinking, these characteristics are magnified and more obvious. Let us consider a few of the chief characteristics. Firstly, this kind of thinking has a *dissociative* nature: the more intensely we think in this way the more we shut off from other people and our environment. Secondly, this thinking is *self-referential*: in the divorced mental realm we can rationalise our own conclusions according to rules we have

independently formulated. Thirdly, because of its self-referential nature such thinking is prone to ungrounded or *unwarranted certainty*. Thinking in this way we can assume the validity of our thoughts and judgements even if we haven't really tested them. Paradoxically, however, the more our own thinking is elevated as a source of certainty the more an *underlying uncertainty* asserts itself. This is a problem that clearly fascinated Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*. His protagonist Raskolnikov is a text-book shadow thinker. His mental life is utterly alienated from the world and the lives of those around him, so much so that his own thoughts begin to form the basis of his reality. The more intricate Raskolnikov's model of self-referential reality is, the more fragile its living connection with reality becomes. The more grandiose his mental schema, the more it may amount to nothing at all. Thus, the more powerful Raskolnikov's urge becomes to keep his obsession in the form it which it can be controlled (ie. to keep it in his head). Such is the weight of Raskolnikov's dissociative and self-referential thinking in the opening sections of *Crime and Punishment*, that it obscures all else and reduces the perceptible world to shadows.

Perhaps the most important symptom to note of this kind of shadow thinking is the mental (and, for Steiner, very much spiritual) alienation of people from each other and from the world. It is indeed a frightening picture that plagued not only Dostoevsky, but also Nietzsche and a great many thinkers of the late 19th century: to imagine every individual in the world so lost in their own heads, so certain of their own self-referential truths. How could one person understand another in such a world? What would the ultimate end of such a human society be? In the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov dreams of a great plague followed by a great war, of all against all:

> He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia… Some new sorts of microbes were attacking the bodies of men, but these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. Men attacked by them became at once mad and furious. But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers, never had

> they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible. (trans. Constance Garnett)

It was a problem that deeply concerned Steiner too. In the lead up to world war, he saw the potential destruction of civilization not only in reference to the arms race, or to breakdowns in international relations, but to the way modern human beings were becoming increasingly unhealthy and self-enclosed in their thinking. He was motivated in his philosophy and especially in his work on education out of this very real concern.

The initial solution Steiner proposes in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is *intuitive thinking*. Earlier we noted that for Steiner thinking is to be conceived not as something that takes place "in our heads" but as the meeting place between the world we perceive (like a horse, or a friend's smile, or even a physical sensation) and the concepts we make formal sense of the world with. Thinking is the meeting of the perceptual world with the conceptual world, which are both part of the total "real" world. To get a sense of how we might understand this, we need to more closely consider the activity of thinking. So, let me ask you another question.

When you shift from being engaged in the conversation you are having with your colleague to becoming absorbed in your own thoughts, what is happening? When you read a book and suddenly realise that you have "read" a whole page without taking any of it in because you were thinking about something else, what is happening? You may answer simply, "I am being distracted", and you would be more correct that you might think. But the point is to be able to name and know what exactly is being distracted. What is it that is shifting concentration from the conversation with your friend to the conversation with yourself? To use Friedrich Schiller's words, which had such influence on Steiner, what "oscillates between different states" in our consciousness? (*AUT*, p. 68) We need to be able to answer this question if we want to know what intuitive thinking is: *what is it that we think with*?

This brings us to the second premise for understanding the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. The first premise, we remember, is that *thinking is a part of reality*. The second premise is that the human being has an aspect

(sometimes referred to by Steiner as a "body" or an "organ") that has evolved to think, in somewhat the same way our lungs have evolved to breathe air. This aspect of the human he calls the "I". We are of course already familiar with this word, though probably less familiar with Steiner's specific way of referring to it. The "I" as a human sense is Steiner's answer to the question of what it is we think with. It is with the human "I" that we think, just as it is with the eye that we see. The sense of "I", the sense of thinking, is for Steiner a human characteristic (not physical, but nevertheless real) that can become stronger or weaker, healthier or unhealthier, just as our physical sense organs can. Put simply, the second premise to understand *The Philosophy of Freedom* is that *an individual can develop healthy intuitive thinking (free thinking) through the development of their thinking* "I". The goal of Steiner education in this regard is the nurturing development of a student's healthy thinking, though this is only possible if other aspects are first developed.

So how do you think intuitively? Herein lies a problem. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner only describes intuitive thinking. He does not expand much on how it is achieved or developed. That is the purpose of his subsequent major text, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, which we will consider in the next chapter. As we will see, intuitive thinking is not developed by great feats of intellectual brilliance, contrary to what Steiner's academic style might suggest. The intellectual challenge of reading *The Philosophy of Freedom* in fact somewhat confuses the fact that intuitive thinking is developed through simple, disciplined meditational practices. Intuitive thinking is not a pathway to heightened intellectual activity. It is more a way of quietening and clarifying the intellect for a more direct experience, including the experience of thinking itself. Not unlike the principles of *yoga* or Buddhist techniques (though not to be confused with them), intuitive thinking is concerned with mental balance, measure and harmony. This for Steiner is the first step in spiritual development.

Put simply, in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner explains that intuitive thinking is experienced when we consciously (in thinking activity) participate in the meeting of the conceptual and the perceptual. This he

describes in spiritual terms. Through intuitive thinking our spiritual aspects and our physical aspects interact and form into a balance or unity. Intuitive thinking is in this sense the meeting point (the threshold) through which the spirituality of human beings finds a living form and can have a creative influence in the perceptible world.

We will explore how this spiritual epistemology fits into Steiner's evolutionary picture of human beings (our physical and spiritual aspects) in later chapters. For now, we can acknowledge that in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner insists that it is simply not adequate to conflate all the manifold human aspects of human beings (cellular processes, emotions, abstract thoughts) into a reductive model that only accounts for the evolution of physical matter. For Steiner, such materialist models cannot explain thinking as an evolutionary phenomenon, but only as a symptom of physical evolution. As he writes: "The evolutionary theorist cannot terminate at the ape and attribute to man a supernatural origin... he must also regard his morally free life as a spiritual continuation of organic life". (*PF*, p. 188) This being so, there must according to Steiner be non-physical evolutionary aspects of human beings which are scientifically knowable. In short, thinking must be conceived as an expression of an evolutionary process just as other aspects of humans are. Steiner proposes intuitive thinking as nothing less than a way to know thinking and to work with the evolutionary development of consciousness which thinking brings.

To conclude this chapter on *The Philosophy of Freedom* let us briefly look at Steiner's concept of *ethical individualism*. Steiner expands at length in the latter part of his book on how an individual's development of intuitive thinking also develops their capacity for a kind of ethically oriented freedom of thought and action. In other words, he describes how healthy intuitive thinking engenders not only free human choice, but ethical human choice. This brings us to our third premise, though before I introduce it let us remind ourselves of the previous two:

*a) Thinking is a part of reality.*
*b) An individual can know reality (and therefore freedom) through the development of their thinking* "I".

The third premise relates to the positive outcome if the first two are followed:

> *c) Through the development of intuitive thinking an individual can develop a free capacity to act ethically in the world.*

This is the ethical aspect of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Steiner describes not just the personal spiritual benefits of developing intuitive thinking, he also expounds on the social benefits. "Each of us", he writes, "is called upon to become a free spirit, just as each rose seed is called upon to become a rose". (*PF*, p. 166) Explained in this light, human freedom is an impulse of evolutionary necessity, a *human need*, as distinct from a human "right". For Steiner, without the spiritual activity of human freedom we experience a spiritual pain in a comparable way to the physical pain of hunger we experience in the absence of food.

But what kind of freedom? The freedom to just do anything we feel like? Theft? Murder? Trade in military weapons? Destruction of the natural environment? This is where Steiner posits *ethical individualism*. We have evolved to be free as individuals. Freedom is a social evolutionary impulse. One cannot be forced to be free. But neither can one be free simply by being left alone, or unregulated, or through an act of sheer transgression. As mentioned earlier, the freedom popularised by liberalist philosophies ("negative freedom") is an inadequate concept for Steiner because it conceptualises a freedom characterised only by absence of restrictions on individual choice. Although Steiner is a champion of the individual (as he writes, "The human being is the source of all morality and the centre of life on earth. State and society are there only because they result necessarily from the life of individuals". *PF*, p. 160) nevertheless, in a society of individuals it becomes the individual's responsibility to act ethically. Indeed, ethically oriented freedom is an evolutionary necessity for human survival. It is the individual's responsibility to make *free ethical choices*.

In the early 21st century we can understand Steiner's concept of ethical individualism very directly in terms of our own political and environmental power as individuals. In affluent liberal societies we want to be free to make

our own choices, but we also want a healthy society and planet to live in. Humans have long negotiated this dynamic, between creative expansions and sustainability. Today we are on a daily basis challenged to find the balance in our free choices, often between our immediate wants and our long term family, community and environmental needs. These questions may play out at the organic section of the local supermarket, or reading about renewable energy, or making enquiries about that electric car, or at the ballot box. When genuinely considered, the question of what is good for us invariably transposes into a question of what is good for our community, or our environment, or for the greater world.

Even though Steiner proposed it in the 19th century, his notion of ethical individualism could indeed hardly be more pertinent to the challenges we face today in the global capitalist society of the 21st century. Is it possible to think and negotiate the choices we make daily in a way that is both free and ethical? Yes, Steiner affirms, if you develop your intuitive thinking by feeding it with what he calls your *moral imagination*:

> What the free spirit needs, in order to make his way, is therefore *moral imagination*. It is the wellspring for the actions of the free spirit. Therefore, it is also true that only people with moral imagination are actually morally productive. Mere preachers of morality, that is, the people who spin forth moral rules without being able to condense them into concrete mental pictures are morally unproductive... Moral imagination and the capacity for moral ideas can become the object of knowing only *after* they have been produced by the individual. (*PF*, p. 182)

Steiner's proposals of moral imagination and ethical individualism are complex and remain somewhat underdeveloped in *The Philosophy of Freedom.* They come more clearly into light in his later texts. Nevertheless, these principles should be regarded not as abstracted ideals but as products of intuitive thinking and the individual freedom that comes of it. Intuitive thinking is the healthy use of the "I" and when developed in a conscious way it leads in Steiner's philosophy to a spiritually free and ethical individual.

To conclude, in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner wishes us to see that in the modern age we have evolved a tremendous capacity for thinking. Our

modern civilization is an awesome and frightening demonstration of this capacity. If we abuse or misuse thinking, if we fail to develop healthy human thinking, we will take directions as a civilization which will gravely jeopardise the future of humanity and the natural world. That is the seriousness Steiner sees for the need to develop intuitive thinking in ourselves and through our education. If we can cultivate such thinking, he is confident that we can overcome the challenges that evolution is throwing us, challenges which critical thinking alone is showing itself simply unable to negotiate.

Such are the far-reaching implications of Steiner's philosophy. For now, the key idea to take from *The Philosophy of Freedom* is the primacy of thinking. Freedom for Steiner is not an abstract condition of potentiality, like a set of negative rights. Rather, freedom (*Freiheit*) is the actualisation through thinking of our spirituality as human beings. This spirituality we experience and develop though thinking. Thinking is the cornerstone for all Steiner's spiritual philosophy. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner usefully distinguishes his ideas on thinking from those of other epistemological philosophers, especially Kant. He presents thinking as a phenomenological process unifying the concept with the percept. He describes modern thinking's struggle with consciousness of this process (modernity's predilection for interior *shadow* thinking) and he presents intuitive thinking as the means by which this problem can be resolved. In short, the core principles of everything Steiner would go on to develop in his spiritual teachings and greater Anthroposophy is laid out in *The Philosophy of Freedom.* What remained were instructions on how to put it into practice.

# CHAPTER TWO

# *KNOWLEDGE OF THE HIGHER WORLDS*: HOW IS INTUITIVE THINKING DEVELOPED?

> In my own world of thought and feeling the deepest mysteries lie hidden, only hitherto I have been unable to perceive them.
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment*

It is hard to know if the young Rudolf Steiner in writing *The Philosophy of Freedom* fully appreciated how challenging and unconventional his ideas were for the intellectual culture of his day. Alas, not one of Steiner's academic contemporaries seems to have genuinely appreciated *The Philosophy of Freedom* and in particular its core idea of intuitive thinking. Of particular grievance for Steiner were the comments he received from the then influential epistemological philosopher and psychological theorist Eduard von Hartmann, whom Steiner had assumed would appreciate the book. Steiner writes in his autobiography:

> I wanted to show that within the subjective experience of mental pictures the objective spirit shines forth and can become the actual content of consciousness; Eduard von Hartmann held against me that in the way I explain matters I remain within the *semblance* of what is sense-perceptible, that I fail to speak of objective reality at all. (*AUT*, pp. 216-7)

It is a typically abstract grievance for Steiner. But this was no small misunderstanding. Hartmann should have had the conceptual framework to understand what Steiner was outlining, and yet he seemed to have missed the point entirely. Hartmann's response made it all too clear for Steiner that *The Philosophy of Freedom* had failed to substantially establish the very principle on which his philosophy relied: namely, the phenomenological reality of thinking. Without an acceptance of this premise, all of Steiner's

further descriptions concerning intuitive thinking, moral imagination and ethical individualism were taken in completely the wrong way, as merely subjective ideals confined to the subjective mental reality of the individual. Hartmann, we might say, had started from the wrong premise and followed Steiner's directions to the wrong conclusion. And in this misunderstanding, he was not alone. No German academic seems to have appreciated *The Philosophy of Freedom* in the way Steiner had intended.

Steiner seems to have sat with the disappointment of his book's reception for some time (something he would never do in his later life). He refers to these years as an extremely difficult period. How, he must have asked during these years, could he explain his philosophy in a way that his contemporaries would fully appreciate? How could he break through that glass armour that encased them in Kant's limited model of thought? The decisive answer he eventually came to was far from an easy one. The truth that Steiner came to realise was that within the terms of the European academic culture of the late 19th century he simply could not adequately explain his philosophy. His core principle of intuitive thinking was not something that could be successfully explained as a theory, in the theoretical discourse of the day. Intuitive thinking and ethical freedom, these were not just abstract theoretical concepts to be agreed or disagreed with, they were real and living ways of thinking and being which led to a different kind of experiential knowledge of the world. They had to be lived, not simply intellectually agreed on.

That Steiner should have taken so long to realise the significance and enormity of his challenge to established ways of thinking is an interesting reflection of his personality and innocence. A more precocious genius would have known at a far younger age that the intellectual establishment would want nothing to do with such a radically different philosophy. For Steiner, perhaps as a result of his rather sheltered intellectual life at the Goethe archives, the full realisation of his radical difference seems to have dawned only in his mid-thirties, when he experienced, in his own words, "an inner transformation of soul life which normally occurs at a much earlier age". (*AUT*, p. 277) Previously detached in a world of thought, Steiner at

this age "came to Earth" as it were. It is strange how such a change can make itself known. He describes that at this age he began seeing and hearing the world more acutely, understanding not only his own ideals but also the realities of others' perspectives.

As so often happens, it was an incidental off-hand comment in a conversation which finally and fully revealed to Steiner the enormity of his ambition and indeed the complete incompatibility of his philosophy of freedom with the intellectual mindset of his day. He writes:

> Sometime later I had a conversation with a physicist, an important person in his field, who had occupied himself a great deal with Goethe's view of nature. This conversation culminated at a point when he said: "Goethe's ideas on colour are such that physics can do nothing with them". And I – *became silent*... From all directions I seemed to hear it said: What to you is the clearest truth is something with which the thoughts that prevail today "can do nothing". (*AUT*, p. 295)

It was a simple comment, but it would change the course of Steiner's life. What struck so heavy in the physicist's off-hand remark? After all the abstract philosophical misunderstandings that had met *The Philosophy of Freedom*, it was the sheer matter-of-factness with which a distinguished scientific scholar could dismiss Goethe's colour theory, not because he thought the theory was incorrect or uninteresting, but simply because he recognised that it was essentially incompatible with the theoretical bases of modern physics. To put it in another way, this physicist understood Goethe's theory enough to know that to accept Goethe's theory would mean to readdress the cornerstones of modern physics. It would mean a complete overhaul of the very way our knowledge of physical reality is to be explained. Goethe's theory required a different way of thinking which informed every other aspect and explanation of its science.

The matter-of-fact way with which this learned scientific scholar dismissed Goethe's different way of explaining the world, simply because he understood it was so different, seems to have been the straw that prompted Steiner to unconditionally realise that his own ideas on intuitive thinking would never be accepted by his academic contemporaries. The problem was not that his ideas in *The Philosophy of Freedom* were wrong. It was that his

contemporaries had no conventional way to understand them, short of readdressing the philosophical foundations of their knowledge. Nothing so substantial can occur without crisis. Another way of putting it is this: Steiner's academic contemporaries had not yet developed the very intuitive thinking by which Steiner's first principle could be understood as a reality. Like the chicken and the egg dilemma, without experiencing intuitive thinking, intuitive thinking could not be understood. So… what to do?

The way out of the situation that Steiner resolved on would change his life completely. He would provide practical instructions on how intuitive thinking could be spiritually developed. He would explain not just intuitive thinking as a specific intellectual practice but, far more essentially, he would explain how thinking could be experienced as a spiritual activity. He would speak openly about realities of experience not known to or acknowledged by modern scientific methods. And this bold decision, of course, came at a great price. Steiner had devoted his life up to this point to an academic career, however tormenting this may have been. Now, to speak openly on the development of intuitive thinking he would have to break the rules of his academic culture irrevocably and risk being regarded by his intellectual contemporaries as delusional. He could no longer expect to be a part of the established German intellectual world. He would have to find a new audience for his philosophy.

So it is that we now come to the Rudolf Steiner many have heard of. Steiner the Theosophist, Steiner the mystic, Steiner who gave lectures on obscure Christian texts, Eastern spiritualities and karma. This is the Steiner who develops the implicit concepts of intuitive thinking in *The Philosophy of Freedom* into the explicit spiritual content of his esoteric books, lectures and social mission. It is also the time when the preoccupations of the Theosophical Society determine a great many of the subjects Steiner discusses and the way he explains them. This is the time when many secular, "scientifically minded" and sometimes sceptical people become very uneasy with what Steiner has to say.

Fortunately, we have already built a philosophical foundation to understand Steiner's esoteric spiritual teachings. So let us note this well before we go any further. Although Steiner's esoteric teachings from this point are markedly different from *The Philosophy of Freedom*, it is nevertheless on the basis of *The Philosophy of Freedom* that Steiner develops his esoteric picture of intuitive spiritual thinking. In other words, the explicitly esoteric and spiritual nature of Steiner's teachings from this point should not be approached as something fundamentally different to the ideas explained in *The Philosophy of Freedom* but rather as a practical elaboration of these ideas.

Let us first recall what those ideas are. Firstly, we learnt in the previous chapter that Steiner regards *thinking as a phenomenon of objective reality*. Although we endow it with a definably "subjective" nature (because we experience thinking subjectively through our "I"), thinking for Steiner nevertheless constitutes an objective aspect of total reality, no less a part of objective reality than the physical world, though of course not physical. Thinking, Steiner proposes, is something we can know in a more complex and objective way through certain meditative practices. Steiner names the "sense" or "organ" through which we think our "I". It is through the development of the "I" that we can practice what he calls *intuitive thinking* or *living thinking*. Unlike our normal day-to-day thinking (with its tendency to drift between perceptual engagement and internal dialogue), intuitive thinking balances the relationship of the perceived world and the conceptual world. This, Steiner explains, is experienced as a clarity and warmth of living thinking, different from the cold and "enclosed" quality of self-referential thinking which he describes as the "shadow" of living thinking. Steiner maintains that the healthy intuitive thinking leads to the development of *moral imagination* and to a free and ethical way of being which he terms *ethical individualism*. In short, *The Philosophy of Freedom* explains that the path to spiritual development is through intuitive thinking and that this spiritual development becomes a social reality through our ethical living as free individuals.

These are the fruits of the previous chapter in a nutshell. And it was precisely these fruits that Steiner's academic contemporaries were unable to appreciate when *The Philosophy of Freedom* was first published. No matter

how often Steiner stressed the point, as long as the idea of living or intuitive thinking remained expressed in theoretical abstract terms it would necessarily be misconceived or insufficiently understood by his readers. Thus, it became necessary for Steiner to discuss intuitive thinking much more directly by giving instructions to the public on how it is achieved.

These more direct instructions and descriptions of intuitive thinking are what is to be found in Steiner's essential books *Theosophy, An Outline of Esoteric Science* and especially *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment.* As instructional texts in self-development, these books may well be considered to categorically fall outside of what we normally class as "philosophy" and belong more closely to what we might call "spiritual", "esoteric" or even "self-help" literature. And yet, they require all the intellectual engagement of a complex philosophy. For Steiner, such distinctions between philosophy, science, art and spirituality are less than important. Indeed, the distinction between "secular" philosophy and spirituality, the confinement of philosophy to a branch of knowledge distinct from science and religion, is in many ways itself indicative of the very limitations of modern thinking which Steiner seeks to challenge. Steiner's writings from this time are explicitly spiritual, though they are also philosophical and, in many ways, scientific. They are in this regard hard to label with our modern categories. This is partly why Steiner eventually chose to give his teachings a name of their own: Anthroposophy. Although, that name too was a categorial label he considered restrictive. In any case, whatever label we choose, we must recognise that the tone and mode of Steiner's discourse changes radically at this point. He is no longer presenting a series of theoretical concepts for us to consider. He is, firstly, presenting instructions on how to develop our inner reality of "thought and feeling" into living thinking and, secondly, describing the spiritual phenomena that we will become conscious of if we develop in this way.

The first important question for us to ask here is, to what extent is the vast scope of Steiner's esoteric themes and ideas essential for our understanding of the developments he made to his philosophy of intuitive thinking? The answer to this question requires a certain pragmatism. The goal in this

chapter will be to provide a simple introductory explanation of Steiner's esoteric teachings with as little esoteric confusion as possible. Instead of launching into the spiritual stratosphere, the method here will be to remain as grounded as possible and to build steps from there. Not all of Steiner's explanations of intuitive thinking and spiritual experience will be considered, merely the most elementary. The expansiveness of Steiner's explanations of spiritual realities will be conscientiously limited, so that a thorough understanding of the basics of intuitive thinking will be possible. It may be that some readers will use the explanation offered here as a basic starting point for further development and understanding, though many of us will likely find that a basic understanding is challenging enough.

Let me add that it is certainly not my role or qualification here to serve as a proxy for the spiritual teachings that Steiner gives in these key texts. The teachings are not something that can be meaningfully learned through information alone and certainly not in any brief summative way from a secondary text. What I merely aim to do here is to outline the developments these texts bring to Steiner's philosophy of human thinking (and feeling and willing) and to consider how this philosophy establishes the basis for his complex and detailed picture of what human beings are.

Let us first consider Steiner's most "practical" but also in many ways most difficult book, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment.* Such is the content of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* that one can easily feel overwhelmed, and this can lead to frustration and an inclination to reject the work entirely. This is a frequent problem we face with Steiner: he perhaps presumes too much of our capacity to follow and keep up with him. *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* offers nothing less than direction in the development of intuitive thinking and indeed much further stages of spiritual development beyond that. In its opening chapters alone, Steiner demands a kind of discipline and training in focussed mental exercises that will see most of us give up within a matter of days. (For what it is worth, I have given up many times. Though every time I try I feel I get a little bit further on the path Steiner lays out.) So, without letting ourselves fall prey to the belief that gleaning over a summary is any substitute for a genuine engagement with Steiner's teaching, let us note some key ideas.

As if to make up for the lost time he spent trying to explain his ideas in academic language, Steiner lays out the purpose of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* forcefully in the opening passage:

> There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which he can acquire for himself a knowledge of higher worlds. Mystics, Gnostics, Theosophists — all speak of a world of soul and spirit which for them is just as real as the world we see with our physical eyes and touch with our physical hands. At every moment the listener may say to himself: that, of which they speak, I too can learn, if I develop within myself certain powers which today still slumber within me. There remains only one question — how to set to work to develop such faculties. (*KW,* ch. 1, n. 1)

This is a radical shift in gear from the philosophical discourse of *The Philosophy of Freedom*! "Knowledge of higher worlds… a world of soul and spirit". We are not used to taking such language seriously. Steiner acknowledges that such terminology "naturally awakens misunderstanding". (*KW,* ch. 1, n. 1) But before we put our guard up too quickly, let us enquire: what exactly does Steiner mean by spiritual knowledge and the means by which to develop it? As we have come to recognise, with Steiner the answer is often far less fanciful than the language he uses to describe it.

Much of what Steiner describes in the early chapters of the book will very likely quell your assumptions of what esoteric spiritual practice involves. There are no séances or crystal balls. "There is, in truth", he writes, "no difference between esoteric knowledge and all the rest of man's knowledge and proficiency". (*KW,* ch. 1, n. 1) For all his esoteric language ("spiritual beings", "clairvoyance" and so forth) Steiner in fact gives instructions in the most simple of meditative exercises. We learn that intuitive thinking is not initially developed out of some wholesale esoteric belief system, but rather through patient meditation on natural phenomena. For such meditation to develop fruitfully Steiner stresses the requirement for a certain attitude of mind.

He firstly addresses the kind of attitude a student needs to bring to meditative practices, prompting his student to become more conscious of a certain habitual way of thinking that we may tend to normalise as the only way of "thinking"; that being, critical thinking. For Steiner, in the modern age human thinking has become particularly inclined towards a critical and even sceptical way of relating to knowledge and the world. This is evident in the most day-to-day sense as well as in the monumentally significant ideas of modern philosophy and science. We remember here, for example, that the most influential scientific thinker Descartes pioneered a certain intellectual relationship to knowledge founded on doubt, doubting even the certifiable existence of anything beyond our own intellect. The scientific attitude of Cartesian doubt has, we might say, infused our modern culture (and especially education) and has powerfully influenced the way we are taught to relate to information, learning and social institutions, perhaps even to other people.

Steiner's purpose is certainly not to renounce critical thinking. He requires more of us than a reactive shirking from modernity that is characteristic of some counter-cultural philosophies. For Steiner, critical thinking is a powerful virtue. Indeed, he recognises the attitude of Cartesian doubt as the very thing that decisively liberated modernity from the dogmatic thinking of earlier times. "Man could never", he writes, "have attained to the science, the industry, the commerce, the rights relationships of our time, had he not applied to all things the standard of his critical judgment". (*KW*, ch. 1, n. 8) Steiner nevertheless does wish to point out that there is another kind of thinking we can develop through meditation, and that this form of thinking cannot be developed if we intellectually approach the meditation in a critical, sceptical or analytical way. Quite simply, if we wish to develop intuitive thinking we cannot do it through critical thinking alone.

Steiner's point is not to reject critical thinking but to balance it. To balance critical thinking, he emphasises the equal need for what he calls "veneration". Again, this term need not be understood in a religious sense. We could easily understand Steiner's notion of "veneration" as a willingness to engage, to be open, to trust and respect in the essential value of something or somebody. In a word, it is a way of thinking inclined towards *sympathy*, whereas critical thinking is inclined towards *antipathy*

(in the sense that to be critical is to separate, analyse, form a judgement). We practice "veneration" all the time, such as when we engage in art. Creative thinking or making and appreciating forms of art is by nature and necessarily sympathetic. It is the very nature of artistic communication that we enter into sympathetic engagement. "Veneration" in this sense is also a way of thinking and being that has great merits. Veneration or "reverence", Steiner writes, "awakens in the soul a sympathetic power through which we attract qualities in the beings around us, which would otherwise remain concealed". (*KW*, ch 1., n. 6)

Steiner notes that this attitude of "veneration" is not an attitude we are used to understanding in strictly cognitive terms, but perhaps more as an emotional attitude:

> It is not easy, at first, to believe that feelings like reverence and respect have anything to do with cognition. This is due to the fact that we are inclined to set cognition aside as a faculty by itself — one that stands in no relation to what otherwise occurs in the soul. (*KW*, ch. 1, n. 12)

Steiner's approach requires us to appreciate how thinking interacts with other aspects of human experience (like feeling and willing). Understood in Steiner's holistic way, thinking (whether reverent or critical) is an activity which interrelates with, influences and is influenced by our emotional and physical realities. All the parts of a human being interrelate as phenomena. Steiner's way of explaining such things requires us to understand thinking in terms of such holistic interrelationships. His essential point at the outset of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* is that the attitude of thought we bring to the experience is crucial for what the experience will bring to us. This is especially the case when practicing Steiner's meditations.

In meditation the attitude of thought must be one that is open to the possibility of experiencing and knowing something of a more developed quality than what we already possess. Quite simply, "If we do not develop within ourselves this deeply rooted feeling that there is something higher than ourselves, we shall never find the strength to evolve to something higher". (*KW*, ch 1., n. 9) Steiner stresses the cultivation of such reverent

thinking cannot be considered independently of our broader lives. In the most uncompromising of terms, he continually reminds the student that the development of higher intuitive knowledge is entirely dependent on their own moral development.

> In all spiritual science there is a fundamental principle which cannot be transgressed without sacrificing success, and it should be impressed on the student in every form of esoteric training. It runs as follows: All knowledge pursued merely for the enrichment of personal learning and the accumulation of personal treasure leads you away from the path; but all knowledge pursued for growth to ripeness within the process of human ennoblement and cosmic development brings you a step forward. (*KW*, ch. 1, n. 14)

We can observe here that the *moral imagination* referred to in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* described as a precondition for the development of intuitive thinking. We can now understand that ethical individualism develops from intuitive thinking because the intellectual development of the student is also necessarily and primarily a moral development. Indeed, Steiner stresses that the moral dimension is the more important: "This golden rule is as follows: For every one step that you take in the pursuit of higher knowledge, take three steps in the perfection of your own character". (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 10)

In a relativistic age such as our own these moral preconditions may feel uncomfortable. But Steiner insists that if we can cultivate a reverent attitude and a strong moral centre of goodwill, we will be ready to engage in the spiritual development of intuitive thinking. It will be like learning to walk. The initial instructions he gives are a bit like baby steps.

Having outlined the need to bring something more open than a critical or sceptical way of thinking to the process, Steiner then describes the first exercise in developing intuitive thinking, a process he calls *preparation*. As mentioned, none of the directions in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* involve any of the crystal ball gazing histrionics that might be assumed of esoteric literature. Steiner's directions are actually, in their basic ingredients, surprisingly simple and modest. (The greatest challenge is perhaps to find the modest discipline required for simple daily practice.) Just as we give

time to exercise our body, Steiner recommends we give time to the exercise of our inner life. So how do we do this?

Firstly, as with all meditative exercises, we are required to find a space of daily tranquillity wherein we are able to experience our thoughts, feelings and perceptions more objectively. "The student", writes Steiner, "must set aside a small part of his daily life in which to concern himself with something quite different from the objects of his daily occupation". He continues:

> Our aim in these moments of seclusion must be so to contemplate and judge our own actions and experiences as though they applied not to ourselves but to some other person… The student must seek the power of confronting himself, at certain times, as a stranger. He must stand before himself with the inner tranquility of a judge. When this is attained, our own experiences present themselves in a new light. (*KW*, ch.1, n. 21)

This proposition of contemplating ourselves from a more objective or higher perspective is not so unconventional for us as it would have been for most Europeans in Steiner's time. With the rise of mindfulness and other techniques of meditation, therapy and self-analysis, this notion of observing our own mental experience in order to regulate and become more conscious of our thoughts, emotions and stress has attained considerable value in the West over the past century. The meditations Steiner recommends are however of a markedly different nature to mindfulness techniques, having less to do with Buddhist forms of meditation than with perceptually engaging with the perceptible world in a more sensitive way.

For Steiner, meditation means as much perceiving outwardly as it does reflecting inwardly. "It must not be thought", he writes, "that much progress can be made if the senses are blunted to the world". (*KW*, ch.2, n. 5) We remember from the last chapter that intuitive thinking is to be found in the balance between the perceived world and the conception with which we make a thought of the world. It is not a purely intellectual activity but rather a meeting of conceptualising and perception. Thus, learning to more consciously meet the world with our feelings and thoughts is fundamental.

To demonstrate his point, Steiner refers to the profound difference between two people's experience of the same phenomenon:

> When passing through a beautiful mountain district, the traveler with depth of soul and wealth of feeling has different experiences from one who is poor in feeling. Only what we experience within ourselves unlocks for us the beauties of the outer world. (*KW*, ch. 1, n. 13)

Such *feeling-full* engagement with our surroundings is especially challenging for us moderns. Our lives are bombarded with stimulus and as a result we are especially conditioned to shut our senses down, especially to the delicate veils of reality we simply call nature. Because of this, Steiner's first meditative exercises are both simple and demanding. To awaken more deeply our intuitive thoughts and feelings we need to give time, focus and humbly meditate on the quiet phenomena of nature. Steiner insists that we do have a natural intuitive ability to do this, only this intuitive ability is something we need to reacquaint ourselves with and practice. "First look at the things as keenly and as intently as you possibly can", he writes, "then only let the feeling which expands to life, and the thought which arises in the soul". (*KW*, ch.2, n. 5)

So, to begin with, the student must find something in the natural world on which to meditate. This stage Steiner calls *preparation*. "Preparation", he writes, "consists in a strict and definite cultivation of the life of thought and feeling". (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 4) Steiner is not specific about what it is we meditate on. We can, it would seem, choose almost anything, anything that has a life force, something that lives and also dies. The rose is the classic example. We find a living rose and we rest our meditative contemplation on it. Steiner writes:

> To begin with, the attention of the soul is directed to certain events in the world that surrounds us. Such events are, on the one hand, life that is budding, growing, and flourishing, and on the other hand, all phenomena connected with fading, decaying, and withering. The student can observe these events simultaneously, wherever he turns his eyes. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 4)

In meditating on the rose we can gradually begin to experience and become more conscious of phenomena beyond the sheer physical reality of the rose.

Specifically, we can consciously experience the phenomenon that the rose is blossoming into life. At the same time we can experience that the rose is dying away. This is the key to this meditation. We come to know the rose not just as a physical object in space (a "thing"), but as a living and dying phenomenon, a "process" in time as much as a thing in space. The life of the rose, not just the physical object of the rose, becomes a more distinct phenomenon for which we cultivate an intuitive feeling. Over weeks, months, even years, our meditation on the life and death processes deepens and develops and becomes something more distinct in our thinking. Steiner writes:

> Thoughts and feelings of a new kind and unknown before will be noticed uprising in the soul… A quite definite form of feeling is connected with growth and expansion, and another equally definite with all that is fading and decaying. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 5)

This distinct and refined experience of the phenomenon of the rose (its living and dying processes) is the first aspect of what Steiner is referring to when he speaks of the invisible or spiritual world. The spiritual refers not to a wholly other world but to the invisible (but also perceptible) phenomena at work in this world.

For our purposes, the essential point to recognise here is that the early development of intuitive thinking has nothing to do primarily with our intellectual grasp of any concept or theory. Intellectual comprehension is not the primary point. Simply stating as a maxim, for example, that "the rose is the meeting of life and death" amounts to nothing at all in Steiner's approach to higher knowledge. Having in *The Philosophy of Freedom* attempted to expound intuitive thinking in theoretical terms, Steiner now insists: "only through meditation that man can attain to such knowledge". (*KW*, ch. 1, n. 33) We might say in this respect that the knowledge Steiner describes is experiential in nature, that this knowledge can only be acquired through experience. More accurately and simply, it can be called practical knowledge, knowledge attained through meditative practice. We make the experience of the meditation a practice, a daily practice by means of which

we develop an inner knowledge of phenomena we had previously been unconscious of.

Key to register at this point as well is that the foundations for intuitive thinking arise out of feeling, our "feeling experience" for the rose. This feeling experience, you will recognise, is by nature intuitive. Our intuitive feeling experience of the rose is not an intellectual construct, not a judgement formed through our critical thinking. Our feelings, especially when we are calm, are necessarily intuitive. These intuitive inner experiences of subtle, invisible, but nevertheless real phenomena are the first step in the spiritual knowledge that Steiner wants to describe. The so-called "spiritual world" is a reality we first access not by means of an escape into another "more spiritual" world, but rather one that arises into our consciousness through a renewed re-acquaintance with the phenomena of this world.

Accompanying visual perception, Steiner also places great emphasis on the development of our listening, our distinguishing of lifeless and living sounds, and the cultivation of our feeling of living sounds. The student, he writes:

> …must concentrate his whole attention on the fact that the sound tells him of something that lies outside his own soul… He must closely unite his own feeling with the pleasure or pain of which the sound tells him… Through such exercises, if systematically and deliberately performed, the student will develop within himself the faculty of intermingling, as it were, with the being from which the sound proceeds. (*KW*, ch 2., n. 9)

We find here that Steiner in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* is once again describing the different aspects of reality in a holistic and human-centred sense. For him, spiritual experience and the experience of our day-to-day mundane world are all part of the same total reality. We find spiritual reality through a reverent engagement with the reality surrounding us; more precisely through the deepening relationship between our inner life of thought and feeling and our outer life of sensory perception.

With that said, the great unified "total reality" that Steiner describes is made up of different parts. Indeed, for someone so committed to a holistic

philosophy, it may come as a surprise that Steiner is so concerned to describe things in terms of categories and even sub-categories. The number of different "bodies", "souls" and spiritual realms to which he refers in his books *Theosophy* and *An Outline of Esoteric Science* is really quite overwhelming. Here the task for the newcomer becomes all too easily confused into a process of sheer name memorisation, as if learning for a test. Not surprisingly, many people who are introduced to Steiner's work in this way soon lose interest or reject the work as nonsensical. This is a particularly acute reason for why Steiner's teachings are best kept to their basics, through meditative practice and the development of experiential knowledge. The opening chapters of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* outline these basics, cultivating the foundations of experience on which Steiner's different categories can then be better understood.

This brings us to the second simple meditation Steiner describes in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, an example of the stage of what he calls *enlightenment*. Once again, the grandiosity of Steiner's language is somewhat at odds with the humble simplicity of the exercise, as you will soon recognise when you learn what it involves.

Anyone committed to following the meditations outlined in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* should make a point of finding a mineral (like a crystal), a pot plant and an animal (though if a living animal is too difficult you can use something like a feather). These different physical forms will be the subjects of your second meditation. Steiner writes:

> Enlightenment proceeds from very simple processes... observing different natural objects in a particular way; for instance, a transparent and beautifully formed stone (a crystal), a plant, and an animal. The student should endeavour, at first, to direct his whole attention to a comparison of the stone with the animal. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 11)

In the same way that the processes of growth and decay were felt and contemplated in the rose, we now meditate on the differences between the animal, the vegetable and the mineral. We do this not through critical analysis but intuitively through patient observation and feeling. We do not

look at the plant and say to ourselves, “Ah yes, this is a member of the plant kingdom and it photosynthesises, I learned that in school biology”. Rather, we restrain our critical intellect and simply sit with these things. We meditate on them, as if experiencing them for the first time. We observe their shapes, their structure, their qualities, their forms. We let inner feelings and thoughts arise from these experiences. We are, in other words, reacquainting ourselves with these most elemental categories of nature.

You may well be surprised at what strong new feelings of insight this simple meditation quickly leads to. Contemplated and meditated on, the different feelings and thoughts that arise as you move from mineral to plant to animal can be very distinct. It may be hard to name exactly what the thought is, though perhaps you will be able to describe the differences between the qualities of the feelings. In any case, the actual experience of the distinction of the feelings or thoughts as you move from animal to vegetable to mineral is what is most important. Steiner writes:

> By sinking deeply into such thoughts, and while doing so, observing the stone and the animal with rapt attention, there arise in the soul two quite separate kinds of feelings. From the stone there flows into the soul the one kind of feeling, and from the animal the other kind. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 11)

Steiner describes how over time our acquired intellectual knowledge (that the stone is lifeless, that the plant grows, that the animal moves) is experienced as an intuitive recognition of what the stone’s “lifelessness” is, what the plant’s “growing-ness” is and what the animal’s “instinct-ness” is. With these intuitive experiences we can cultivate a renewed intuitive knowledge of what the difference between mineral, vegetable and animal is. Where once we intellectually conceptualised the differences, we come now to intuitively know these differences as realities, as phenomena. These different phenomena, we come to realise, are profoundly different. Their very constitutions, the way they are made and what they are made out of (their “energies”, if you will) are all profoundly different. We of course already knew this, and yet now it strikes us like never before, because the meditative process invites us to know it in a very different and deeper way of thinking and knowing.

Steiner proposes that as we become more familiar with the differences between a mineral and a plant, the question should arise, "What makes them different"? Well, of course, we might simply answer that the plant is alive and the stone is not. But how does one explain this more subtly and deeply, in light of the meditative experiences? What phenomenon gives the stone its dense, lifeless unchanging form and the plant its far more subtle, complex, fragile and living form? Indeed, ponder the word "form" for a while and ask what the word means for the stone and the plant respectively. The stone can be said to have a "form" in the sense that it has a shape, but it cannot be said to have a form in the sense that the plant has a form. This is clear from a simple consideration of how each acquired its shape. The shape of the stone is sheerly a result of environmental conditions, of time and the elements "fashioning" it into a certain shape. The shape of the plant, however, although certainly influenced by environmental factors, cannot be explained in the same way. The plant has a form which is inherent and characteristic to itself and its species. It seems to have brought this form with it, into its life. Indeed, like the rose meditation, we can understand the plant's form as a process, a phenomenon in space and time, not just a fixed shape. The phenomenon in time is that the plant grows with its form. It is precisely in relationship to its changes (its growing and decaying) as a living thing that the plant has a form. We can simply call it a *life-form*.

Steiner insists that if we develop our intuitive feeling and thinking for the plant we will come to know the phenomenon of the plant's "living-ness" not simply as a rational conclusion ("that the plant is a living organism") but as a knowable reality. In time something distinct will resonate within us and we will recognise the phenomenon which gives the plant its life-form. He calls this phenomenon the plant's *life body*, or its *etheric body*. We will learn more about the *life body* in the next chapter.

So then, the meditation continues. We put the stone down and we turn our attention to a comparison of the plant with the animal (let us say, a goldfish). Once again, we sit with the two phenomena, letting our intuitive feelings for their qualities and differences develop within us. We probably notice that the once complex and subtle plant (so much more complex than the

stone) now seems tough and relatively basic in its structure and form when compared with the darting, glistening fish. The form of the fish is in contrast so complex and ever-changing, ephemeral. As our observations of the differences develop we begin to ask: how is this animal different from the plant? Both are alive of course. But considered as living forms obviously the goldfish has something the plant does not, and this informs not only its behaviour but its entire structure and form. There are also of course manifold physical differences in structure. The goldfish has sense organs, a circulatory system, a mouth, a brain and so on. It is clearly a more sophisticated life form than a plant. But does this fully explain its capacity to swim and find food? We can go further and observe that the goldfish has an independent will. It can direct its way. It is not entirely dependent on its environment in the way the plant is. The fish can in ways determine the course it takes in its environment, even if for purely instinctual motivations. How does it do this? The fish, we can say, is animated with consciousness. It is an actively conscious organism.

Again, we already know this as a fact, we have known the fact since childhood. But the point here is to go beyond the dry abstract fact and develop our intuitive feeling and knowledge for what the fish's consciousness is. We have meditated on the living form of the plant as a phenomenon. We now come to meditate on the consciousness of the animal as a phenomenon. Over time and practice our intuitive knowledge of the phenomenon of the animal's consciousness develops. As with the plant's *life body*, Steiner describes that the phenomenon of the animal's consciousness can gradually be known as a distinct reality, which he calls the animal's *astral body*. We will further consider Steiner's explanations of the *astral body* in the next chapter.

These meditations may sound too simple to initiate a genuine development of intuitive thinking. Nevertheless, Steiner insists that "enlightenment proceeds if the student rises, in the sense of the foregoing exercises, from the stone, the plant, and the animal, up to man". (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 15) These simple meditative activities, with a rose, a stone, a plant and a goldfish, introduce a surprising reacquaintance with the perceptible world and our relationship within it. Over a genuine period of consistent practice we come to know these phenomena in a very new way. With practice, our intuitive

recognitions of the differences between these small phenomena can extend into the wider world to inform our daily feelings and thoughts. That is indeed the point: that these meditations remain not simple practices kept to a few minutes a day but, over time, gradually awaken within us intuitive thinking.

These simple and rewarding exercises are just the beginning of Steiner's teachings in spiritual development. The meditative practices and developments of intuitive thinking outlined in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* go well beyond what I have described here. Nevertheless, these simple exercises establish solid enough grounds by which we can more concretely understand what Steiner means by intuitive (or living) thinking, and indeed how such an approach to cognition and knowledge requires a reconceptualization of what human thinking is and how human thinking relates to the world.

To frame the value of these exercises in philosophical terms, we can ask: how do the exercises presented in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* present an elementary challenge to dominant epistemological models of human thinking, experience and knowledge? We remember that Kant and the broader modern epistemological tradition of rationalism maintains that the conceptual categories we use to rationalise and make sense of the world are purely and only intellectual concepts. They can only be, Kant decides, because rationality exists only in the phenomenal realm of human intellectual experience. Intellectual concepts, therefore, have no natural or essential interrelationship with the noumenal realm they are applied to. The relationship is at best hypothetical. Concepts are relevant, quite literally, only to the phenomenal realm of human intellectual experience.

The Kantian model of human thinking of course prompts us to ask if the relationship of a concept to the hypothetical noumenal thing it seeks to explain is therefore arbitrary. Are the concepts we apply to the hypothetical world sheerly our own inventions, referring only to our experience or "reception" of the world? Well, in an essential way, the answer according to this model is yes, because our concepts originate from and only have

relevance for our own thinking. Although not all proponents of the Kantian model go so far as to claim that the relationship between the rational concept and the thing it rationalises is arbitrary, it is nevertheless the case that the Kantian model insists on such a fundamental split. Indeed, the main reason a Kantian might argue that the relationship between intellectual concept and hypothetical object is not arbitrary would be that no relationship (arbitrary or otherwise) can exist to begin with. According to Kant's model, human knowledge of the world is, if not arbitrary, then at best entirely self-referential. Rationality only makes sense because it makes sense to us.

From a young age Steiner intuitively knew this to be a false premise and an unnecessary limitation on human knowledge. But he was not able to fully articulate the problem to his contemporaries in the abstract philosophical terms of the academic culture of his day. He tried and did exceedingly well in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, but ultimately, he came to realise that the living phenomenon of thinking (and indeed all other phenomena) that he wanted to describe could not be grasped with the intellectual mindset that had produced and popularised the Kantian rationalist model. Thus, in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* he provides practical instructions in the development of intuitive thinking. The meditations he describes invite us to (with practice) experience and intuitively know the natural relationship of concepts and the world. These exercises are simple demonstrations that human knowledge, when experienced in an intuitive way, originates not in a self-referential activity but rather in a meeting of intellectual concept with phenomenal reality. (Although, of course, a Kantian would maintain that this knowledge is still purely confined to the phenomenal.)

Such meditative practice is indeed a challenge to the Kantian and the broader rationalist model. Even these simple exercises prompt us to consider that the categories and concepts we use to rationalise and make sense of the world are not merely intellectual, but rather conceptualisations that arise out of meditation on real phenomena. In other words, these exercises provoke us to realise that our thoughts about the objects arise from our intuitive sense of them. Our living intuitive sense of the objects inspires the thoughts we have, demonstrating a very important relationship.

This brings us back to the core premise of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Remember the great epistemological challenge Steiner gave, the one that went unnoticed by his contemporaries?

> Does not the world bring forth thinking in the head of man with the same necessity as it brings forth blossoms from the plant? Plant a seed in the earth. It puts forth root and stem. It opens into leaves and blossoms. Set the plant before you. It unites in your soul with a definite concept. Why does this concept belong any less to the whole plant than leaf and blossom do? (*PF*, p. 75)

The meditations described in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* are a practical explication of this philosophical challenge to rationalistic thinking. The phenomenal world, Steiner's meditations offer us, has inherent order, categories and forms. Our thinking participates in this. *Indeed, our thinking is one of the world's categories and forms.* The intuitive concepts we arrive at through the meditation process correspond in a "living" way with the phenomena. In this sense, Steiner's practical instructions allow a direct understanding of what the Idealist philosopher Hegel meant by his notoriously tautological phrase: "The real is the rational and the rational is the real". In stark contrast to rationalists like Kant, Hegel meant that we are being rational when our thinking is in harmony with the rational order of nature. This, it would seem, is precisely how intuitive thinking develops.

Developing his philosophy and spiritual teaching out of German Idealism, Romanticism and Goethean science, Steiner suggests that there are indeed rational categories in nature, not just in terms of the differences in physical structures between mineral, vegetable and animal but also in terms of phenomena that are not visible. We intuit knowledge of these phenomena through meditative engagement. There are, for Steiner, knowable phenomena beyond the physical. We have previously regarded such phenomena only in terms of abstractions (concepts like "living organism" and "consciousness") precisely because they are not physically visible, and the Kantian model compels us to consider such things as mental schemata. However, Steiner insists that we do not only develop a subtle intuitive feeling for such phenomena but that in time we can inwardly experience

invisible phenomena as distinct, inner forms. With meditative practice these phenomena become…

> …no longer facts which make indefinite impressions on him as of old, but rather they form themselves into spiritual lines and figures of which [we] had previously suspected nothing. And these lines and figures have, for the different phenomena, different forms. A blooming flower, an animal in the process of growth, a tree that is decaying, evoke in his soul different lines.... These lines and figures are in no sense arbitrary. Two students who have reached the corresponding stage of development will always see the same lines and figures under the same conditions. Just as a round table will be seen as round by two normal persons, and not as round by one and square by the other, so too, at the sight of a flower, the same spiritual figure is presented to the soul. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 5)

This sounds impossible. But if we are to restrain our judgement on what is and is not possible, and simply concentrate on the process, we can see how the meditative steps Steiner wishes us to take in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* establish the basis of intuitive thinking through our awareness of invisible phenomena. By developing living intuitive thinking, he stresses we can know, as reality, not simply that which the physical reality makes visible to our senses, but also the more subtle and invisible objective realities of life and consciousness. For Steiner, just because something is invisible does not mean it cannot be known scientifically.

When Steiner refers to his “spiritual science” (with the often extraordinary explanations of invisible realities) it is always from the basis of intuitive development of thinking and feeling. It is this “spiritual science” which we will consider more closely in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER THREE

# SPIRITUAL SCIENCE AND THE FOURFOLD HUMAN BEING

> What Goethe had worked out in relation to various branches of science seemed of less significance to me compared with his *central* discovery. This, I considered was his discovery of *how* thinking has to be applied in order to understand organic nature.
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Rudolf Steiner, An Autobiography*

The previous chapters have focussed closely on Rudolf Steiner's key principle of intuitive thinking. It may seem to some readers (especially those of you familiar with the vastness of Steiner's work) that my approach has been too restrictive. Considering the eclectic library of ideas that Steiner gave us, you could be forgiven for assuming my intensive focus on intuitive thinking has come at the expense of neglecting many other important areas. Rest assured, from this point forth we will go some way in addressing some of these other areas.

The reductive approach of this study so far has served a purpose. For without at least a basic understanding of intuitive thinking (and a basic understanding is all that is offered here) the subsequent principles that inform Steiner's picture of the human being, human development and the education of the child cannot be understood in a relevant way. We have needed to develop an understanding of Steiner's early and foundational principle of intuitive thinking so that we can make sense of his many other key ideas. We have needed to answer the questions: (1) "what is intuitive thinking"? as Steiner poses it in *The Philosophy of Freedom*; and (2) "how is intuitive thinking developed"? which Steiner addresses in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*. With Steiner's approach to these questions now established, it is time to consider how a scientific knowledge of the human

being can be developed out of intuitive thinking. That is to say, we are ready to consider Steiner's *spiritual science* in its details.

Of all the roles that Rudolf Steiner assumed (philosopher, spiritual teacher, educationalist, artist) it is undoubtedly his claim to scientist that is most questionable. This may seem ironic given the fact that, if anything, Steiner was qualified as a scientist. His doctoral qualification was in Physics. Nevertheless, in his claim to be a scientist Steiner causes more friction than anywhere else. From the standpoint of modern scientific methodology, what Steiner calls his "science" can only be considered inherently invalid, if not fabricated, on the simple basis that Steiner's observations and conclusions refer to evidence which cannot be tested and verified. And that is putting the issue politely.

Inspired by Goethe's scientific approach and working within the Theosophical Society, Steiner in the early years of the twentieth century took the extraordinary liberty to challenge the very basis on which modern scientific knowledge could be built. The "spiritual science" he first presented in these years was based not on empirically observable sense data (or at least not only on empirical data), but on phenomena only known through the kind of inner spiritual development described in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*. In other words, the science Steiner presented is a science of invisible phenomena directly knowable only to someone who has themselves developed their intuitive thinking into spiritual faculties.

Steiner's science, in contrast to classical models, relies on the development of an individual's spiritual faculties of thinking through the intuitive principles of meditation we have so far considered. His is a science of inwardly knowable realities. Contrary to the Kantian model of the mind as an independent reception device, Steiner's science insists on active and intuitive human thinking. If the intellect remains disengaged and only critical in its activity, couched solely in analytical reflection, the spiritual phenomena Steiner is concerned to describe will remain invisible. Put more directly, the phenomena he is concerned with are observed and known not by means of analysis, but through imagination. It is through our powers imagination that we access our knowledge of spiritual phenomena.

This may well sound like childish make believe, like the insistence of a three year-old that their imaginary friend is real. Nevertheless, Steiner insists that these spiritual phenomena are real and observable phenomena which interact with the physical world and of which we as human beings are composed. The term "esoteric science" refers in this regard to a science of "secret", or "yet to be known" phenomena. The more useful term "spiritual science" literally refers to a scientific approach to the explanation of spiritual reality.

Steiner well knew how outrageous the premise of his "spiritual science" was for the scientific culture of his day. He frequently in lectures refers to how ridiculous his scientific insights must appear to mainstream science and often delights in confessing how outrageous his teachings are in the light of modern scientific methodology. At the outset of his most substantial outline, itself called *Esoteric Science*, he acknowledges the risible incompatibility between his approach and the standards of modern scientific inquiry. He writes:

> To many [spiritual science] is somewhat repellent or calls forth derision, pitying smiles, and perhaps even contempt. They imagine that a way of thinking that describes itself in this way can only be based on idle, fantastic dreaming, that this alleged science can only conceal an impulse to reinstate all kinds of superstitions that those familiar with the "true scientific approach" and "real striving for knowledge" are quite right in avoiding. (*ES*, p. 11)

Note that Steiner genuinely appreciates the apprehension many will feel. A reactionary reversion to pre-modern superstitions can, he acknowledges, never form the basis of a tenable modern way of thinking and living. He is unambiguous that it is the call of our time that we must be scientific and rational in our approach to life. Equally however, he insists that we should not simply reject the spiritual science he proposes as superstition, for that too is an unscientific approach. Without developing our capacities to know spiritual phenomena, we are in no position to form a conclusive judgement on what spiritual science describes. Thus, the importance of approaching Steiner's spiritual science by developing intuitive thinking, which of course

we do by means of the meditations described most comprehensively in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*.

Just as Steiner realised that his philosophy of intuitive thinking in *The Philosophy of Freedom* could not be genuinely accepted by anyone who had not themselves developed intuitive thinking, so too he knew full well that the propositions he put forth in his spiritual science could not be appreciated by anyone for whom scientific knowledge of reality was necessarily based only on sensory observation of physical phenomena. As he writes:

> Of course, to those who restrict science to what is revealed through the senses and the intellect that serves them, what is meant here by *esoteric science* does not constitute a science. (*ES*, p. 13)

In light of this we come to the next challenge in our journey to understand Steiner's ideas. (And hence the importance of the previous chapters.)

One of the essential goals of this book is that, by means of a gradual development of core principles, we can approach and explain aspects of Steiner's philosophy and spiritual science in a clear and justifiable way. This is entirely in keeping with Steiner's own scientific and philosophical values. But here we come to a significant leap, for when approaching the specifics of Steiner's spiritual science we necessarily step into a field of (what are for most of us) "unknowables" which can all too easily be rejected as sheer make-believe or gleefully accepted as groundless dogma. Let us avoid either of these hopeless outcomes by first linking the foundations of Steiner's spiritual science back to what we learnt in the previous chapters.

Steiner went to some lengths, as we have seen, to provide directions in how intuitive thinking can be developed. He also, concurrently with these spiritual directions, outlined very detailed and complex explanations of the science of spiritual realities that can be perceived and known if intuitive thinking is developed to a very high level, far beyond the reach of most people. In his books *Theosophy* and *An Outline of Esoteric Science* and in countless lectures, Steiner outlined a science of spiritual realities (of the human being, of the Earth, of the Cosmos) based, he claimed, on his own highly developed clairvoyance.

To a very great extent Steiner in these texts goes far beyond the elementary and modest developments in intuitive meditation we considered in the previous chapter and describes the knowledge which his own developments had brought him to. In many cases (such as when he is describing the spiritual beings at work in the early evolution of the Earth, or when he is describing the state of consciousness of human beings in the time of Atlantis) Steiner's explanations dramatically overstep the bounds of the rational and require of us something more than a benefit of the doubt. The highly esoteric spiritual knowledge, which he imparts in these books, is not something one can expect to know for oneself after only a few weeks spent developing intuitive thinking by meditating on a rose or a stone.

Steiner's extraordinary descriptions of spiritual phenomena can cause the newcomer more than a few headaches, and it is worth asking why he included them in books intended for the general public. Why indeed overwhelm newcomers with these many details of cosmic spiritual evolution when they are yet to even develop the basic preparatory steps of meditation? Would it not be better to focus only on the basic spiritual practices, to let newcomers discover things gradually for themselves? And given the highly intellectual tendencies of our time and culture (which Steiner himself is concerned with) why open the door to the very real risk of this spiritual knowledge becoming reduced to an esoteric learning exercise, while the important basic spiritual practices are ignored? When reading a book like *An Outline of Esoteric Science* I often find myself asking these questions. What is the usefulness of including such far reaching explanations into what are meant to be introductory texts? For many readers the experience is simply too confronting or overwhelming for them to persist with the reading. For others it invites an alarming level of dogmatic spiritualist intellectualism.

The answer Steiner consistently offered to these concerns is that a prior knowledge of spiritual realities is in fact beneficial for our development, whether or not we have yet attained to the level where we can perceive such phenomena. Perhaps, like reading a guidebook about Rome or Berlin before embarking on a journey, knowing what to expect in the spiritual world will

apparently help us if we do develop the ability to perceive these spiritual phenomena.

Of course, the principles of spiritual science can be known and applied practically without spiritual development. A farmer, for example, can apply the science of biodynamics without needing to have developed the ability to perceive the spiritual forces biodynamics works with. Likewise, a teacher can apply the insights of child development into their teaching practice without directly knowing the forces at work in the developing students. To an extent, when meeting with Steiner's spiritual science we must accept and work within our limitations. We may not be able to directly know or understand the spiritual formation and evolution of the Cosmos, but we can at least get a grip on the basics. We can use the principles we have developed so far to at least form some level of understanding of what Steiner means by spiritual phenomena, how he differentiates these phenomena and how he describes the interaction of these phenomena. In this chapter we will be concentrating on how Steiner applies his scientific approach to the spiritual aspects of the human being. So, let us consider what the "spiritual" in "spiritual science" is.

Steiner specifies two conditions on which the knowledge of his science is based:

> The whole of esoteric science must spring from two thoughts… The first of these thoughts is that behind the visible world there is an invisible one, a world that is temporarily concealed… The second is that by developing human capacities that lie dormant in us, it is possible to enter this hidden world. (*ES*, p. 19)

By now we should have a good idea of what Steiner is referring to. The gradual acquaintance with phenomena invisible to the senses, which we approached through the meditations described in the previous chapter, is precisely how the "hidden world" can be known. Spiritual science can therefore at an elementary level be understood as *a science of visible and invisible phenomena active in the world, and how these phenomena interrelate*.

Towards the end of the previous chapter, after considering the simple preparation exercises, we encountered a very challenging and important notion that Steiner puts forward. He writes that with sufficient development, our intuitive engagement with invisible phenomena (like the blossoming process of a rose) will not be experienced as mere feelings, or even as intellectual concepts, but rather as *distinct inwardly experienced forms.* This is of the most paramount importance for our understanding of spiritual science. Steiner writes that with sufficient meditative practice the student will come to inwardly perceive…

> …spiritual lines and figures of which he had previously suspected nothing. And these lines and figures have, for the different phenomena, different forms. A blooming flower, an animal in the process of growth, a tree that is decaying, evoke in his soul different lines.... These lines and figures are in no sense arbitrary. Two students who have reached the corresponding stage of development will always see the same lines and figures under the same conditions. Just as a round table will be seen as round by two normal persons, and not as round by one and square by the other, so too, at the sight of a flower, the same spiritual figure is presented to the soul. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 5)

Note here that Steiner is not claiming we will imagine a form "subjectively", or purely of our own imaginative creation. Rather, he is claiming that with the right level of meditation something will present itself to our mind (or soul) and we will inwardly imaginatively perceive an actual "objective" spiritual form. We will inwardly perceive a form in our minds that is not subjective but objective, as objectively real as the outwardly perceptible physical shape of the rose.

Let that idea sink in for a moment…

This is precisely the threshold at which many of us will be impelled to reject Rudolf Steiner as delusional. We may say, "meditations are all well and good, and intuitive thinking seems to have many positive practical applications, but such things as objective spiritual forms simply do not cohere with anything we know to be real". And yet, this is also the fundamental point at which Steiner claims that spiritual science can begin

to be directly known. As he continues: “Just as the forms of animals and plants are described in ordinary natural history, so too, the spiritual scientist describes or draws the spiritual forms of the process”. (*KW*, ch. 2, n. 5) What Steiner is referring to here is an inward, but nevertheless objective, experience of invisible phenomena. And it follows from this that if such phenomena are objective, if these things can be equally known by different people, these phenomena can form the basis of a science. It is in this sense that inner spiritual experience becomes the basis of objective spiritual science.

Perhaps that’s not enough to win you over just yet. But it is worth noting that Steiner is not the first philosopher to describe such spiritual forms. Pythagoras and Plato, for example, both referred to the reality of objective spiritual forms. A vast number of ancient thinkers did. For modern ways of thinking, however, such an idea as objective spiritual forms is more than uncomfortable, it is practically incomprehensible and necessarily unacceptable. Steiner’s claim of objective inner phenomena brings up an enormous consideration. Rationalist thinking, as we have seen, has powerfully inclined us to conceive of subjective experience as strictly the product of the individual mind (indeed, going so far as to limit human knowledge completely to this subjective experience). Theories like behaviourism have gone even further, to suggest that our subjective experience is purely the product of our sensory experience (thus practically eliminating the Kantian idea of “concept” or “category” altogether). We could explore an endless number of influential modern theories which endorse such views.

But if what Steiner says is true, then the inward vision of a “spiritual form” which we might normally describe as a purely subjective experience (“of the imagination”) can actually have an objective phenomenological reality. And this reality is what Steiner means by “spiritual”: the objective phenomenological reality of inwardly perceivable spiritual phenomena. Two different people, he says, can experience the same spiritual phenomenon. With the right meditative practice the inner reality achieves an objectivity. He insists, the spiritual form is an objective phenomenon, and can be experienced intuitively by many people in the same way.

How does a modern way of thinking come to grips with such a notion? We certainly need to if we are to get anywhere with Steiner's spiritual science. For this idea is the very basis on which Steiner justifies his science: the actual objective reality of inwardly experienced spiritual phenomena.

So, to start, let's try a brief experiment.

Try picturing a palm tree in your mind for three seconds.

Good.

You did it rather easily, didn't you?

Now try holding it there in your mind for a while longer.

Easy.

Now make the leaves bright purple and give the trunk black and white stripes.

No problem.

That is as far as we need to go with the experiment. But, now we ask, how did you do it? How did you picture the palm tree?

You may reply: "I have seen many palm trees. It is thus no great feat to refer to those perceived palm trees from the storehouse of my memory and form a mental picture". But if this is the case, which palm tree was it that you imagined? Was it literally a snapshot of a particular palm tree that you have seen in the past? Or was it a "composite" palm tree? Or no real palm tree at all? In other words, was your mind capable of creating an image of a palm tree that is in fact none of the specific palm trees you have perceived in the past? Were you therefore able to change the appearance of the palm tree because you created it?

This is truly something to consider: the ability of your mind to form a mental picture independently of any particular experience. We call this, quite

simply, *imagination.* And if I had asked you to imagine something you had never seen -like a three-headed yellow flamingo dancing on the Moon -the point that you are using your imagination would be even more clear.

The second thing to consider from this is the sheer talent your mind has to imagine such pictures. You do not have to troll through records of memory in order to create the image. It is not like remembering someone's name when you have forgotten it. The imagined mental image is more or less instantaneous. I asked you to picture a palm tree and there it was. Indeed, it is harder *not* to picture the tree. You probably pictured the flamingo and I did not even ask you to. The point here is that this mental faculty of imagination that we share is capable of remarkable feats without any real effort on our part. We can direct our memories with astonishing focus, use our imaginations with equally astonishing creativity.

So then, what would it be like if we really trained our imaginative faculties? This is the kind of question we really need to ask and contemplate if we are to approach Steiner's spiritual science in an open-minded way. If we can all so easily picture or recall an image in our mind, what is possible through a rigorously conscious development of our imaginative mental faculties? Is it possible that we can see more than we naturally can? Is it possible there are higher or deeper levels of imagination? Is it possible that imagination can access some "objective" or "collective" or "universal" field? Many artists and pioneering psychoanalysts have suggested so, not least Carl Jung. Though in Jung's case such images are thought to be accessed "beneath" or "without" consciousness. In stark contrast to psychoanalysis, Rudolf Steiner, outlining the development of intuitive thinking, answers precisely this: through conscious development of our intuitive and imaginative faculties we can perceive phenomena that are not known to the senses, phenomena that shape and interact with the world, phenomena that in fact shape and interact within us as constituent parts of the human being.

With that established, let us now consider the specific spiritual phenomena that Steiner describes in the constitution of the human being. As always, I will approach these explanations in as grounded a way as possible, focussing above all on what Steiner's explanations share with conventional knowledge rather than on what sets them apart. We will find that although

Steiner describes the human being using highly esoteric language and concepts, the phenomena he describes are often not that far removed from our common understandings. A lot of the time, in describing the different spiritual aspects of the human being, Steiner is referring to things we know quite well already, but which we refer to in colloquial language more vaguely or in a very different sense.

Perhaps most unusual is the precision with which Steiner describes the different aspects of the human being. He describes emotions, human consciousness and even the sense of self as scientifically observable phenomena, and this can take some getting used to. He also differentiates aspects of our inner life very specifically. Where we tend to conflate concepts of life, consciousness, soul and thinking into overlapping and nebulous notions, Steiner presents very clear differentiations of these phenomena. These concepts we have for life, consciousness and thinking are for Steiner very different concepts because they refer to the four different aspects of the human being. These four aspects are:

(1) the physical body
(2) the *life body*
(3) the *astral body*
(4) the "I" (or Ego).

Let us now consider each of these in turn.

*The Physical Body*

"The physical body", Steiner writes, "is the part of the human being that is the same as the mineral world. In contrast, everything that differentiates us from minerals cannot be considered part of the physical body". (*ES*, p. 30) This reads as a redundantly common-sensical definition. But this is one of those statements worth reading a second time. We need to contemplate this definition for a moment to make sure we follow rightly what Steiner is saying.

The physical body, Steiner says, is comprised *only* of the mineral constituents that make it up. In other words, the physical body can be defined as the sum-total of its mineral constituents. So if we were to, hypothetically, break the human body down, we could analytically demonstrate all the mineral constituents that make it up. And we might therefore conclude that the human body is made up of its minerals, as demonstrated by the analysis.

Unfortunately, having done that, we wouldn't be able to put the minerals all back together into a living body again. And here we come to the point in Steiner's unassuming definition. Contrary to Dr. Frankenstein's ambition, there is no way we could compose a life form simply by combining the mineral pieces. There is no way we could get such a body to live. Our analysis can show that the mineral constituents of a human body are the physical ingredients or the physical "material" that make it up. But our analysis cannot show how these minerals interact to make the *living* body. That, Steiner explains, is because mineral elements of the physical body cannot interact in a living way without other active phenomena present. Other vital things are necessary for a human body to hold together, for its systems to function and interact, for it to live, to have consciousness, even a sense of self.

So the physical body, according to Steiner's fourfold picture, is lifeless, composed only of minerals. The minerals of the physical body are lifeless not only when separated as individual elements; they are also lifeless in combination. Minerals cannot of themselves constitute a life form. To get a concrete sense of this, think of the stone you meditated on in the last chapter. The stone is only mineral. And we can agree that it is lifeless. It cannot rightly be said to have a form, only a shape. The overall shape of a stone is merely the result of environmental factors. It can just as easily be a different shape, as demonstrated when the stone smashes into many smaller pieces. We do not say in such an event that the stone has died. We refer simply to the smaller pieces. The minerals are all still there. Nothing aside from the physical dimensions of the stone has been lost.

Now of course, this is not the case with the plant we meditated on. If the plant gets torn into pieces, we do not refer to the smaller pieces as smaller

plants. So, we need to ask: what is the difference between the physical body of the plant and the physical body of the stone? Steiner wants us to recognise that the mineral constituents themselves (of the stone and the plant) are not the primary difference. Both the stone and the plant are composed of minerals, however different these minerals might be. The more essential difference, Steiner stresses, has something to do with our correct but also vague recognition that the stone is lifeless and the plant is alive. However, the full explanation for this difference cannot be found only in reference to the mineral constituents of the physical body.

Steiner's key point is that if the plant (or indeed a human body) were only physical and only made up of minerals (like a stone), it would necessarily fall apart and decompose out of its form, namely because a plant that is only mineral is lifeless. Of course, decomposition is precisely what organic physical bodies do when they become lifeless. So, what is present for the organism to have life? Steiner proposes that the life force which holds the plant together as a life form is an interrelated but independent phenomenon to the physical body itself. It is not physical, but it interacts with the physical and is knowable. We touched on this phenomenon in the previous chapter. Steiner calls it the *etheric body* or the *life body*.

*The Life Body*

Steiner writes: "What prevents the physical substances from going their own way during life, which would cause the body to disintegrate… will be called the 'ether body' or 'life body'". (*ES*, p. 32) Any living organism according to Steiner has a *life body*, though he stresses the complexity of the organism's *life body* will be proportionate to the complexity of its physical body. A human, for example, has a far more complex *life body* than a plant. The *life body*, in Steiner's words, "permeates the physical body in all its parts and is to be seen as its architect, so to speak". (*ES*, p. 35) In other words, the *life body* holds the organism together and stimulates the organic processes integral to the organism's life. Without it the organism would decompose. To this extent we can say the *life body* is responsible for

stimulating the growth and organic systems in the living form of an organism.

For our purposes, the *life body* represents the first layer of what Steiner refers to as the spiritual world. Perhaps *life force* rather than 'body' is a term that helps us not to confuse it with a literal body in physical space. The *life body* in no way occupies physical space. But note that Steiner is also not referring to a phenomenon that is wholly apart from the physical world. The *life body* is a phenomenal life force which very much interacts with and gives life to the physical world. The *life body* is the first invisible layer of spiritual reality that Steiner talks about as a knowable phenomenon which interacts with physical reality.

Fortunately, in principle we do not have to stretch ourselves conceptually too far to follow what he is suggesting. As Steiner notes, even in the early 20th century "only the most rigid materialists who hold fast to this denial of a life-force or vital force." (*ELA*, p. 4) We can rationally understand and appreciate what Steiner is referring to by the *life body*, even if we are to describe it to ourselves more as a phenomenal force or process which takes place in time rather than as a "body" which resides in space. It is reasonable to consider the possibility that there is some phenomenon which gives the organism its form, some phenomenon which stimulates its growth into its form and which leaves when the organism dies and decomposes out of its form. And yet, if we are to understand Steiner correctly, we must be careful not to define the *life body* sheerly as physical "energy" or some other measurable quantity. To the extent that the *life body* betrays physical evidence, it is intimately related to the physical phenomenon of the body. The point, indeed, is that it is essential to the living physical body. Nevertheless, Steiner stresses the *life body* is "recognisable to sensory perception only because of its effects -that is, because it is capable of giving a particular shape or form to mineral substances present in the physical body". (*ES*, p. 33)

In other words, using empirical scientific methods we can only hypothesise the *life body*'s existence in reference to what it does to the physical. We cannot physically perceive or directly measure the *life body*. We can, according to Steiner, only perceive the *life body* by cultivating our intuitive

faculties to perceive invisible phenomena. Even then, Steiner explains that our perception of the *life body* will not mean seeing an additional physical dimension "around" the organism. This is often a source of major confusion over what Steiner is describing. The words "body" and "ether" should not be confused with a physical or even *semi-physical* substance, like a coloured mist. Steiner in fact describes the spiritual impression of the *life body* in the following way:

> The general impression that a clairvoyant observer has of the human [*life body*] can be described as follows: When people with supersensible cognition have developed such strength of will that they are able to disregard what their physical eyes are seeing… they are then able to use supersensible consciousness to see into the space the physical person occupies… When people first perceive in this way they get a general impression of the [*life body*] The inner sensation that arises in their souls is approximately the same as the one they get from seeing the colour of peach blossom … After that they also perceive the individual organs and currents within the [*life body*]. (*ES*, pp. 401-2)

Steiner's description is necessarily vague, and it remains an extraordinary challenge to imagine the appearance of an invisible phenomenon without attributing to it some physical characteristic. Nevertheless, these aspects of reality, he stresses, are not physical and not perceptible with the physical senses. The *life body* is a spiritual phenomenon. As we noted earlier, it is directly knowable only as an objective reality in an inwardly perceptible spiritual form.

Steiner proposes that with meditative practice and spiritual development we can develop our intuitive knowledge of such invisible phenomena as the *life body*, and that we can come to know the *life body* scientifically. With such insight we can understand the interactions of the *life body* with other aspects of the human being in quite precise ways. Even without our own direct spiritual perception of the *life body* we can still use an appreciation of the influence of the *life body* to inform our understanding of the human being. Sicknesses in the human body, for example, are according to Steiner often due to activities in the *life body*, which with the right approach can be

directly treated. This is a small keyhole into the principles upon which Anthroposophic medicine is based: treating the invisible aspects of the human being as well as the visible. It is also particularly relevant to Steiner's explanation of child development, which we will consider in the next chapter.

To summarise, the *life body* is the phenomenon or force which unifies and stimulates the constituent parts of a physical body into living organic processes. The *life body*, Steiner stresses, is a complex phenomenon-in-itself (more complex even than the physical body) and not just a vague or ubiquitous "energy" that permeates the material world. Although it has marked effects on the living processes at work in the physical body, the *life body* has no physical reality and cannot be directly perceived with the physical senses. The *life body* is spiritual and can only be perceived intuitively with spiritual faculties.

*The Astral Body*

The third aspect of the human being is more difficult to conceptualise. This is an aspect not shared by the plant, which consists only of the physical and *life* bodies. To get a grounded sense of what this aspect might be, let us return to the fish meditated on in the previous chapter. In comparing the fish with the plant we observed that the fish was not only endowed with life but also with consciousness. The fish, however basic, has an independent conscious will that the plant does not have, the plant being subject completely to environmental factors.

We thus need to distinguish between "life" and "consciousness". According to Steiner's spiritual science, the plant and the fish both have life, but only the fish has consciousness. We need not speculate on the nature of the fish's consciousness. We need not ask, "How conscious is the fish? What kind of consciousness does the fish have"? The sheer fact that the fish swims of its own accord to find food is enough to demonstrate its essential consciousness. The challenge for us is to understand the spiritual force which brings consciousness to the fish (and indeed to humans) as a phenomenon and not simply as a property of the physical organism (e.g. a

product of the physical brain). Steiner calls this phenomenon the *astral body*.

Like the fish, the *astral body* is a slippery phenomenon to deal with. There are many ways to approach a description of it and none would be comprehensive. (Steiner in fact stresses the oppositional nature of the astral, describing that it works through opposites or polarised forces rather than as something fixed we could define.) Perhaps most simply, the *astral body* refers to that force which gives the organism subjective consciousness. The *astral body*, according to Steiner, is the phenomenal force which animates the creature with consciousness and an independent will. The *astral body* is also that which brings waking consciousness to the animal; not self-consciousness, but the consciousness to independently enact its instinctual will.

It can help to understand this idea by picturing an animal without an *astral body*. Steiner writes that without an *astral body*, with only an active *life body*, the animal would remain in a vegetable or sleeping state. With only a *life body* the animal would be like a plant. Plants, he explains, are in this sense always in a sleeping, vegetative state, having no means of consciousness. Only the presence of an *astral body* brings waking consciousness to the organism. He writes:

> Just as the physical body cannot maintain its form by means of the mineral substances and forces it contains, but only being permeated by the ether body [*life body*], the forces of the ether body are incapable of illumining themselves with the light of consciousness. Left to its own devices, the ether body [*life body*] would have to remain in an ongoing state of sleep. We might also say that it would only be able to support a plant-like existence within the physical body. A waking ether body [*life body*] is illumined by an astral body. (*ES*, p. 37)

So, the *astral body* is that which brings to the organism waking consciousness. When we are awake, when we are conscious, the *astral body* is at work. It works upon the *life body*, just as the *life body* works upon the physical body. From the physical to the *astral*, each of these bodies

represent a more recent stage of evolution. According to Steiner, when we sleep the *astral body* leaves the physical and *life bodies* and rejuvenates elsewhere. That is in fact what Steiner's definition of sleep is: it is the departure of the *astral body*. In sleep, only the *life body* remains with the physical. However, of course, there may be fluctuations in this dynamic, and therefore fluctuations in our sleep.

More than this, the consciousness brought by the *astral body* creates the possibility of inner conscious experience. In this regard it can also be considered as, in Steiner's words, "being of the nature of "soul"'. (*ES*, p. 44) Here we meet Steiner's most essential spiritual scientific definition of consciousness. Even the most basic of animals, Steiner insists, experiences the world in a way that is different to the way plants respond to the world. There must always be in any conscious entity a subjective dimension (soul) to their experience of the world. This he clarifies in comparison to those plants which seem to through movement engage with the world:

> When external stimulus is applied to a plant, it makes certain movements just as an animal would do; we can say that plants whose leaves curl up under certain external stimuli are "sensitive" to these stimuli. The deciding factor in consciousness, however, is not the fact that a being responds to stimuli but the fact that it inwardly experiences something new in addition to the mere response. Otherwise we could also speak of consciousness when a piece of iron expands under the influence of heat. (*ES*, pp. 37-8)

The essential words here are "inwardly experiences something new in addition to". An animal, even the most basic, has an inner conscious experience. Even an ant does not have its directions only dictated by its environment. It is quite capable of adjusting its path to find its way around a rock. It is capable of far more complex problem solving too. For Steiner, the capacity of even the most simple animal to do such things is because of its consciousness. The platform of consciousness is therefore established on the capacity of the animal to subjectively engage independently with its environment. This is made possible, Steiner explains, because of the *astral body*.

Considered at a still more complex human level the *astral body* brings to humans far greater depths of inner life. More than a wakeful, conscious and

wilful engagement with our environment, the *astral body* brings to humans the acute subjective experience of consciousness through emotions or feelings. For human beings emotions are the subjective conscious experience of the *astral body*. And, as we know, this experience can be violent! Steiner writes: "How full of uncertainty [the *astral body*] is in its joy and sorrow! What manifold cravings and passions work themselves out in it that are adverse to the higher aims of man, and are often meaningless!" (*ES*, p. 117) The activity of the *astral body* is perhaps most evident in passionate emotional outbursts or in the heated arguments of adolescents, when the inner life literally explodes into the outer world. (We will consider Steiner's developmental explanation for why adolescents and many adults can behave this way later.) But such cases are merely extreme examples to demonstrate the point: the complex and often fraught dimensions of human emotion are experienced through the *astral body*.

To summarise, the *astral body* is the phenomenon of our soul, our subjectivity and our consciousness. It is, like the *life body*, a spiritual phenomenon. It has marked effects on the physical body, but it is not perceptible with the physical senses. The *astral body* is the phenomenon which makes possible our conscious subjective experience of the world. Without the *astral body* we would remain in an unconscious state, like a vegetable. This is indeed the case when we sleep. In sleep the *astral body* departs from the *life body* to rejuvenate elsewhere. Finally, the *astral body* brings consciousness, but not human thinking, which Steiner is keen to differentiate. To accurately understand Steiner's fourfold picture, we must be careful not to confuse the consciousness (of perceptual experience) brought by the *astral body* with the phenomenon of human thinking and memory, which we will consider next.

Before we move on to the final aspect of the fourfold human being, let us briefly recap. So far, we have considered Steiner's definitions of the physical body, the *life body* and the *astral body.* You can no doubt already recognise that with each step the ease with which our normal thinking can conceptualise these phenomena diminishes. And yet equally, the *effects* these supposed spiritual bodies have on our lives are very familiar.

Considering the *life body*, it makes sense that an organism would have some force which keeps it alive. Likewise, we can agree on the reality of emotions and consciousness which the *astral body* is said to produce, even if the concept of the *astral body* still eludes us. The great challenge we face in Steiner's spiritual science is less in understanding the physical effects of these phenomena than in appreciating the way Steiner presents these phenomena as observable and knowable. To conceive of the very consciousness of an animal or indeed a human being as a phenomenon, indeed a phenomenon we can perceive through spiritual development, is something very challenging for our day-to-day ways of thinking.

When trying to make sense of such things it is worth reminding ourselves of a key question we asked back in our study of *The Philosophy of Freedom*; namely, *is thinking real*? For, strangely enough, it was by confronting this rather more complex question that we got a foot in the door into Steiner's very innovative way of describing the world. As a holistic philosopher and scientist Steiner insists that all phenomena are both real and knowable. Thinking, he insists, must be real. It must be a part of the same reality as everything else that is real. Steiner's key principle of intuitive thinking is both a demonstration and an affirmation of the reality of thinking. If we only develop our thinking in the way that is natural to it, he insists we will come to experience the actual living reality of thinking.

From this early premise it does not take much of a step to pose the following idea: if thinking is real, it must be knowable as a phenomenon. Therefore, feeling must also be knowable as a phenomenon. Growing must be also knowable. As different, interrelated aspects of a "whole" knowable reality, all of these phenomena must themselves be scientifically knowable. The spiritual science Steiner offers of the *life body* and the *astral body* is precisely the knowledge of these phenomena.

It was not until *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* that Steiner provided instructions on how such a knowledge could be developed. And we have considered only the most basic of these instructions. Nevertheless, in the basic meditations he offered it is possible to see the foundations on which such a science of invisible phenomena could be built. Simply by meditating on a comparison of a stone with a plant with an animal, we have considered

three distinct "dimensions" of the spiritual reality which Steiner describes: the physical, the *life body* and the *astral body*. So, let us take the comparison one step further and consider Steiner's explanation of the final aspect of the fourfold human being.

*The "I" (Ego)*

We have considered how the stone, the plant and the goldfish differ from one another. The stone has only a physical body, the plant has both physical and *life* bodies, and the animal has physical, *life* and *astral* bodies. But how does a human differ from these other organisms, especially from the animal? Steiner's answer is that the essential points of difference between a stone, a plant, an animal and a human being cannot be found in reference to the physical alone. Analysis of the physical bodies can of course demonstrate differences in physical complexity, but it cannot demonstrate the essential differences, which Steiner insists are of a spiritual nature.

We can perhaps better understand Steiner's idea this way. If I were to (theoretically) make an exact replica of myself from minerals, that is to say make a composition as complex as a human body using all the necessary mineral constituents, would I succeed in completely replicating myself? Of course not. It would be a dead replica. It would simply be mineral. It would not move. It would certainly have no consciousness or memories or personality. And it would fall apart. The minerals, therefore, do not constitute the whole human being. So then, if I were to attempt the same experiment with a plant (the making of a "plant-man") would there be a different result? Yes, theoretically the replica would be living. But it could not move independently. Indeed, it would need roots to live. The plant-man would be alive, but far less than a man. What then about the goldfish? Could the goldfish, with a great leap of the imagination, be transformed into a complex human being? Ignoring superficialities like gills or skin type or the size of the eyes, let us simply ask: would anything essential that a human being has be lacking in the transformed goldfish?

Here we are posed with a real problem to consider. The goldfish is conscious. It can move independently, according to its will. The goldfish, it

would seem, can also learn from experience (something all the more possible with a much bigger brain). The goldfish has feelings. It can feel pain and pleasure, feelings probably also heightened by its bigger brain. Indeed, as we know from a dog, complex animals can have a sophisticated consciousness of perception, action and feeling. So, when magically transformed to have the biological and, in particular, neural complexity of a human being, will there be any essential difference between the goldfish and the human?

Obviously, this is a very polarising question. On the one hand, Creationists who emphatically distinguish humans from the animal kingdom, would argue yes, the human being is a spiritual creation of a fundamentally different order to animals. On the other hand, Darwinian evolutionists who just as emphatically locate humans in the animal kingdom, will argue no, the material evolution of the human body has produced a more complex organism, but not one that is essentially different to animals.

Steiner is situated somewhere between these two camps.

Human beings, Steiner insists, need to be understood in terms of the different aspects of their make-up. We are not just physical bodies, as an extreme materialist might argue. We are not just thoughts, as Descartes speculated. We are not just spirits, as some mystics have believed. We have, Steiner describes, a fourfold make-up. We have a physical body. We have a *life body*. We have an *astral body*. And finally, we have something an animal does not have. Unlike many evolutionists, Steiner's evolutionism proposes that humans both share in the animal kingdom (we have what animals have) and stand apart from it. In other words, no matter how complicated the goldfish, Steiner is clear that it will still lack something that humans have. So then, what for Steiner differentiates humans from animals? Well, we have met it already in our study of *The Philosophy of Freedom.* It is the phenomenon of the "I" or the Ego.

You are likely already familiar with some concept of "Ego" (be it through Freud's theory or some more general notion of a sense of self) and you are of course certainly familiar with the word "I". Obviously, these concepts are related. They imply and indeed signify a sense of self-awareness and

identity. And you would be correct to assume that a sense of identity is key to what Steiner is referring to with regards to the phenomenon he calls the "I". The "I" and our capacity to develop a sense of identity are for Steiner intimately related. But to understand such complex things as identity in the terms of Steiner's spiritual science we require an understanding of something more basic. For that we must consider the far more primary abilities that make a sense of identity possible, principally our faculties of memory.

So, let us consider the significance of memory for Steiner's definition of the "I" by first returning to that palm tree you mentally pictured a few pages back.

Can you recall that image?

In this simple exercise we initially experienced the potential of the human mind to form a mental image. Now, in the case of remembering the image of the palm tree we use our capacity to form a mental image which refers to a past experience. The palm tree you now imagine is of course probably not exactly the same tree. It is not the exact experience of the palm tree you imagined earlier. It is a new experience. And yet, somehow memory enables us to access a past experience, even an imagined one, in order to form a mental picture of it.

We are remarkably able to do this, to recall as mental pictures, even when the original experience was itself purely an imagined mental picture. We tend to take it for granted, and yet this faculty, Steiner specifies, is crucial to the human mind and sense of self. Memory, in his sense, is the first or most basic faculty we can refer to in order to understand the phenomenon of the human "I".

The human "I" is, in Steiner's sense, the phenomenon by which we can directly know the spiritual. Steiner means this as a scientific fact, not merely as a metaphorical statement (such as, "I know eternity through my own self."). The "I", according to spiritual science, is the human "organ" that is of a purely spiritual nature. One way of understanding what Steiner means

by this is to think of the "I" as belonging to that dimension of reality which is "beyond" or transcendent of the material world's restrictions of space and time. We know the physical world is bound by the dimensions of space and time, and yet equally we know that human thinking is not entirely subject to these spatial and temporal restrictions. The simple fact that we can observe the restrictions demonstrates this. Through critical thinking, for example, we can stand apart from or above the restrictions, observe the restrictions, theorise the restrictions and conceptualise the restrictions. We are thus not entirely subject to these restrictions in our thinking as we are in our physical bodies. (This is yet another one of those "obvious facts" which, when approached from Steiner's perspective, leads to a very different picture.) Steiner explains that it is the phenomenon of the "I" that enables our separateness and capacity for observation, conceptualisation and abstraction. It is the "I" which enables humans to access the conceptual world and thus to form thoughts from our perceptual experience. It is (partly) a uniquely human faculty to form conceptual knowledge from our perceptual experience and to articulate this knowledge in language.

Steiner explains the "I" very much in terms of memory. For our day-to-day mental experience memory is the most concrete example of the "I" at work, for it is a literal demonstration of the human ability to mentally transcend the restrictions of space and time. Quite simply, to remember something we need to redirect our thinking "I" from the perceptible present in order to recall some mental image from the past. Many of us can do this very naturally and so we tend to take memory for granted. But our ability to remember is an extraordinary faculty. Unlike the activities of the *life* and *astral* bodies, memory is an activity that can work entirely independently of our physical body. To this extent it is our first glimpse at, in Steiner's terminology, the purely spiritual in the human. Memory in its image content is a reflection of the past, but in its actual thought activity it is also a demonstration of the higher spiritual faculties which our minds are capable of reaching. In short, if we reflect on the actual process that is taking place through human memory, we find an evolutionary faculty that (potentially) liberates us from the immediate restrictions of space and time.

Steiner's spiritual science encourages us to wonder at such a thing as memory, and truly it is worthy of wonder. Memory is a remarkable

phenomenon, all the more so if rightfully considered as an evolutionary development in a comparable sense to the way we might consider the lungs or the ears evolutionary developments. Think of the magnificent cellular complexity of the respiratory system, or of the organs of sense, or indeed of the brain. What natural evolutionary process of trial and error could have produced such phenomena? Then apply this same question to a human being's mental life -their thoughts, images, memories and dreams. According to Steiner's approach, these too are evolutionary phenomena, though not physical, and must have somehow come about through an evolutionary process.

Let us flesh this notion of the spiritual nature of memory out some more. Steiner puts forward that memory is an evolutionary human development that is only possible because we can observe from a "second position" our own subjective experiences. Memory requires not only that we can have conscious mental experiences but also that we can observe these conscious mental experiences in retrospect from a "higher" or separate point of observation. We must therefore be able to both consciously experience the world and observe our own conscious experience. Remember the precondition for meditation described in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*: "to contemplate and judge our own actions and experiences as though they applied not to ourselves but to some other person… confronting himself, at certain times, as a stranger" (*KW*, ch.1, n. 21). So how is this possible? How is it possible that we can both have conscious experiences and assume a "second position" in relationship to our conscious experience? It is possible, Steiner explains, because we are not simply conscious through our *astral body*, we are also capable of observing our conscious experience through our "I".

Memory relies on what Steiner calls "permanency". (*ES*, p. 39) By permanency Steiner means that humans have access to both a temporary (in time) and a permanent (out of time) experience. Again, this is one of those concepts that appears challenging, but is really quite simple. Steiner is simply saying that to recall images from the past through memory we must be able to refer to something permanent. Our past experiences must be, as it were, coherently

arranged and "all accessible" to our memory, irrespective of our present surroundings. We must be able to recall memories as images wherever we are and at whatever time. This is not just a possible but a very real precondition for our ability to remember. Our thinking must therefore have organised access to the "permanent" (the very word "recall" implies this) and this permanency must be a phenomenological reality.

And yet, if it is a phenomenological aspect of the "I", permanency must be in an important way not subject to the limitations of the physical. Permanency must be somehow independent or transcendent of space and time. This is what Steiner means when he refers to the "I" as a purely spiritual category, enabling our access to "permanent" conceptual realm of fixed abstractions and universals. In simpler spiritual language it is the reference to the *eternal*. The evolutionary ability of human beings to recall mental pictures as memories is, for Steiner, the most basic demonstration of our spiritual faculties, our access to the spiritually permanent trough the "I", independent of sensory perceptible experience, which differentiates us from all other forms of life and consciousness on the planet.

It is here that many people will raise the very pertinent question regarding the memory of animals, such as a dog may have of its owner. We may ask, animals demonstrate indisputable evidence of memory, so do they also have an "I"? Steiner, however, insists that a dog's recognition of its owner, or their capacity to learn and repeat actions, should not be understood as if the animal experiences mental memory pictures. Rather, Steiner explains, a dog experiences sensations of consciousness provoked by the owner's appearance or behaviour, something like a "feeling recognition", which should not be confused with the specific operations of human memory. Steiner notes the ease with which these phenomena can be confused:

> It would be very easy to misunderstand this book's explanations of the faculty of memory. It will not be immediately apparent to people who consider only outer processes that there is a difference between what happens in memory-like occurrences in animals or even in plants and what is described here as real memory in human beings. (*ES*, p. 42)

Steiner's distinction is not to diminish the conscious intelligence of an animal, but to distinguish the animal's outwardly "memory-like" behaviour

from the human being's mental operations of remembering through "mental pictures". This is a distinction which requires a great deal more detail than Steiner provides in any of his introductory textbooks. For now, we can simply note that in Steiner's explanation the animal's capacity for recognition is entirely due to its *astral body*.

To sum up, memory is the most elementary way we can recognise what the "I" brings to humans. Steiner writes:

> What *death* is to the physical body and *sleep* to the ether body, *forgetting* is to the astral body. We can also say that life belongs to the ether body, consciousness to the astral body, and memory to the "I". (*ES*, p. 40)

He elaborates:

> If we do not consider the unique process that takes place in human beings - which is a process of really *perceiving* earlier experiences at later points in time rather than merely a process by which earlier conditions influence later ones -we will never be able to really grasp the essence of human nature… the *perception* of the past… called *memory*. (*ES*, p. 43)

Of course, Steiner's notion of the spiritual "I" must be appreciated as more than just memory. Memory is just the "outer layer" or the gateway of the familiar through which to understand Steiner's spiritual concepts of mind and spirit. (Indeed, a greater portion of Steiner's explanation of the human being is given to the dimensions of spiritual reality that can be attained through spiritual development.)

The "I" enables us to not only form mental pictures of the past as memories but also to conceptualise our experience and thus establish coherence in our thinking. Thinking, like memory, requires permanency (of course thinking and memory are in practice entirely interrelated). If it did not our thinking could have no coherence. Without permanency we would, as we say, make "no sense" of things (by which we mean our thoughts would have none of the conceptual organisation needed to interpret in the sensory world). The "I" provides for this coherence. It is the source and centre of permanency for thinking. It is the phenomenon, if you like, which enables us to establish

fixed conceptual points, draw conceptual correlations and establish complex intellectual systems. It is also the phenomenon which enables us to experience intellectual clarity of thought. As with our memory, we tend to take this faculty for clear coherent thought for granted (until of course we lose it).

A sense of identity can be of course considered in a similar way. Without a sense of permanency we could not develop identity, at least in any conceptual way. Our mental relationship to the world and sense of self would be ever-changing. We would exist in a perpetual present and be mere mirrors of other people and our environment. We need a sense of permanency in our mental life which is uniquely our own. The emphasis in Steiner education on students developing a healthy sense of identity should be explained in this sense. The healthy and stable "I" is, self-evidently, the foundational basis for free thinking.

The example that best illustrates our need for a uniquely permanent sense of identity in our mental life is perhaps our use of the word "I" itself. Steiner writes:

> Within the entire scope of our language, there is only one name whose essential character distinguishes it from all others. That name is *I*. Any other name can be applied to the thing or being to whom it belongs by any human being, but as a designation for a being, *I* has a meaning only when that being applies it to itself… I am only an "I" to myself; I am a "you" to anyone else and anyone else is a "you" to me". (*ES*, p. 45)

When one refers to "I" in conversation ("I think", "I feel" *etc*) no one is likely to doubt that what they are referring to is a reality, even if it cannot be seen or touched. My "I" is no less a phenomenon than anything else. And yet, the "I" is a phenomenon that can only be named subjectively. It is a phenomenon known subjectively precisely in the way that spiritual phenomena can be known subjectively. In this sense, the "I" is spiritual. Conceived not just as an idea, but as a spiritual phenomenon, the identity we form through our "I" requires a fundamentally different kind of independence from the world to that of the physical, *life body* and *astral body*. To bring this back to our earlier consideration, the "I" is the primary starting point of inwardly knowable spiritual realities. Steiner insists that if

you are genuinely willing to acknowledge and more deeply meditate on the reality of your inner sense of self (your "I") you may through this process be ready to discover greater spiritual phenomena also unknown to the physical senses.

"Nothing external", Steiner writes, "has access to the part of the human soul we are looking at now". (*ES*, p. 46) Where the consciousness brought by the *astral body* enables the organism to have a subjective experience of the world (such as the ant negotiating its way around a rock), the "I" enables the human to have an experience that is itself independent of the world. This capacity of the "I" indicates its spiritual nature. The "I" is used not only for memory, for abstract systems or in passive mental reflection. These are only the most basic applications. The "I" is the faculty for our spirituality. Through the "I" we can develop intuitive thinking.

Intuitive thinking is precisely the development of the *"I"*. This he argued for in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, gave instructions for in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* and provides a scientific explanation for in *An Outline of Esoteric Science*. For Steiner, the development of the "I" (through intuitive thinking and meditation) is the means by which human spiritual development takes place. It is the means by which intuitive thinking is developed. It is thus the means by which human freedom is attained. The "I" is both the key and the doorway into the spiritual world. And once we take the step through this doorway, what does he say will happen? Indeed, the inner experience of mental pictures, which formerly appeared as subjective experiences, will be superseded with what he calls perception of objective spiritual phenomena. Quite literally, by means of the development of the phenomenon of the "I", Steiner claims we will be able to perceive such spiritual phenomena as the *life body*, the *astral body* and even the "I" itself.

*The Fourfold Human Being*

Steiner thus presents four different but interrelated aspects of the human being. The physical body, that with which scientific methods based on physical sense data are necessarily limited to, is but one aspect. We can only

perceive the physical body with our physical senses, but Steiner assures us that with the right development we can inwardly perceive the other bodies as objective spiritual forms. The *life* or *etheric body* is that which brings the organism life, stimulates its systems, its blood flow, heartbeat, respiratory rhythm. The death of the physical is in this sense the departure of the etheric. The *life body* ceases to work on the physical, the blood flow stops, the heart stops, the breathing stops. It is a very strange and unique way of understanding the process. And yet one cannot deny it makes some sense.

All living organisms have some kind of *life body*. What differentiates the animal is the presence of an *astral body*, that force which brings consciousness to the living organism. As we conventionally categorise subjective experience as being somehow unreal or "of a different order of reality" to tangible physical sense data, understanding consciousness in Steiner's terms can be very challenging. Nevertheless, the effects of the *astral body* are everywhere to be seen. The sheer capacity of an animal to form subjective experience and direct independent action is a demonstration of the consciousness brought by the *astral body*. The phenomenon of emotion, of mood, those entirely inner forces which can make even the most sophisticated adult behave like a small child, are an especially strong example of an invisible phenomenon that can literally transfigure the physical appearance. The *astral* animates the living organism with a subjective reality.

Finally, the "I" is the most recent development in human evolution. It is the aspect by which we can not only have subjective experience, but subjective experience of objective reality. Our capacity to remember snapshots from our life is a clear example of this. But idle memories are just a very basic demonstration of the "I", perhaps in the sense that saying "goo-goo ga-ga" is an elementary demonstration of our capacities for language. Steiner insists it is our task to develop our "I" to its evolutionary capacity, and this means engaging in the spiritual development for modern consciousness that he describes. By doing so we can, he explains, "spiritualise" the other aspects of our being, transforming our consciousness and life forces and even our physical body itself.

Before any of that, we may simply stress here the necessity to regard this spiritual scientific picture in the holistic terms that are integral to any understanding of Rudolf Steiner's work. Most of us have in this modern world been educated and conditioned to prioritise the analytical separation of parts over the synthetic whole. We may indeed be so conditioned to analyse that we may not consider an alternative form of scientific knowledge conceivable. The relevance this has to something like Steiner's spiritual science is immense. For here, if anything, we are being given more categories, more parts, more names to learn. The essential point therefore is to always develop one's sense of the part in relation to the whole. None of the four aspects of the human being exists independently, or at least have any relevant form of independent existence. It is only through the interaction of the aspects, like organs in the physical body, that these different phenomena have reality. The four human aspects are, we can say, a literal demonstration of evolution, from the material to the purely spiritual. It is this evolutionary process (not just of the human but of the Earth and the Cosmos) and the relationship it has to human development which we will consider in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND COSMIC EVOLUTION

> Just as the tree has not reached its complete existence unless the life of root and trunk continues into blossom, so, too, the world has not reached its complete existence unless it continues to live as knowledge. This insight caused me to repeat at every appropriate moment: Man does not *stand apart* from the world and *produce* knowledge about it for himself; rather, *his soul provides the stage upon which the world itself begins to experience its own evolution and existence.* Without knowledge the world would remain incomplete.
>
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Rudolf Steiner, An Autobiography*

In the previous chapter we considered Steiner's explanation of the human being as being something like a picture of its parts -its physical, life force, consciousness and thinking aspects. It is an unusual and intriguing picture, but nonetheless a rather static picture. We need to go beyond this. We need to understand the human being as a phenomenon. This means, in its simplest sense, that we need to understand the human being as a process as much as a "thing" or a static fact. Steiner requires of us something far more dynamic than a dead, static way of understanding facts. To more deeply understand Steiner's picture of the fourfold human being we need to consider how the four different aspects of the human being (physical, *life*, *astral* and "I") unfold in time over the course of our lives, how they manifest in different ways at different stages and how these changes bring greater transformations to the human being as a whole. In particular, we need to become familiar with Steiner's explanations of the developments that occur over the course of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. In other words, in this chapter we need to consider Steiner's explanations of human development.

Before we can do that however, we must first consider a more general and fundamental concept in the thinking of Rudolf Steiner. In order to genuinely engage with Steiner's explanations of human development we need first to briefly consider that far broader concept of development which so deeply informs all of Steiner's spiritual science. We need to consider more directly Steiner's concept of evolution.

It is well known that evolution, as a philosophical concept, has a long history. It is not a strictly modern scientific concept, or, more accurately, a concept that was invented with the rise of biological science. Indeed, most religious systems refer to some kind of evolution of a natural or worldly order. Diverse concepts of evolution can be found in a range of ancient philosophies, in pre-Socratic thinkers (principally Empedocles) and in medieval Aristotelianism (its systemisation of Christian cosmology). We also of course can see examples of early evolutionary theory in the work of a great number of early modern European scientists (including Carl Linnaeus, Comte de Buffon and Erasmus Darwin). Of particular relevance for this book, we can find a unique evolutionism in Goethe's scientific writings, which the young Rudolf Steiner so closely studied in the Goethe archives. Goethe's novel approach to the question of evolution fundamentally inspired Steiner. Goethean evolutionism indeed requires an intuitive conscious engagement with living phenomena, something very much at the heart of Steiner's intuitive thinking.

In our time, however, evolution has come to be discussed by many people in a remarkably narrow way. The term "evolution", as most of us know it, refers to one specific evolutionary theory and the science which has developed out of it. That theory of course is the one proposed by Charles Darwin in the mid-19$^{th}$ century and popularised by his book *On the Origin of Species*. As you might expect, the powerful cultural influence of Darwinism presents a significant problem for our understanding of the evolutionism of Rudolf Steiner. For Steiner requires of us a completely different way to approach to idea of evolution to that proposed by Darwin. He was indeed especially critical of Darwinism, seeing it (along with Marxism) as a powerful and destructive 19$^{th}$ century expression of

materialist thinking, a thinking which leads us to a destructive relationship with ourselves and our natural environment. Steiner's concerns about Darwinism extended not just to the specific conclusions that Darwin's evolutionary theory leads to (how this or that species acquired an evolutionary trait, for example) but also to the very way of thinking about evolution that Darwinian theory has inspired (how Darwinism powerfully influences the conceptual relationship we form in our thinking about and with the evolutionary process). Through its influence, Darwinian theory might be said to have instituted a dominant evolutionary discourse informing our conceptual grasp of not only the details of evolution but also the fundamental idea of what evolution is. The very concepts we bring to the questions of evolution are powerfully informed by this Darwinian discourse. Those concepts are, of course, in a Darwinian framework wholly of a material (genetic) order. Evolution, in the most basic of Darwinian terms, is expressed through successful genetic adaptation, measurable in reference to the material needs of the individual organism, enabling the organism's survival and reproduction in competition with other members of its species.

Within the framework of his philosophy of intuitive thinking and the spiritual knowledge which can be developed from it, Steiner's basic concern is that in its foundational concepts Darwinism encourages a definite standpoint in our relationship to natural phenomena. Darwinism presupposes a model for knowledge of the natural world and this model creates or informs limitations on (or presumptions about) how the evolutionary processes natural world can be known. The limitations of the Darwinian framework can (if not recognised consciously) inform, distort and limit the kinds of insights into evolution that we are capable of reaching, not least regarding the evolution of human thinking.

Rudolf Steiner's explanation of evolution is, not surprisingly, quite different to Charles Darwin's. Though it has essentially one thing in common with Darwinian theory, as it does with all evolutionary theories and indeed all creation mythologies: it seeks to trace the evolution of human beings back to their origin. But the similarities with Darwin end there. The vast and astonishing evolutionary narrative Steiner presents is about as different from Darwin's as the modern mind could possibly imagine. And that is quite

simply because the origin Steiner wishes to point to in the evolution of human beings, the very cause of our present condition, is not to be found in the physical world, in any genetic comparison of human and animals.

Following the trajectory of spiritual science, the actual causes of evolution according to Steiner are to be found nowhere in the physical world, for the physical world is a product or symptom of evolution and not a cause. The causal origins of evolution for Rudolf Steiner are, rather, spiritual. As he writes:

> For spiritual research has to consider not merely the material processes of Earth evolution, but before all the spiritual causes which lie behind all matter and substance. (*ES*, p. 119)

We have come to learn this notion of "spiritual" refers not to some vague mystical state of non-being from where all matter derives or to some anthropomorphised deity called God. A quite different conception of spiritual is required. The spiritual realities from whence originate this world are complex and manifold and can be known scientifically through spiritual knowledge. For Steiner, the spiritual origins of the world and of humans are of different qualities and are reflected in our very constitution -our physical body, *life body*, *astral body* and "I". In other words, Steiner's evolutionary explanation of human beings concerns the evolution of all four aspects of the human being.

This brings us to another challenging but important idea, an idea that if approached in a naïve way can seem like the most wistful of New Age fantasies. For Steiner, the human being cannot be understood in relief to the world or Cosmos around us. To understand the evolution of human beings is to understand the evolution of… everything in the universe. Let us ponder that task for a moment.

For Steiner, we cannot truly approach and fathom the evolution of the human being unless we also approach and fathom the evolution of the Cosmos. This is very much a principle that runs at the heart of Steiner's holistic, spiritual and cosmic philosophical mission. *The fourfold*

*constitution of the human being is an evolutionary expression of the spiritual forces at work in the universe.* We are a mirror or a microcosm of the Cosmos. Just as modern astro-physics has helped us to understand that our physical bodies are constituted by atoms forged at the beginning of the universe, so too does Steiner wish us to understand that the non-physical aspects of our being originated in the spiritual Cosmos. It follows then that a true evolutionary picture of human beings must be concerned not only with the time that bipeds or mammals or respiring organisms have existed on the Earth. Rather, evolution must be traced far far further back in spiritual time to the origin of the cosmic spiritual phenomena we are made from.

From where, for example, do the forces that bring consciousness originate? From where does the phenomenon that gives us memory originate? What is the evolutionary origin of feeling? Of dreams? These are typically Steinerian questions, which would likely prompt contempt among most evolutionary theorists, for whom such "ephemera" are merely products of the physical organism, but which we are asked to take seriously. Certainly, at the time of Steiner's life, an intrenched intellectual culture of materialism had come to consider such questions as absurd. However, in the light of our study, in particular our meditation on the reality of thinking, willing, feeling (and so on), it becomes not only plausible but eminently logical and necessary to pose these questions. If such things as thinking and feeling are real phenomena, and if evolution is a natural world-process, then these phenomena must have evolved just as the physical aspects of the human being have, just as the human cranium has, just as the human eye has. Put simply, *if thinking is real, then it must have evolved.*

The answers Steiner provides to these questions are as vast and conceptually overwhelming as they are unprecedented. To make matters even more challenging for the newcomer they are presented seemingly without any evidence that could be evaluated for reliability. In *An Outline of Esoteric Science* and his book *Cosmic Memory*, as well as in a host of lectures, Steiner outlines a narrative of human and cosmic evolution that finds few imaginative comparisons for conceptual scope in either religious or science fiction literature. Certainly, if one is looking for a reason to reject Rudolf Steiner as a quack, one will find no shortage of reasons to do so in his explanations of cosmic spiritual evolution in *An Outline of Esoteric Science.*

As I mentioned earlier, I personally question the value Steiner's far-reaching explanations have for the newcomer, in what is ostensibly an introductory text. As this study is dedicated to a simplification of Steiner's ideas the vast extents of his esoteric teachings on cosmic evolution will be omitted in favour of a clarification of the key concepts that arise from this picture of evolution. (Should you wish to engage with Steiner's cosmic narrative there are no shortage of texts available in the *Rudolf Steiner Archive*.)

The first essential point to take from Steiner's explanation is that all four aspects of the human being (physical body, *life body*, *astral body* and "I") have evolved as phenomena. All four aspects, even the physical body, have evolved out of a spiritual state. Steiner writes: "Material things, events and entities condense, as it were, out of a previous existence which was spiritual through and through". (*ES*, p. 120) The materialisation or "incarnation" of spiritual phenomena into physical matter must therefore be understood as the "direction" (if not the first cause) which evolution takes. Through evolution spiritual realities materialise into physical realities: first the physical body, then the *life body*, then the *astral body*, then the "I". Understood in this way the physical body (and indeed all physical matter) has evolved into its present material form from previous spiritual stages. The other aspects of the human being are also moving through these spiritual stages. The "non-physical" bodies of the human being (*life*, *astral*, "Í") are in this sense not in an equivalent spiritual state and are not all at the same stage of evolution. The *life body* has, to put it simply, "materialised" more than the *astral*, and the *astral* more than the "I".

The second essential point to take is that for Steiner the evolution of the four bodies has, up to this stage, culminated in the thinking human being -the human being with an "I". For Steiner, the crucial development of this period in human evolution is that human beings have evolved to have a thinking and memory life, which is only possible because we have an "I". This is for Steiner is a development made possible because the other three aspects (physical, *life* and *astral*) have evolved enough for the "I" to, as it were,

"find a home" and permeate our consciousness with thinking and memory life. He writes:

> Spiritual science must go still further back with its researches if it would find an answer to the question: How did the three bodies reach a stage of evolution such as enabled them to receive into themselves an I, and then too to the further question: How did the I itself come into being and how did it acquire the ability to work within the bodies? (*ES*, 119)

Remembering from the previous chapter that each of the four aspects of the human "permeates" or "illumines" the one before it (the *life* permeates the physical, the *astral* permeates the *life*, and the "I" permeates the *astral*), we can understand the evolution of human beings as the development of each aspect so that it is "ready" or "evolved enough" to host the next spiritual body.

In the scheme of a cosmic evolution that is said to extend beyond physical time, this rather too logical and simple step-by-step evolutionary process of successive spiritual bodies may sound rather too conveniently formulated. Indeed, Steiner often describes the development of these spiritual phenomena as though it were a process as straightforward as making a sandwich or layering a cake. But for the sake of conceptual clarity, Steiner's reductive picture outline at least makes clear that at our earliest stage of evolution, the foundation of human beings had only a physical body (still in a spiritual state) before being ready to be permeated with a *life* body, then and *astral body* and most recently an "I".

The physical body of the human being is thus, according to Steiner, the oldest spiritual aspect of the human, meaning the physical body is the aspect that has had the most time to evolve and materialise from spirit to matter. He writes:

> Of the four present members of the human being the physical body is the oldest. Moreover, it is the physical body which has attained the greatest perfection in its kind… Compare, for example, the physical body with the astral in this respect. The astral body, it is true, being of the nature of "soul", stands at a higher level in evolution than the physical. Yet… consider the structure of the heart, planned as it is in accordance with the highest wisdom!

> … Or look at the miraculous structure of the brain … And now compare with this the astral body as the bearer of joy and sorrow, of cravings and passions. How full of uncertainty it is in its joy and sorrow! … The astral body is only on the way to the achievement of that harmony and self-contained-ness which we see already before us in the physical. (*ES*, 119)

This is a fine example demonstrating why Steiner's holistic spiritual approach should not be wholly confused with mysticism. Far from taking a mystic position and denying the importance or even the reality of the physical body, Steiner emphasises the astonishing level of perfection in the functional design of the physical body and indeed notes that that more spiritual *astral* level of soul in us is the more "childish" element, the far less developed aspect. Esoteric though Steiner's language may be, it makes a degree of sense, observing human behaviour, to attribute differing levels of evolution to the body and soul. Notice the unconscious ease, for example, with which most people conduct the innumerable number of complex physical operations required for life (heartbeat and respiration, for example) without a second's thought and yet can easily find a red light in traffic or an off-hand comment from a spouse or lover enough to prompt a fit of emotion. The simple answer here is that we are far more evolved to respire than we are to process emotions.

Nevertheless, Steiner's explanation of course comes with its own difficulties. Such notions as the "evolutionary age" of the physical body being greater than the evolutionary age of the soul can wreak havoc on our imaginative and logical abilities to form a conception for what Steiner means. To this extent any intellectual discussion of Steiner's description of cosmic evolution, such as is offered here, is fraught with problems. As Steiner repeats throughout his texts and lectures, this spiritual knowledge can only be directly known through the higher stages of intuitive spiritual development. What we can only do here is clarify in the most basic way the key principles.

Steiner's strange and highly esoteric description of evolution outlines the cosmic spiritual development of the fourfold human being towards the point where the human "I" was able to be received by the other three aspects. He quite literally presents a narrative that traces the gradual materialisation of the entire universe from a spiritual state into a physical state. We humans, he insists, are an evolutionary microcosm of that cosmic process. In not only our physical bodies but in all aspects of our living being and consciousness have we inherited, if you will, the spiritual DNA of the creative Cosmos. For modern readers it is an overwhelmingly challenging narrative in almost every way. Nevertheless, vast, cosmic and esoteric as Steiner's evolutionary narrative may be, the process he describes is actually crucial for our understanding of something far more immediate; that being the development of the individual human being.

For Steiner, the life of a human being is a microcosm of the evolutionary process at work in the Cosmos. Human life is an expression of the cosmic evolutionary process. The vast cosmic evolution of the four aspects of physical, *life*, *astral* and "I" which has taken place over vast stretches of cosmic time also takes place in the short term in the individual human being over the course of their lifespan. The evolutionary processes of the Cosmos are at work in the individual developing human being. More specifically, Steiner explains the evolution (or "incarnation") of the fourfold human being over the first twenty-eight years.

So, we come back to more solid ground somewhat. Although still esoteric and still very much informed by spiritual science, Steiner's ideas on human development fit far more comfortably within established discussions than do his ideas on cosmic evolution. This is not least because, although Steiner's explanations remain very challenging, we can at least point to some clear evidence in early human development and to some clear correlations with more established developmental theories, most notably those of Jean Piaget. We are also simply more familiar today with the very

idea of approaching human beings from a developmental perspective. In the past century research into human development, especially early childhood, has grown at such a rate that Steiner's developmental way of explaining the human being as a phenomenon which unfolds through certain definite stages of growth may now appear quite familiar (even if his specific explanations do not). During Steiner's lifetime this was far from the case. The revelations which come from studying childhood had yet to be widely recognised.

If the core question of human evolutionary theory is "from where did humans (or organic life) originate and what has occurred for them to have their present form"? the core premise of developmental theory is "how does an individual human being develop from their earliest life into their present adult form"? In other words, if the evolutionary theorist boldly attempts to explain the evolution of our entire species (or for Steiner even the Cosmos), the developmental theorist contents themselves with the more modest, though perhaps no less challenging, task of explaining how and why humans grow and develop in the way they do.

The famous Swiss psychologist and developmental theorist Jean Piaget referred to his own theoretical approach to this question as "genetic epistemology". Combining these two terms (normally distinguished as essentially different) Piaget pointed to what he thought was the essential correlation necessary to understand how the human being develops: in simple terms, the relationship of how the human being physically grows (genetic) and how the human being thinks (epistemology). Although still very much adhering to a research-based methodology, Piaget's vast and voluminous studies into child development consistently concluded that in order for the human being to be understood as a living and growing phenomenon, the thinking life of a child must be understood as something that develops concurrently with the physical body. Thinking (epistemology)

is therefore understood as a characteristic of the development of the organism (genetic). It was an idea that Einstein described as being so simple only a genius could have thought of it.

This is not the place to attempt a detailed comparative study of Piaget and Steiner. Nevertheless, simply by comparing their core concepts of "genetic epistemology" and "living thinking" we can recognise a profound agreement. Though they never met and their scientific methods and philosophical orientations are worlds apart, Piaget and Steiner share the observation that the intellectual life of a growing human being must in some way have a relationship with (or be an expression of) the organic physical life. More to the point, the intellectual life must itself grow and develop, just as the physical body grows and develops. This is to say, the intellectual development of a human being is not simply a process of experience or a kind of processing of mental pictures that takes place in total relief from the physical world (in the Kantian sense). Thinking is an aspect of reality with its own growth and developmental patterns. In other words, *thinking is an aspect of living reality and it develops through definite evolutionary stages and cycles of growth just like all other aspects of living reality.* Just how to conceptualise this thinking aspect and its development remains the problem.

Where Piaget pins this insight down to the most specific instances he can find in early childhood development (such as specific developments in physical coordination and the related developments in the child's mastery of language), Steiner presents his typically vast and esoteric explanation of what is occurring with regards to the four human bodies from the time a baby is born to the time that person enters the world as an adult from the age of twenty-one. Actually, Steiner's explanation of human development goes beyond this age span, beyond death even. However, in regards to the four human bodies the first twenty-one years are especially important.

Just as Steiner regards evolution as a process of materialisation of spiritual forces, so too he regards human development as a process of *incarnation* of the spiritual forces of physical, *life*, *astral* and "I" in the human being. As we learned earlier, even the human physical body, from Steiner's perspective, is a product (or an incarnation) of a spiritual force. This is not an easy principle to digest in a materialist intellectual age. However, it is a principle that must be registered if we are to make any meaningful sense of Steiner's picture of human development. The human being does not develop from nothing. The living human being is an incarnation of human spirit. Indeed, as far as Steiner is concerned, the human being is a *reincarnation* of the spirit. Though we need not explore that idea here.

The process of human development must therefore be understood as the progressive incarnations of spiritual phenomena and not as the progressive development of "something from nothing", or of the adding of entirely new "layers" of being onto the human. The marked developments in human growth that Steiner describes (the births of the *life body*, a*stral* and "I") do not refer to the creation or introduction of entirely new phenomena, but rather to changes in the role and influence that spiritual phenomena have in human life. Another way of explaining this difficult notion is to say that when treated as spiritual phenomena everything in the human being exists both during life and before and after death. The process of human life involves the changing manifestations of these spiritual phenomena.

The developmental process Steiner describes unfolds over definite stages, each marking a new level of incarnation. In early life the stages mark the progressive incarnation of the spirit into living form, and in later life the stages mark the progressive *spiritualisation* of the human towards death. The entirety of a full human lifespan is conceived in this regard much like

a breath, the inhalation being the incarnation of the spirit in early life and the exhalation being the spiritualisation of the body in later life.

So it is that, even when considering the human physical body, we need to approach Steiner's explanation from an attitude which regards the physical, *life*, *astral* and "I" as incarnations of spirit. Steiner helpfully refers to the incarnation of the bodies as "births" -birth of the physical, birth of the *life body*, birth of the *astral body*, birth of the "I". These births take place, very broadly speaking, at seven-year intervals. We can understand the significance of subsequent stages in human development by first considering the birth of the physical. Though, as usual with Steiner, we are asked to consider physical birth a little more conceptually than we might be familiar with.

*Birth of the Physical Body (the first seven-year cycle)*

In one of his most accessible introductions, *Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*, Steiner writes:

> With physical birth the physical human body is exposed to the physical environment of the external world. Before birth it was surrounded by the protecting envelope of the mother's body. What the forces and fluids of the enveloping mother-body have done for it hitherto, must from now onward be done for it by the forces and elements of the external physical world. (*ECA*, p. 11)

Notice in this description the importance Steiner places on the "independence" of the physical body, rather than on its conception or physical creation. The unborn child of course physically exists. Its conception and subsequent development before birth are indeed perhaps the most remarkable developmental processes in nature. And in a real sense the child's development in utero is a life cycle unto itself. However, for Steiner

it is the physical birth that marks beginning of the human's independent physical life. The human physical body has a developmental period in utero during which time it is completely dependent on the mother (cannot survive without the mother) and only at birth does the human become independent as a physical organism (though of course it is still physically dependent in many ways). Steiner's concept of human physical birth as the independence of the body also applies for the "births" of the other spiritual bodies in later years. For the *life body* the birth to independence will not occur until the age of around seven, for the *astral body* the age of around fourteen and the "I" the age of around twenty-one.

So how do we conceptualise a human being with a "born" independent physical body but still "unborn" and developing spiritual bodies? This is an important question to ask because this is precisely how Steiner characterises the child up to the age of seven. In the first seven years, he puts forward, the child's growth and development needs to be explained entirely in relation to its physical experience. In his lecture cycle *The Kingdom of Childhood* he explains:

> In the first epoch, before the change of teeth, we may describe the child as being wholly "sense-organ". You must take this quite literally: wholly sense-organ… the sense-organ is acutely sensitive to the impressions of the outer world. (*KC*, Lect. 2)

Steiner's point here is not that the child is only sensitive to heat, light, taste, touch or smell, but rather that its experience and development is mediated entirely by its physical experience. What will later become aspects of inner life are during infancy and early childhood wholly experienced through the physical.

This may well appear to be one of those concepts of Steiner's that is wilfully irrational. How, you might ask, can a child be rationally understood to be "wholly sense-organ"? After all, young children's paintings and stories obviously demonstrate a level of consciousness beyond the sensory. Young children often say all kinds of the most profound things, suggestive of deep reflection. Surely Steiner is not naïve to these common realities. So, what does he mean when he describes young children as "wholly sense-organ"?

Key to recognise here is Steiner's point that children's consciousness is not "only sensory" but that their young consciousness is mediated "through the sensory". Sensory experience is, in Steiner's explanation, the medium or "language", as it were, through which the child has conscious experience. (Again, this concept perhaps only achieves clarity when compared with other forms of conscious experience, of the kind we are capable of in adulthood.) Memory of early childhood, if we are capable of it, is therefore typically of a heightened sensory quality. Strong sense experiences stand out in early memory. This is something James Joyce is particularly concerned with in the opening chapter of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he writes of the young child Stephen Dedalus' experiences strongly defined by the sensations of hot, and cold and wetness. "When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had a queer smell". These potent sensory experiences stand out like beacons for the narrator's recollection in an otherwise inaccessible ocean of early memory.

By referring to the young child as "sense-organ" Steiner means that the young child's physical sensory experience is their medium for their experience of consciousness and thinking, whereas for the adult, thinking and consciousness is experienced more distinctly or independently of the physical-sensory. Thus, for the child, *imitation* of the perceptual world is their natural way of learning. Imitation of what is perceived sensorily (seen, heard, *etc*) is the "modus operandi" of this early stage of developmental

consciousness. If, for example, we impartially observe young children with their parents or older siblings we will observe the astonishing extent to which they imitate, mirror and adapt the behaviour of those around them, from repeating a father's regrettable cursing, down to the slightest of facial gestures and habits. The young child does this from infancy, in such extraordinarily complex and consistent ways and combinations that the imitative nature of their behaviour can easily be ignored or forgotten. Certainly, if some belief in the child's fully formed individuality is preferred by parents, these imitative traits can readily be explained as unique to and originating from the child. Indeed, Steiner agrees that the child's spiritual identity is unique to the child. Nevertheless, he stresses that the expression (or realisation) of this identity is first achieved through imitation. Even those hints of a young child's complex inner life are typically expressed as imitations of something they have seen or heard. Parents' behaviours are merely the tip of the iceberg. The entire world constitutes an experience for imitation.

Steiner's explanation for this imitative stage of consciousness is that the child's soul is still entirely of the world around it, and only much later will it condense and "materialise" to form something independent and "of itself". For this reason, what a young child experiences (sees, hears, *etc*) is entirely determinant for their development, for these experiences will form the "raw material" which the child imitates and from which it learns to be. Thus, kindergarten learning in Steiner education is explicitly framed primarily around imitative exercises, with the children repeating the teacher's sung melodies, copying the teacher's knitting patterns, and so on, as well as an emphasis on engagement with the natural world, its textures, smells, colours, sounds. The specifics can vary enormously, but sensory and imitative learning is the key. Childhood experiences form the "material" for the emotional and psychological aspects that develop later.

Steiner even goes so far as to suggest the child's sensory experiences in the early years will inform how its organs develop:

> Now before the change of teeth in the seventh year, the human body has a task to perform upon itself which is essentially different from the tasks of all the other periods of life. In this period the physical organs must mould themselves into definite shapes. (*ELA*, p. 11)

This statement may sound ridiculous. But here we must remember Steiner's evolutionary principle that spiritual forces (such as the *life body*) influence and determine the growth of the physical body. Matter alone does not grow of itself. Whereas a materialist perspective might regard the physical growth of a child as a matter of genetic course, Steiner explains physical growth as spiritually determined. And this spiritually determined growth continues throughout childhood (and indeed later life). The child's early physical experience is a powerful factor in how their spiritual and physical development unfolds. This, of course, is precisely why Steiner's indications place such emphasis on the child's early experiences. The organism's "predetermined" genetic course is, in Steiner's sense, powerfully influenced by its experience, not least because the child's experience will profoundly affect their ability to successfully develop through their subsequent stages of growth. We thus need to transcend any simplistic nature/nurture divide to appreciate what Steiner is presenting in his developmental picture.

Steiner describes the first seven years of human life as a specific cycle of human development. For him, fundamental developments occur in this period which are all related to the child's "physically mediated" developments. Again, we need to question deeply what Steiner means by this. Because to most observers, the development of a new-born baby to a six-year-old will rightly be considered fundamental and seismic. We might even observe that the greatest observable changes in human development occur over these years. It is indeed the developmental changes that take

place over the first six or seven years that take up most of Piaget's focus in his monumental work on human development. For Piaget, understanding human development amounts in large part to understanding those developments which occur in our first seven years and, in particular, our first two years. The acquisition of fundamental physical and mental operations developed during this time are taken by Piaget to be the foundations of human development, and all subsequent developments in later life are, to put it very simply, complex elaborations. In other words, for Piaget (and many other developmental theorists) the essential developments for human beings are established in early childhood.

Steiner takes a very different view on this question. Although he by no means ignores the substance and significance of early childhood development, he nevertheless does propose that other fundamental developments occur after the first seven years, developments of an entirely different and outwardly less perceptible kind (relating to the *life body*, *astral body* and "I"). The first seven years are, for Steiner, a distinct stage or, as he puts it, an "epoch" of life. The child from one to seven plainly goes through manifold and remarkable changes that are of a certain form or developmental continuum. The developments of later stages take different forms. These later developments require of us a different level of sensitivity and insight in order to understand them. Sheer physical observation, though still relevant, will not be enough to appreciate the development of the older child, or the adolescent, or the young adult.

*Birth of the Life Body (the second seven-year cycle)*

Steiner explains that at around seventh year the *life body* is "born" and this brings about a fundamentally new stage in the physical, emotional and mental development of the child. This event can vary markedly from child to child (certainly in terms of specific age and in how "successful" or

"complete" the incarnation of the *life body* is) but it is nevertheless a fundamental development in all early human life. It is also a most challenging developmental concept to explain! Until now we have understood that the *life body* is that phenomenon which is responsible for the living operations of the physical body. It is that which gives life to the mineral substances of the physical. The *life body* is, for example, the living force that makes the plant alive and differentiates it from the stone, or some other dead matter. How then are we to understand the *life body* as a phenomenon that is "born" in the seventh year?

Key to an understanding of what Steiner means here is our recognition of the distinction between the conception of something and its birth. As with the physical body, Steiner explains that the *life body* is of course present with the newborn. By definition, the newborn cannot be alive without it. However, the *life body* goes through a long developmental or "gestational" period before its actual "birth" at age seven, during which it remains still within a kind of a spiritual "womb". (These terms "womb" and "gestational" are of course to be read as metaphorical.) It is indeed only because of this long "gestation" period that the child can eventually develop to have an independent *life body*. He writes:

> All that has to evolve in the etheric body before the seventh year — ideas, habits, memory, and so forth — all this must develop "of its own accord", just as the eyes and ears develop within the mother-body without the influence of external light. (*ELA*, p. 12)

In the human being then, that which characterises the *life body* develops in early life to become fully "born" and independent in the subsequent period of childhood. The characteristics that come to define the child in the second seven-year cycle are thus not wholly absent in the younger child, but rather in a nascent stage.

This *life* or *etheric* "birth" is frequently described by Steiner in reference to the change of teeth. Anyone vaguely familiar with Steiner pedagogy will probably recognise this: the change of teeth is a symptom of the birth of the *life body.* But for newcomers, this may very likely seem yet another strange point of reference: firstly, because we tend not to endow this physical development with a great deal of significance; and secondly, because the change of teeth would seem to be a strictly physical change, whereas the *life body* is supposed to be a spiritual phenomenon. Nevertheless, Steiner insists that the change of teeth is symptomatic of the change in the spiritual constitution of the child; namely, the birth of the *life body*. Of course, there is enormous variability in terms of when and for how long a child will lose their baby teeth. To this objection, Steiner stresses the "birth" of the *life body* as a gradual phenomenon that can begin and end at different times. Seven years is merely an approximate reference point.

For Steiner the change of teeth is a physical symptom of a change in the spiritual constitution of the child. It is this spiritual change which is the more important development to understand. But to more directly discuss the deeper aspects of the birth of the *life body* (and the subsequent bodies) we must consider a field of observation not so reliant on physical evidence. We must consider the inner changes of the child; the changes in their thinking, their emotional being, their relationship with the world. It is in reference to these aspects that the second seven-year developmental stage of consciousness can be known. Again, this may sound more difficult a task than it perhaps is. We need not have developed a high level of clairvoyance to appreciate the developments. We can readily use our capacity to observe, empathise with and reflect on the changes of a child's inner world in these years.

The birth of the *life body* marks, according to Steiner, the time when a child is ready for formal schooling. Once purely imitative, the child at this age develops a conscious memory life. Memory, as distinct from imitation, becomes the frame or window through which the child forms mental experience. And yet, crucially, it is a memory without self-consciousness. Childhood memory, Steiner insists, must be distinguished in this respect from adult memory. The capacities of memory that the *life body* awakens between the ages of approximately seven and fourteen are of a particular kind, unique to this stage in life, a kind which Steiner describes as *picture consciousness*.

Described in a very basic and approximate way, memories in picture consciousness might be said to be (somewhat paradoxically) "subjectively experienced" as "objective" rather than mediated through subjective experience. This challenging distinction is perhaps best understood in a qualitative sense. Steiner's explanation is not that the child's memory picture consciousness has no self-awareness, but that the self-awareness is comparatively minimal, so the memory experience is related to as "more objective". Another way of putting this is to say that the *picture consciousness* of the child of seven years is still, as it were, "behind the scenes". The child's self is not experienced consciously as the medium of memory (at least not in the way experienced by an adult). Thus, the world of *picture consciousness* for the child has a lucid, factual quality. The child remembers not their subjective experience but the things themselves, as any time spent with an eight-year old will likely demonstrate. Now whether this "factual" thinking is sheer childish delusion is not the point at all. Such critical evaluations are irrelevant. The point is not the validity of the child's philosophical take on the nature of reality but rather how the child's consciousness is operating. The way the child relates to their memory process indicates something very important about their developmental stage of consciousness. And Steiner is clear the child's consciousness works in a language of *picture facts*.

Steiner's description of the child's consciousness applies beyond specific recollected memory images to the very relationship the child forms with thinking and knowledge, in other words, to how the child learns. For Steiner, the child between the ages of roughly seven and thirteen thinks in memory pictures; that is to say, thinks in "facts". It is this picture consciousness with which primary school education must work.

This is an essential principle for Steiner educators and parents to sit with and reflect on, both for its enormous complexity and its simple, practical applications. How do we understand and work with picture consciousness in a practical way?

Let me give you an example to clarify the concept. Teach any group of, say, eleven-year-olds and you will witness an extraordinary capacity and joy for recall. It is a form of recall that seems to require no self-reflection whatsoever. Only beginning to develop in the seven-year old, by the age of ten or eleven the memory capacity can become remarkably quick and agile, much in the same way as the child's physical coordination does. Often this will manifest in a fascination in statistics or trivia (like an entire team's scoring average), or a preoccupation with collecting things, or the finer details of a certain game or hobby. A fascination with mastering the basic structures and technicalities of music is common too. In the classroom I have often noted how, when posed with a concrete factual question by their teacher (questions with a definite answer, such as "what is the capital of China"? or "what is 72 divided by 12"?) children of this age need almost no time to process what has been asked of them, if they have learned the answer previously. They seem to require no time to "process" the question before firing their answer back, usually with the same tireless enthusiasm with which they chase a soccer ball or practice their yoyo skills at lunchtime.

Whole volumes of question and answer workbooks can be consumed in this way, creating the illusion that significant learning is being accomplished.

By twelve or thirteen this memory faculty can develop into an even more remarkable capacity for memorising complex historical and scientific information, the multiplication and periodic tables and lengthy literary passages, even whole parts of Shakespearean plays. As a Steiner educator, one of the great wonders I have witnessed of this age has been students, many still highly challenged in basic literacy, memorising and performing the entire parts of Shakespearean characters, like Edmund in *King Lear*, Antonio in *Merchant of Venice* or Miranda in *The Tempest.* It is an extraordinary thing, to observe these young students memorising and reciting such verse, even if the greater meaning of the text remains beyond them.

Witnessing such marvels we are left to ask how these students are capable of memorising and performing vast passages of complex verse and yet, for some, not able to develop far in their own basic literacy. How is it that a thirteen-year-old can learn and perform the role of King Lear and still struggle to string together a basic paragraph of their own writing? The answer, Steiner proposes, has to do with their stage of consciousness. The memorisation of Shakespeare (or a Mozart sonata, or the last five years of football statistics, or the constellations, *etc*) is the culmination of the child's development of picture memory. It is an evolutionary development, quite literally what the child's consciousness has evolved to do. Those activities which meet picture consciousness in its own terms will likely resonate strongly and generate impressive results. Those activities which jar with the consciousness (requiring a kind of thinking yet to be developed) will likely be a struggle. Now importantly, both learning experiences are important for the child. The education of the child does not mean tailoring learning experiences to exclusively suit the child's state of consciousness. However,

for Steiner, effective education does fundamentally require the teacher to understand and consciously work with the child's state of consciousness.

Many popular modern educational methods are in some way tailored to the picture consciousness of the child which Steiner outlines. On the whole, however, such methods have capitalised on the picture memory consciousness of children by prioritising rote learning and having short question and answers parroted back and forth in a classroom. It can indeed feel for the teacher as if great progress is being made using such rote learning methods, such is the children's talent and enthusiasm for this activity. However, the short-term benefits rarely translate to long term educational gain. Steiner is clear that such methods are often redundant, even detrimental, and that the child's particular talent for picture memory must be met with a particular type of creative learning. Having children memorise and parrot back hardened facts as abstractions is not a form of learning that genuinely meets the child's developmental needs. For in such activities their picture consciousness is simply being reinforced. Such rote practice is, on the level of consciousness, a bit like conducting the same maths lesson every day. The same "consciousness experience" is being repeated. For the child, even though they can excel in such exercises, these lessons are sheerly a game bearing no meaningful learning in the long term. (If you need proof of this, try asking adults to recall the facts they learnt in their primary school years.) The child's memory, though adept in its procedures is simply not ready to take in and process such things to the extent that they can be meaningfully recalled and applied in later life. Put simply, the memory capacities of picture consciousness must not be confused with adult memory as a premise for learning.

In contrast to the redundancy of rote learning Steiner proposes the principle of working with pictures and story for students of this developmental

"epoch" of picture consciousness. Pictures and story are the primary medium of learning for picture consciousness, just as imitation is for younger children. Teachers of this age group are called on to bring images and narratives (out of their own imaginations) into the classroom and to use them as the frameworks of the children's learning. These narratives and motific images are not arbitrary, but thematically and conceptually integrated with the children's overall learning, both within the lesson and across the year, which the individual class teacher is largely responsible for. In short, the student's learning of key concepts is achieved not through rote learning of facts or by means of abstract explanation but is instead framed and oriented around a key image and/or narrative. Steiner insists that images and stories, created by and engaging the imagination, are the means by which children of this age group can genuinely grasp the concepts integral to the learning.

This principle applies not only in subjects like Art or English but across the entire curriculum. In the broadest possible sense, the outlining of the curriculum for the second seven-year cycle, introduces an integrated cross-disciplinary "network" of lessons and subject areas. These lessons are designed to meet the consciousness of the children as they develop from class 1 through to 8. The forms of instruction the teachers apply, be it in Mathematics, or History, or English Literature, are intended to work with the children's developmental stage. Steiner places great emphasis that such teaching practice requires a deep level of conscious meditation and reflection from the teacher and cannot be ascertained as a set of simple instructions. It also requires of the teacher the development of intuition. The teacher must be capable of intuiting what "new element" or "new direction" the children are ready for. This of course relies on the teacher's responsiveness to the ongoing changes taking place in the class. No curriculum outline or teacher guidelines can alone provide such a skill. Nevertheless, in a general sense, working with the developmental stage of the students' consciousness and understanding the implications of the

curriculum and Steiner's guidelines may be said to be the task of the educator and the pedagogical foundation of Steiner teaching.

The child's physical body, of course, also gradually grows in this second seven-year period. The foundations of coordination established in the first seven years culminate by the ages of eleven or twelve, when the coordination of balance and movement is typically at its peak. Over the stage from seven to twelve, we can observe the child's physical growth is notably gradual, much like their conscious development. We can recognise in the child's physical growth a clear expression (or resemblance) of the developmental continuity that characterises the child's intellectual development. There is no great rupture in these years, but rather something more like coherent gradual development. Likewise, in their mental and emotional life, the child of twelve, though far more developed than the seven-year-old, is still working with the same model of consciousness, still "playing the same game", as it were, as the seven-year old. In other words, there is a continuity of consciousness over the course of the second seven-year period.

For a parent this explanation may be difficult to accept. The changes one's own child goes though during this second seven year "epoch" may very well seem seismic (and in close quarters they certainly can feel that way). And there may well be seismic changes for some children. Steiner does not seek to refute these experiences. His point is simply that when placed relative to other stages of development, in that vast context of human development, a consistency over these years is nevertheless apparent. The child's physical body and their way of thinking and of learning (their consciousness, in other words) develops in a consistent way from the birth of the *life body* to the coming of the next great change.

*Birth of the Astral Body (the third seven-year cycle)*

We all know what this great change is. And we all know what it means for our inner mental and emotional life, as well as for our physical body. But even experts in human development will acknowledge that we still know very little about what that change called adolescence is. If anything, we probably have lost the knowledge of adolescence that traditional societies had. In the modern age the uniqueness and complexity of adolescence has been profoundly ignored, with the consequence being that today we tend to explain adolescence solely in terms of the physical changes that we can identify: the maturation of sex organs, the beginning of menstruation, the growth of hair and other obvious developments, all said to be brought on by hormonal changes. These are the glaring things we refer to in order to show that something certainly has changed in the child. The child, indeed, is no longer a child. The child is now an adolescent.

Just as he explained the seven-year-old's change of teeth as a symptom of a spiritual change in their constitution, so too does Steiner explain the obvious physical signs of adolescence as symptoms of the birth of the *astral body*. According to Steiner, with the birth of the *astral body* the human being palpably changes physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. As well as our body, our very consciousness changes. After years of very gradual development, the adolescent is suddenly struck by a revolution in their physical, mental and emotional constitution. As the outer physical body undergoes rapid transformations, often leading to the loss of that previously perfected coordination, the inner life too is overhauled and replaced with a key new feature, a new kind of consciousness.

It can be (and usually is) a traumatic change to begin with. The sudden awkwardness of the physical body is challenging enough. But this would not nearly be so confronting were it not compounded by an entirely new dimension of consciousness. The adolescent *self-consciousness* that has

arrived is not only an awareness of the acne or the fluctuating voice. It is far more importantly a new developmental phenomenon, a new capacity for awareness of oneself. It is, Steiner explains, nothing less than an evolutionary development in human consciousness. The adolescent's consciousness, their way of experiencing, thinking and feeling, is fundamentally different to that of the younger child. The frame or window through which they consciously experience the world is no longer the open pool of picture consciousness. It is the consciousness experienced as self.

The early adolescent's sense of self and the influence this has in their thinking about and interpretation of the world must, in this sense, be compared to the awakening of conscious picture memory in the seven-year old, or indeed to the physical coordination of the new-born baby. The young adolescent is highly self-conscious, but far from developed in negotiating this new aspect of their consciousness. Their self-consciousness is a very new, awkward and even painful development. It is also, like the infant's sensory experience, all-encompassing. To begin with, differentiating the consciousness of the self from consciousness of the world of others is more or less impossible.

Modernity's conspicuous lack of insight into the developments of adolescence and the increasing problems experienced by adolescents adapting to the world point to a glaring failure in modern materialism. Steiner insists, we must not fall into the reductive thinking that explains adolescent self-consciousness as simply "different behaviour" to that of the younger child, as if the younger child were capable of such self-consciousness. Nor, of course, should the adolescent's behaviour be considered an "aberration" of their younger behaviour. Our insights into adolescence will not develop, he insists, if adolescent consciousness is explained simply as a child's complicated emotional response to their new

physical developments. Such explanations presume a false standard of continuity of consciousness and fail to recognise that human consciousness, like the body, develops and changes. We should instead approach human mental and emotional development as an expression of evolution. Adolescence is not only a new stage, but a new condition of being for human consciousness. It is an evolutionary development resulting from a substantial change in the spiritual constitution of the adolescent human being.

Unlike the second seven-year cycle, the "birth" of the *astral body* has nothing gradual and coherent about it. The changes announce themselves very quickly, though it remains a long time before the individual can properly "grow into" these changes. And this, of course, can be a very complex thing to work with, for both adolescents and adults. Adolescents can have their own behavioural and psychological norms turned upside down, while adults can quickly become confused about how to relate to them. We are often challenged by adolescents to ask: are they children or adults? Adolescents can certainly behave like young children. But they can also grow to such an adult physical stature, in a matter of months, that adults can find it very easy to project an expectation of consciousness onto their way of thinking. Faced with the intent stare of a six-foot fifteen-year-old, it is easy to expect the self-awareness of an adult. Such expectations, of course, usually lead to great frustration. For in their new way of self-oriented, "self-captained" thinking adolescents are of course only at the most infantile stage of adult conscious development.

Indeed, this "third stage" of consciousness development can at first seem much more like a regression in consciousness. For the middle-years teacher, the classroom transforms from a hive of pre-pubescent mental activity in class 7 to a den of stagnation by class 9. Occasionally the stagnation is relieved by moments of insurrection, and it is much the same at home. The adolescent's consciousness of self, the experience of self, has literally

undergone a birth (a messy birth at that) and it can dominate everything. The "new-born" adolescent self-consciousness is vulnerable, sensitive, even in pain, and its most obvious need is protection from the eyes of the world. Thus, the adolescent hunches over, mumbles into their chest, looks at their feet, retreats into their bedroom. These and countless other traits are the behavioural manifestations of a very real inner change. Steiner insists: the human being has not simply grown taller, has not simply acquired mature sexual organs. They have acquired an entirely new aspect of their spiritual constitution, known primarily through its consciousness, the *astral body*.

Like so many of Steiner's spiritual concepts, referring to the *astral body* can initially sound a nonsensical way to describe the contemporary teenager. But this has more to do with Steiner's choice of arcane terminology, for we in fact know the influence of *astral* from experience only too well. The subjectivism, the emotional life and the inner separation from parents and the broader world, all of these are symptoms of what is meant by the spiritual "birth" of the *astral body*. Again, we see that Steiner's explanations are not meant to deny what we already know, but to enable our understanding of a much deeper spiritual transformation that is occurring for the human being at this age.

In the classroom the adolescent intellect may well provide the teacher with challenges and frustrations undreamt of only a year or two earlier. But with their new consciousness of self, new forms of learning also become possible. No longer given to parroting facts about multiplication and capital cities, the adolescent can begin to formulate a new subjective mode of relationship to knowledge. Knowledge mediated through the consciousness of self begins to develop.

The "objective authority" of their earlier education (the primary teacher, like Moses from the mountain, imparting knowledge as fixed and

immutable law) becomes permeated with an important subjectivity and uncertainty in adolescence. This is first normally manifested in a totalising questioning of authority. For learning, knowledge becomes something meaningful and relevant only through the medium of the individual. The formation of judgements, the weighing up of evidence, the interpretations of poetic texts or scientific data, in short, the participation in a process self-oriented learning, this is the learning that meets the consciousness of the adolescent and challenges it to develop in complexity.

At the earliest developmental stage of adolescence, still very much binary in its thinking (either/or, black or white) and diabolical in its intent to win an argument, the adolescent consciousness can over time be met with progressive intellectual challenges for its development. This is the pedagogical ideal for this stage of education, for the fanatical subjectivism of the young adolescent consciousness to be gradually challenged, leading to a young adult (or post-adolescent) with an appreciation for intellectual complexity and an oriented self-consciousness, un-reliant on any kind of fixed dogma for its own sense of intellectual orientation. In other words, the goal is for early adolescent consciousness to develop over this third cycle towards the kind of free-thinking individual described in *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

One of the key points to take from Steiner's explanation of this stage is that those aspects of adolescence which materialist culture deems "aberrant" or "undesirable" are in fact expressions of human evolution (an obvious insight perhaps, though one that requires emphasis). Just as humans cannot reproduce without the physical changes of adolescence, so too, without the challenging emotional and other changes of consciousness brought by adolescence, we would have none of those things which arise from an individual's capacity to "know thyself", to form one's own judgements and develop the freedom of choice we take for granted in our social fabric. For

Steiner, the spiritual event which brings these crucial developments is the "birth" of the *astral body*.

Thus, we have a developmental picture of the human being: of the newborn child born physically; of the seven-year-old born in their *life body*; and of the adolescent born in their *astral body*. If you have followed the path thus far it may seem difficult to consider anything much further. But there is of course another key stage of development. Only at approximately the age of twenty-one, Steiner explains, will the individual's sense of "I" be born.

*The Birth of the* "I" *(the fourth seven-year cycle)*

The birth of the "I" is even more difficult to describe. From the previous chapter you will remember we are not dealing here sheerly with an abstract notion of self-awareness, or with an individual's capacity to use language in order to express their self-awareness. (Even small children these days are capable of such language.) In the modern age our capacity to recognise and distinguish what Steiner means as the "I" has indeed become extremely complicated. The overwhelming external influences of our age (not least the influence of behavioural science) have radically complicated our ability to observe and recognise what it is that Steiner means by a fully born "I". Based sheerly on behavioural observation it would seem almost impossible to distinguish any substantial developmental change brought by the "I" at twenty-one, at least to anything like the extent we can point to developmental changes observable around the ages of seven and fourteen.

Nevertheless, Steiner insists the "I" is born, or can be born, at twenty-one. This birth announces itself with no obvious physical symptoms (though we can point to significant neurological developments). Its arrival is invisible, or at least "more invisible" than the birth of the *astral* or *life bodies.* It is also, according to Steiner, something relatively new to human evolution.

The “I” is the fourfold human’s most recent acquisition, and so because of this it is still perhaps in a kind of embryo stage, yet to find its full form. Remembering Steiner’s concept of evolution as a development from spiritual to material states, the “I” remains of a wholly spiritual nature. As a phenomenon it therefore eludes our conceptual imagination somewhat, making it extremely difficult to describe even a vaguely concrete sense. We are, it might be said, simply not developed enough to directly fathom (or at least describe) what the “I” is or might be as a phenomenon unto itself.

So then, how do we approach the “I”? We have in the previous chapter already considered Steiner’s description of the “I” in terms of its relevance to human memory. As he writes: “Life belongs to the ether [*life*] body, consciousness to the astral body, and memory to the I”. (*ES*, p. 40*)* The “I”, Steiner goes on, enables our access to the permanent “memory recording” of consciousness. The property of memory-permanency the “I” brings to consciousness enables the “perceiving [of] earlier experiences at a later point in time”. (*ES*, pp. 42-3) Put simply, the “I” enables conscious recall of experiences independent of spatial and temporal restrictions, an extraordinary evolutionary capacity which we which we simply call “memory”. This was covered in the previous chapter.

Important though this insight is, the memory function of the “I” must also be regarded as only the most outer or superficial layer of what is meant by “I”. Like the change of teeth, Steiner emphasises memory because we can refer to the operations of memory with a degree of certainty, whereas other considerations of the “I” remain intangible and for many of us inaccessible. Nevertheless, we must not confuse memory with an adequate or comprehensive description of what the spiritual phenomenon of what the “I” is. Indeed, quite literally, conscious memory is according to Steiner not even wholly of the “I”. Conscious picture memory recall is, he tells us, a phenomenon that takes place in the “overlap” of the “I” and the *astral*, a

space where consciousness is permeated by a spiritual phenomenon not fixed in the immediate, which he calls the *sentient soul*.

To discuss those further developmental (or evolutionary) aspects brought by the birth of the "I" requires of us a far more meditative and inward form of consideration. Indeed, in terms of the kind of simple, grounded intellectual explanation offered in this book, the "I" must be said to remain in an important respect unknowable. In order to directly perceive and know the "I" as a phenomenon a different kind of thinking is required.

That different kind of thinking is, you may have guessed, the developmental practice of intuitive thinking as a spiritual path which Rudolf Steiner promotes. The "I" and its full realisation (or "birth") at twenty-one can never be adequately known within the terms of the critical thinking which prevails today. The "I" remains dormant or unconscious to such thinking unless the individual develops intuition and consciously awakens intuitive thinking and moral imagination in themselves. In other words (and this could hardly be more logical) to know the "I" as a phenomenon one must discover it for themselves, or in themselves, and this can be done by engaging in spiritual practice like the meditative development of intuitive thinking that Steiner recommends.

Steiner is clear that the "I" as a phenomenon cannot be perceived in any way (only its influence on other phenomena). Whereas the *life body* and *astral body* births provoke marked physical changes, the transformations that take place over the period from twenty-one to twenty-eight with the birth of the "I" are more strictly transformations of soul than of body. (Steiner speaks of the development of the "Intellectual Soul" in this stage.) To locate symptoms of this developmental stage we must therefore reflect not on the body but on the intellect, and the individual's developing consciousness of intellectual and, potentially, spiritual experience.

The “I” is, therefore, of a definably spiritual order. For Steiner the “I” is indeed our “gateway” or access point to the spiritual, our medium of spiritual experience. To put this another way, the “I” is the locus or medium of spiritual experience as experience of the eternal. It is through our developing consciousness of the “I” that our spirituality and consciousness of eternity develops. Though of course this development is entirely dependent on our conscious activity, which is for Steiner first and foremost our development of intuitive thinking.

How this phenomenon of the spiritual “I” manifests in our modern lives is, Steiner insists, of the most paramount importance. *The consciousness of our age must meet the “I” in “its own terms”, as it were, and not in the terms of a previous religious age.* No other message resonates more frequently throughout Steiner’s work. The modern age requires a modern spirituality. This means a spiritual approach that is as much scientific as it is philosophical (for the two are wholly commensurate). This Steiner describes as a modern spiritual approach developed through thinking, and more precisely through the development of intuitive thinking by means of meditative practice.

To put this another way, intuitive thinking is the conscious awakening of the potential of the “I” through spiritual practice. The benefits arising from this practice can be recognised not only in reference to the student’s intellectual comprehension of new principles or laws of thinking, but through their ongoing developmental practice of an intuitive way of thought.

The most practical way to appreciate this concept is perhaps to return to the basic meditations we have considered. In my attempt to keep things simple, I have restricted my discussion of Steiner’s meditative practices largely to those basic exercises in intuitive thinking which Steiner recommends (mediation on the rose, the stone, the plant and so forth). Important though

these elementary exercises are, it has been left unstated the far greater meditative course that Steiner outlines. For our purposes, his course in meditative spiritual practice extends beyond meditation on the mineral, plant or animal worlds to meet with a meditation on the "I" itself. So, let us consider this a little further.

Steiner's simple meditations, we remember, are directed exercises in concentration and contemplation which lead us towards a new consciousness of the qualities of the stone, or the plant, or the fish. The perceptual nature of the mineral, or the vegetable, or animal is, as a result of our meditation, "raised" or "clarified" in our consciousness. Most importantly, the qualities of *life* and *astral* forces are distinguished perceptually from the material qualities of mineral matter (which the stone, plant and fish all share).

It may come as no surprise that this very kind of observational, experiential approach is also brought to bear also on the "I". The "I", that inner orientation point of our mind and consciousness, now becomes the object of concentrated meditation. This, Steiner puts forward, is only genuinely possible with the birth of the "I" at around twenty-one years of age. Though preparatory meditation exercises and forms of self-reflection are possible for the adolescent, actual meditative self-reflection of the spiritual nature described here is only possible with the developments of the fourth seven-year cycle. With the birth of the "I" at around twenty-one, the window of self-consciousness through which the adolescent views the world is transformed to become a mirror in which the adult can become conscious of and even observe their own self. Where the adolescent developed self-consciousness, we might in very simple terms call this later development *self-awareness.*

This development only comes with great conscious effort. Steiner explains that the developments enabled by the birth of the "I" are (even more than earlier developments) dependent on the conscious work of the individual. They are not to be understood as evolutionary developments which occur sheerly out of an "external" natural process. The individual must consciously awaken the "I" (or, more accurately, their conscious relationship to the "I") for it to be fully "born". This is described quite literally by Steiner in terms of an "awakening" or bringing to consciousness of the "I" in the other aspects of the fourfold human being.

At this point Steiner's spiritual science extends far beyond the scope of this short introductory book. Steiner, however, writes that if consciously awakened the "I" can transform (or spiritualise) the rest of the human being in a most profound way. The "I" permeates and transforms all of the other fourfold bodies. This first takes place (or is first consciously knowable) in the *astral body*; more specifically in that part of the *astral body* which is "closest" to the "I", which he calls the *consciousness soul*:

> The true nature of the "I" first reveals itself in the consciousness soul… the consciousness soul's perception of the "I" can take place only through a certain inner activity… When the "I" is perceived -that is, when self-reflection takes place -an inner activity of the "I" begins. (*ES*, p. 48)

This "inner activity" of the "I" on the consciousness soul brings transformations of a spiritual order to the human being. The individual does not simply come to new insights or ideas. Rather, the very manifold aspects of their spiritual being (the fourfold bodies) transform.

Steiner describes the transformations which meet the fourfold human being as such a consciousness is developed. In *Theosophy* he writes of the transformations brought to the *astral body*:

> Although the human "I" flashes forth in the consciousness being, it nevertheless penetrates the whole soul being… [making] its appearance in such a way that the astral body is transmuted from within the soul… This expresses itself in the illumination of the impulses, desires and passions… The "I" has then... become ruler in the world of impulses and desires. (*Theos*, pp. 37-8)

We might simply call this transformation "emotional regulation" or "self-control". And, in a limited sense, this is probably close to what Steiner means. However, such language can imply a sense of regulation or even policing of emotions without an actual change to the impulses, desires, passions. (For example, "I still have an urge to steal that bicycle, but I won't".) What Steiner is referring to here is rather a literal transformation in the conscious experience of emotions, a symptom of a literal transformation of the spiritual phenomenon of consciousness. The emotional life, and with it the moral imagination, transforms. This transformation is what makes the ethical individualism proposed in *The Philosophy of Freedom* possible. Steiner does not describe the transformation unequivocally – he notes that the *astral body* can remain "partly transmuted and partly untransmuted" (*Theos*, p. 38), allowing for certain emotional failings even from the most enlightened of individuals. Nevertheless, his key point is that the bringing to consciousness of the spiritual "I" actually initiates a phenomenal evolutionary development in the astral being of man. He calls this spiritual transformation of the astral the *spirit self*. "A similar process", Steiner writes, "takes place when he receives the life spirit into his 'I'. The *life body* then becomes transmuted, penetrated with the life spirit". (*Theos*, p. 39) If the *spirit self* is conscious mastery of the *astral* realm (of emotion, etc) the *life spirit* arises if the student develops conscious mastery over the *life body*'s etheric forces.

Further still, even the physical body itself can be transformed. He writes, “if the “I” receives the *Spirit Man*, it thereby receives the necessary force to penetrate and transform the physical body”. (*Theos*, p. 39) However, he qualifies, “naturally, that part of the physical body thus transmuted is not perceptible to the physical senses”. (*Theos*, p. 39) *Spirit Man* is thus Steiner’s term for the bringing of spiritual “I” consciousness to the physical body. Its relevance to yoga and other meditative practices will be known to many.

Outlining these transformations schematically, Steiner explains the “following arrangement may also be given of the members of [the human being]”:

1. Physical body
2. Life Body
3. Astral body
4. “I”, as soul kernel
5. Spirit self as transmuted astral body
6. Life spirit as transmuted life body
7. Spirit man as transmuted physical body (*Theos*, p. 39)

Such concepts are of course extremely challenging, and perhaps the best we can do here is simply outline the place they have in Steiner’s overarching system of the human being and its evolutionary relationship to the Cosmos. Put very simply, the descriptions offered by Steiner point to a spiritual development not only of our thinking, but also in our emotional, organic and physical bodies.

In light of all of this we must remember that for the modern individual it begins with thinking. This spiritual process is initiated not through ancient practices, or through encyclopaedic leaning, but through our development of intuitive thinking; through conscious meditation, first on the phenomena

of nature, then on the "I" itself. At an advanced level this process can, Steiner insists, lead to the transformation of our *astral*, *life* and physical bodies.

All of this is explained by Steiner in evolutionary terms. For Steiner, we participate in the evolutionary process of the Cosmos. Our individual lives and bodies are expressions of the evolutionary process of the Cosmos. We are in our differing aspects an image of the cosmic process. Steiner wants us to relate to evolution (and our participation in it) in far vaster and more conscious terms than materialism allows for. He insists that Darwinism and other brands of sheerly materialistic evolutionary science fail to adequately conceptualise evolution because of the emphatic reductionism of their methods, which so drastically under-represent or ignore those aspects of human beings (and the Cosmos) which are indeed the most evolved and worthy of our contemplation and knowledge: namely, our living forces, our emotional being and our thinking consciousness. For Rudolf Steiner, it is not through our genetic complexity but through our capacity for thinking-consciousness that our evolutionary development is most importantly understood. This of course requires a science of consciousness, built from a methodological capacity to observe consciousness. And just as this applies to our understanding of the development of the young human being, so also it applies also to the question of human evolution and our place in the world today. To this last question we will now turn.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# MATERIALISM, MODERNITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

> It is the secret of materialism that human beings turned to matter because of their spirituality. This is modern man's negation of his own spirituality.
> -Rudolf Steiner, *Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy*

In this final chapter we will consider the implications Steiner's philosophy and spiritual science has for the present time. What relevance do Steiner's key ideas of intuitive thinking, the fourfold human being and the evolution of consciousness have for the challenges which prevail today? How can Steiner's ideas be integrated into more mainstream or dominant intellectual frameworks? And to what extent does this integration require compromise and adaptation on the part of Steiner's philosophy, lest it remain confined to the world of esoteric societies? In other words, the concern in this final chapter is to consider if Steiner can become a relevant and useful thinker for the 21st century.

These are enormous questions. To even open them for consideration (which is all that can be hoped for here) we must first address what Steiner had to say about the current materialist period in which we live, speak and even think. For without a consciousness of those conditions of materialism which powerfully influence our language and our thinking, we are necessarily bound to conceptualise Steiner's key ideas within a limited and even counterproductive framework. It is indeed no small thing to acknowledge that the very impulse, or the very meaning, which impelled Steiner to

develop his philosophy and spiritual science may well be lost if we keep within terms of understanding that are familiar and conventional.

These concerns are of particular importance for this book. I have in previous chapters sought to explain Steiner's key ideas in simple terms. My motivation in doing so has been to provide an avenue through some of the obstacles that impede a wider reception for Steiner. But there is, of course, a potential problem with my approach. I have not yet addressed how the simple terms I often have used in this book uphold a materialistic kind of thinking, that very kind of thinking which Steiner sought to challenge. So, in this final chapter we need to explicitly ask a question that has quietly echoed behind the scenes throughout: to what extent is this book trying to adapt Steiner's ideas to a materialist discourse? And to what extent does this discourse inherently compromise or even undermine the spiritual value of Steiner's philosophy and broader Anthroposophy? For all the virtues of accessibility and simplicity that I have aimed for, does this project to "make Steiner simple" necessarily ignore or omit something of vital importance, something essential in Steiner's spiritual philosophy? I, of course, do not think it does. But these questions must be asked. For only in asking them can we expect to locate the potential problems. So, first, let us consider what a materialist discourse or, more specifically, "way of thinking" involves.

The notion of a "way of thinking" for how we make sense of or understand the world is often related to the idea of discourse. In conventional language the word discourse relates to rhetorical structures (for example, how one structures an argument to make a case). But in philosophical terms the idea of discourse can extend much further. When approaching discourse as a philosophical concept we are really dealing with the essential conditions that make up a person's world view, their beliefs or norms, or even their "reality". In modern philosophy, the core premise of discourse in this sense

is that forms of cultural meaning and power in a society are “products” or “symptoms” of more fundamental conditions in that society and historical period. In other words, the way people think and the prevailing normative concepts in a society are symptoms or products of underlying causes. The first challenge is to figure out what is the cause and what is the symptom.

This philosophical concept of discourse can be seen to stretch back at least as far as Plato. Plato recognised that most people’s intellectual framework for reality is dependent on their experience, and that this experience is always limited. Though we must be careful not to project too modern a way of thinking onto Plato, his chief observation seems to have been that most of us each “construct” an intellectual framework to make sense of reality and this construct is based on our daily experience and education (our domestic and civic life, our formal education, our religion, cultural influences and political influences *etc*). The world in Plato’s sense is dependent on and limited to what we, over the course of our lives, are exposed to and educated to know. Our intellectual framework must therefore be in some sense normative or relative to (or constrained within the terms of) the cultural and societal education we have engaged in.

For Plato, because the intellectual frameworks we construct are built from our education and experience, they are bound replicate the norms and systems of our society unless wider experience and knowledge is sought. Thus, the potential of new ideas and ways of thinking becoming widely accepted in any given society is very limited. Giving our normative intellectual frameworks all the more power is the fact that any substantial intellectual challenge to the framework is almost certainly bound to failure, namely because any substantial challenge must address the very parameters by which the normative framework establishes the terms of the real, or the true, or the possible.

Plato's ideas on "discursive realities" are articulated most famously in his *Allegory of the Cave*, in which he describes humanity as being chained within a cave, our heads fixed to see only a single wall and our entire experience of life confined to the shadows cast on that wall by a fire. In the cave, only the shadows are constitutive of our knowledge of the world, our intellectual framework of reality. Thus, in the cave, we attribute values of truth and reality to the shadows. In Plato's allegory a philosopher escapes his confines and climbs the mountain above the cave. From atop the mountain he experiences the grand vista of directly knowable reality. He returns to the cave to enlighten his fellows, still confined to the framework of shadows, on the wider reality of the world. On hearing what he has to say they murder him.

The idea of intellectual frameworks determining our reality is nothing new. What is more recent is the attempt to critique the historical, societal and cultural conditions for our intellectual normative frameworks. The German Idealist philosopher Hegel probably was the first to substantially develop such a critique. Hegel was the first to treat human thinking, morals and values systematically as historically relative to the time, place and culture from which they arose, and he did so with an unnerving level of ambition and scope, tracing the cultural and ideological norms of earlier civilisations up to the early 19$^{th}$ century Prussian State, which he postulated as the zenith of human cultural and intellectual development. For Hegel, new forms of ideas and human thinking enabled historical progress.

Then Marx, famously appropriating Hegel's concepts, applied the Hegelian historicism in sheerly economic terms. Developing the theory of historical materialism Marx argued that all intellectual frameworks are products or symptoms of the economic class relations of a society. Ideas did not create new conditions, new conditions created new ideas. For Marx, if you want

to find the reason for the way people think and value in a certain culture (be it ancient or modern), you should look to the economic basis of that culture. The intellectual and, more broadly speaking, "cultural" characteristics of a society are, in Marxist terms, strictly products or symptoms of economic class relations of power. The aesthetic, ideological and theological characteristics of medieval society are, for example, explained as symptoms of the economic relations of feudalism. Likewise, the cultural formations of modernity are explained as symptoms of capitalist relations.

Such was the influence of Marx's historical materialism that many were intimidated to take his idea further. But, in the twentieth century cultural theorists and postmodernists pursued Marx's notions of class power relations into the cultural sphere, finding articulations of power in all forms of the cultural fabric. These contemporary theories of culture, discourse and power differ wildly. However, put simply, for all these cultural theorists our intellectual frameworks and the ways we think are profoundly determined by the social structures of knowledge and power we inhabit and engage with.

So what does this outrageously brief overview of historicism and discourse have to do with Steiner? On the surface, perhaps very little. Marxist and postmodern theory are not normally discussed in the same sentence as Anthroposophy. However, if we reconceptualise the discussion a little, we find that the core idea of approaching intellectual frameworks symptomatically is entirely implicit to Steiner's philosophy. Steiner is indeed a symptomatic philosopher. He is concerned with describing those characteristics of a culture and of human thinking as symptoms of underlying conditions. But here we must add an important qualification. For unlike Marx or Michel Foucault, Steiner is not primarily concerned with underlying conditions such as economic relations or normative cultural

structures. These things he regards not as determining structural causes but as material symptoms of underlying spiritual causes.

As a "bridging term" between Steiner and mainstream Continental philosophy, the concept of discourse or intellectual frameworks might be said to refer in Steiner's philosophy to the dominant way of thinking of a certain "cultural epoch" and how that dominant intellectual framework is relative to a particular evolutionary stage in human development. Steiner is, rather ironically, not unlike Marx in this sense, in that both philosophers explicitly adopt Hegel's model of certain stages in history that have had distinct intellectual and cultural formations. Indeed, the structure of Steiner's evolutionary narrative is basically Hegelian.

But radically unlike Marx, for Steiner the dominant discourse of a historical period is not a product of sheerly material economic forces, but rather the effect of new conditions in the spiritual evolution of human beings, society and indeed the Cosmos. For Steiner, the discourse of a society and culture transforms not because people are influenced by material economic structures, but rather because people themselves change. More precisely, our consciousness changes. Human consciousness changes because our fourfold evolutionary make-up changes, bringing with this change new forms of thinking. These new ways of thinking inform the kinds of concepts people develop in thinking, the kinds of models they design, the kinds of explanations that acquire power in a culture and society. In turn, this is all informed by certain spiritual changes at work in the evolution of human beings. In other words, if for Marx social and historical change occurs as a result of economic forces, for Steiner these changes are a result of the evolutionary process in human consciousness.

We come now to another essential and very challenging Rudolf Steiner idea. *New ways of thinking are made possible by new evolutionary stages of*

*consciousness*. So, let us consider this vast and strange idea. And being that it is so vast, let us focus on the relevance this idea has for the present time.

Our current cultural epoch is that of modernity (Steiner has many names for it, including the "Fifth post-Atlantean Epoch", but I will here just refer to it as modernity). The initial problem with discussing modernity is not so much the question as to whether such a period existed or continues to exist (most scholars can agree that some form of modernity exists or has existed). The greater problem is deciding when and where modernity began. Is modernity concurrent with the industrial age, the capitalist age, the age of European discovery, the age of printed words? Is it necessarily a phenomenon with Western or European origins? Does modernity continue today, or do vestiges of modernity remain while an entirely different form of culture and discourse has arisen? To any of these great questions it would all seem to depend on what reference points we are using. However, the supposition (still ubiquitous in Steiner's time) that modernity began in or was unique to the intellectual cultures of Europe has long been rejected.

With a Eurocentric attitude typical of his age, Steiner describes modernity very much as a European cultural and intellectual phenomenon. For him modernity begins to develop in Europe out of the previous epoch of medievalism around the 13$^{th}$ century. However, for Steiner the seeds of modernity are planted long before the tree of modernity begins to substantially grow. Steiner qualifies his explanation of European modernity by explaining that the essential change in human thinking, which brought about modernity, is first evident in early Islamic intellectual culture of the 9$^{th}$-13$^{th}$ centuries. It was, Steiner explains, early Aristotelian Islamic culture that developed what could be called an unprecedentedly abstract way of thinking. When introduced into Christian culture, the influence of Islamic thinking (exemplified in thinkers like Avicenna and Averroes) was such that a form of abstract Aristotelianism, quite different from the kind of Greek

thinking in original Aristotle, could be synthesised with Christian doctrine to create the basis for a modern intellectual culture. This will be explained in more detail later.

Though its origins lie some five hundred years earlier, it was not, Steiner explains, until the 15th century that modern thinking found its first major cultural expression, perhaps most notably in the Italian Renaissance. Over subsequent centuries the new way of thinking culturally established in the Renaissance spread and developed like branches into the Scientific Revolution, the Protestant Revolution, the great liberal-democratic revolutions of France and America and of course the Industrial Revolution. For the contemporary historian such broad categorical explanations of these historical changes, each epochal in themselves, may well seem absurd. But for Steiner, who deals in such vast historical explanations, all these monumental developments belong to the same modern "stream" or "impulse". They all primarily arise from a change in human consciousness and thinking.

Steiner proposes that we can recognise in the Reformation, the scientific revolution and the liberal democratic revolutions a common and fundamentally modern re-conception of the individual's relationship to authority: the individual's role in their relationship with God (Protestantism), to ascertain truth not from doctrine but from observation (scientific method), to determine the political authority of their society (liberal democracy). It is a simplistic but nevertheless accurate observation to say that all these cultural revolutions have to do with the individual's sovereignty and capacity for self-determination (determining knowledge, claiming individual rights, achieving salvation). All these expressions of individual sovereignty, Steiner claims, are symptomatic of a change in human consciousness.

In the field of modern philosophy, the emphasis on the sovereignty of the individual becomes the criterion not just for political rights, but also forms the basis of the modern epistemological model of reality. The sovereignty of the individual defines modern thinking. Remember Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*? As Steiner writes:

> A firm point had been won from which one can seek... the explanation of the rest of world phenomena... *I think therefore I am.*… There is only one thing I know with altogether unqualified certainty, for I myself bring it to its existence: my thinking. (*PF*, p. 34)

Descartes can be considered the first definitively modern thinker, precisely because he takes the value of individual sovereignty and places it as his philosophical premise. Descartes does not simply philosophise about the value of the individual freedom within the framework of the older philosophers. He makes that value the premise of his philosophical model and develops every subsequent principle from it. For Descartes the individual sovereign thinker becomes not only the key to knowing reality, but the only reliable basis for theorising reality itself. This is the basis for the dominant intellectual framework of modernity.

Descartes' model of individual sovereignty is an astonishing break from the medieval conceptual framework that preceded it. Indeed, it may be the most radical conceptual shift in history. So, from where (or out of what) did this new modern idea of the sovereignty of the individual and the thinking mind arise? To appreciate Steiner's approach to this fundamental development in modernity we need to ask: what changed for humans to be able to imagine those ideal forms of freedom (scientific, religious, philosophical, political) that distinguish modernity? Are these ideas sheerly symptomatic responses to material conditions (like the rise of new capitalist economic relations, as

Marx would have it)? Or do we have to consider something new in the human being?

Steiner wants us to consider the possibility of a fundamentally new spiritual impulse of consciousness, unique to our time, which engendered a new a very different relationship to the world. It is an impulse not to be found in the external world but in human beings themselves. He calls it the *consciousness soul*.

What are the essential characteristics by which we can recognise the modern consciousness soul? Well, it is hardly within the limitations of this book to substantially describe those intellectual, imaginative and creative aspects that distinguish modernity. However, one representative example provides an insight not just into the new ideas and concepts characteristic of modernity but also into what might be called the "perspective" or "world-view" of modern consciousness.

Questions of aesthetics may seem too fickle to be significant for an understanding of human evolution. However, aesthetics can shed light on crucial and otherwise neglected aspects, especially when considering the ideas of consciousness that Steiner raises. Steiner referred consistently to works of art in his explanations of the evolution of consciousness, for these artworks, he claimed, bring to light aspects historical change that other forms of research cannot reveal. The study of the aesthetics of Greco-Roman antiquity or of Medievalism, for example, can tell us much more of these cultures and periods than sheer analysis of historical texts or artefacts. So too is this the case with modernity.

So let us consider the modern preoccupation with two-dimensional illusory images. Of all the aesthetic preoccupations that have characterised the modern age, the most prominent is the desire for verisimilitude: the

representation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane. For the 14th and 15th century artists it was the new aesthetic frontier. Their perspective paintings announced a revolution in ways of seeing. Today, observing the number of people staring at images on screens, we might say it has become something more like an addiction. Though not entirely without precursors in pre-modern art, the fascination with verisimilitude is uniquely modern. Verisimilitude, we might say, is symptomatic of something essential in the modern perspective and, indeed, modern consciousness.

Firstly, we can recognise in the verisimilitude of early modern painting a new level of aesthetic value placed solely on the represented object. The material physicality of the object itself (not just what it represents or symbolises) becomes far more important than in earlier pictorial art. Earlier Greek and Roman art strives for this physical value in sculpture, but not until the modern age is such physicality sought on a two-dimensional plane. For the early modern painters the goal to faithfully reproduce the perceptual experience of the represented object is of primary importance, not just for the image of Christ and the Virgin Mary but also for the smallest details. We can refer to countless examples to demonstrate this aesthetic value, but to take a simple one, think of Leonardo da Vinci's fascination with accurately drawing folded material. Amid all the cultural complexities of his day, the sheer perceptual imprint made by light on folded material claimed Leonardo's fascination. The fascination was, we might say, the threshold of modern artistic consciousness, to capture such visual nuances of physical reality in an image.

Something new of modern consciousness is evident in Leonardo's drawings. The two-dimensional representation of light on folded material, though seemingly ideologically insignificant, becomes a source of the greatest interest and artistic challenge. And this is of course demonstrated

not just in Leonardo's work but in the work of all the major Renaissance artists. Here is a new aesthetic value arising from a new conscious experience of the world. It is an aesthetic value to reproduce and record the reality of the perceptible world in a two-dimensional form. It is an aesthetic value of verisimilitude that might almost be called "scientific", for it is an aesthetic of observation and of documentation, by means of reproducing the perceptual experience of the object.

So, in modern verisimilitude we find something both subtle and very significant: an aesthetic trend in early modernity that conventionalises the values of observation, documentation and fidelity to the physical reality of the object. For Steiner the similarities these values bear with the values of modern scientific methodology are not coincidental. Both, according to Steiner, are symptomatic of modern consciousness and the new intellectual experience it brings for humans of the relationship between the perceptible world and mental experience. The accurate intellectual and aesthetic representation of empirical reality becomes the new modern preoccupation.

But to further understand the modern consciousness we must note the paradox. For, as Dostoevsky most astutely observed, modern consciousness is inherently given to paradox. The paradox of verisimilitude, say in Leonardo's drawings of folded sheets, is of course that they are both highly realistic depictions of the object and the sheerest illusionism. An aesthetic of realism is, by definition, equally an aesthetic of illusionism.

One thinks here of René Magritte's realistic painting of a smoking pipe with the caption, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe"). It looks like a pipe. But of course, it is not a pipe. It is a painting. Likewise, when we remark that a painting by a Renaissance artist looks "realistic" we are of course remarking (consciously or not) that it is an extremely well-constructed illusory image, a near perfect demonstration of perspective,

light, space, colour and plasticity to make the image appear three-dimensional. But we know this appearance is an illusion. We, as viewers, endow the illusion with reality.

The aesthetics of verisimilitude work by means of paradox: a mental experience of reality is constructed by means of an illusion. And this the paradox leads us some way to understanding Steiner's description of modern consciousness. Verisimilitude values, and even celebrates, scientific observation and fidelity to the object. And yet this is achieved by an illusion, by a two-dimensional image that tricks us into relating to the image as three-dimensional reality. If we look to the subsequent developments of verisimilitude (photography, cinema, television, virtual reality) we can readily recognise the cultural magnitude of this paradox. These paradoxical images have become our primary cultural currency.

What, you now ask, does this tell us of modern consciousness? For Steiner it tells us something of a *split* in the way we experience and know the world. And this split, he claims, is peculiar to modernity. He writes that at the towards the end of the medieval period:

> Influences led to a split within the human soul... This split still exists today and is evident in many different phenomena of life… Intellectual forces were developed … in the context of knowing and controlling the sense world. Two worlds developed within the human breast, so to speak. (*ES*, p. 277)

We will consider more literally the "two worlds" this cryptic passage refers to a little later. For now, one way to approach the idea of this "split" is to return to Kant's epistemological model and the division Kant finds between the phenomenal world and our experience of it.

We remember that for Kant the split between phenomenal and noumenal is an accurate representation of the relationship of human thought and the

world. The realm of the mental picture (the mind) and the realm of perceptible reality (the noumenal world) are for him necessarily split. Indeed, without such a split there can be no thoughts, because for Kant thoughts need to "think about" or reflect on things. Kant's entire epistemological model is built from this premise. Reality is knowable only as two worlds: phenomenal and noumenal. In promoting such a model, Kant of course is representative of a dualist epistemology, in Steiner's words, "assuming two worlds absolutely different from each other... each of which has its own laws". (*PF*, pp. 100-101)

For Steiner, the split in Kant's epistemology is symptomatic not of any essential human condition but of a certain kind of thinking engendered by a certain form of human consciousness. Kant's model represents for Steiner not the reality of mental experience ("as it is" or "as it has always been") but rather *how* modern consciousness has evolved to come to intellectual knowledge of this reality. In other words, Steiner argues that Kant finds an essential split between the noumenal and the phenomenal not because there is an essential split, but because Kant's consciousness and thinking activity creates the split. The Kantian "gap" between the noumenal and the phenomenal is therefore, for Steiner, a symptom of modern consciousness.

Steiner insists that human beings in previous epochs experienced consciousness differently. They did not experience the modern "split" of mind and world, at least not in anything like the way we do in modernity. The difference Steiner proposes is not simply because our modern brains have developed as a result of interaction with far more technological information and stimulus. Steiner insists that *human consciousness in earlier epochs was different to ours in an evolutionary sense.* Human consciousness has evolved. And the most notable characteristic of this evolution of consciousness is that the activity of thinking and the

relationship between what we call the “inner life” and the external world has changed.

So, here’s the rub. If consciousness has changed, how do we approach the thinking of an earlier time if our own thinking is determined by our modern consciousness? How do we avoid projecting our modern concepts, ways of knowledge and thinking onto earlier times? This is a considerable problem.

Here the ancient Greeks provide a very useful point of reference, for in many respects they offer a bridge between a far older forms consciousness and our modern form. We accept that ancient Greek intellectual culture established many of the foundations for modern knowledge systems and dominant ways of thinking. As Bertrand Russell eloquently summarises:

> What they did in art and literature is familiar to everybody, but what they did in the purely intellectual realm is even more exceptional. They invented mathematics and science and philosophy; they first wrote history as opposed to mere annals; they speculated freely about the nature of the world and the ends of life, without being bound in the fetters of any inherited orthodoxy.[5]

Because of this eminent influence, ancient Greek intellectual culture has often been considered a kind of embryonic form of present modern culture. Modernity is regarded as a genealogical “descendent”, as it were, inheriting the intellectual frameworks developed by the ancient Greeks. The values of empiricism, deductive and inductive reasoning, pluralism, democracy, all of these modern values are considered to have their origins in Greece. This narrative has led many to assume a continuity of consciousness between ancient Greek thinking and modernity. And indeed, why wouldn’t we

[5] Russell, Bertrand, *The History of Western Philosophy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996) p. 15

assume such a continuity when Greek knowledge informs so much of our education system to the present day?

This assumption of continuity is something Steiner challenges. Although he could hardly stress the intellectual significance of ancient Greek culture more, Steiner does point out that a problem in knowing Greek thinking arises when a distinctively modern way of thinking is projected. He insists that the Greeks thought differently, not just because the different material conditions of the age conditioned them to different mental operations, but because thinking literally took place for them differently as a phenomenon. He means this quite literally: as a phenomenon the Greeks thought differently. He explains:

> When we look back to former epochs… we find a mode of perception that, albeit instinctively, penetrated into things… grasped something of the soul activity within outer nature… understood the incorporation of the soul-spiritual into the physical corporeal element. (*MAT*, Lect. 3)

And again:

> The Greeks actually did not picture the soul separately from the body. They imagined it moulding the fluid body, bringing about the presence of air through inhaling and exhaling. They pictured the soul causing the conditions of warmth in the body, the body's warming and cooling processes… The Greeks pictured all this in full vitality. (*MAT*, Lect. 17)

According to Steiner, the Greeks experienced the activity of thinking in a manner far more interrelated with the living forces of the body and of what we call “nature” than we do. In Kantian language we might say their mental pictures were far more connected with the noumenal, or with feeling experiences. The “soul”, that subjective phenomenon of consciousness, was

less distinct than in modern consciousness, still something to a degree experienced in the perceptible world. Referring to his fourfold description of the human being, Steiner explains that the ancient Greeks experienced thinking in the *life body*. At that stage of human evolution, it was the *life body* where thinking "took place". In this sense the phenomenon of Greek thinking was of a different nature to modern thinking, as an activity and not just in terms of ideas or content.

It is an astonishing claim, an actual phenomenologically different kind of thinking. Indeed, the Greeks are only one example Steiner gives. They are only the most "proximate" form of consciousness to ours. Steiner gives numerous explanations of the more different forms of human consciousness as experienced in the earlier "Post-Atlantean" epochs of ancient India, Persia, Eqypt and so on. Put very simply, each epochal stage is, in Steiner's broad categorical language, characterised by a new evolutionary form of consciousness, a new relationship of thinking to both the spiritual and the physical worlds. The evolutionary direction of these developments is, in his words, "… to develop soul faculties that could be acquired through awakened powers of thought and feeling [for] … the world of the senses". (*ES*, p. 263)

Put even more simply, human consciousness has, in Steiner's scheme, evolved to become increasingly oriented or bound to the material. The consciousness of what he calls the first "Post-Atlantean" epoch (ancient Indian culture) was still, according to Steiner, located primarily in the spiritual, regarding the physical as *maya* (illusion). The consciousness of subsequent epochs progressively materialised, up to the point where today the physical has become the primary and reliable reference point for knowledge and the reality of spiritual phenomena has become logically doubtful.

Once again, the scope and esoteric nature of Steiner's claims here warrants a fair degree of scepticism. But his grand esoteric claims and dubiously Eurocentric epochal narrative need not dissuade us from the more essential points. Perhaps the key principle we are to take from Steiner's explanation of this evolutionary process is that the phenomenon of thinking, indeed the relationship of human thinking within the fourfold human being, changes over the course of evolution (not just physical evolution, but spiritual). Just as last chapter we learnt that the phenomenon of thinking changes as the individual human being develops over the course of a lifespan, so now we learn that human consciousness and thinking has evolved over the course of human history. Where for the Greeks thinking interacted in a constant way with the living processes of the *life body*, for moderns a new kind of consciousness means that our thinking moves from the *life body* into the material conditions of our physical body.

The evolutionary change in human thinking from *life body* to physical body is of enormous importance to comprehend if we are to make sense of Steiner's picture of modern consciousness. Steiner explains that in the modern age the activity of thinking "earlier experienced in the etheric [*life*] body… has now slipped, so to speak, into the physical body where it leads only a subjective existence". (*MAT*, Lect. 10) In other words, the modern activity of thinking is now materialised in the physical body in a way that thinking in earlier epochs was not. He elaborates:

> In the fifteenth century people began to think with their physical bodies. When we think, we do so with the forces the etheric [*life*] body sends into the physical body. This is the great difference that becomes evident when we look at thinking before and after the fifteenth century. When we look at thinking prior to that time, it runs its course in the etheric body; in a sense,

> it gives the etheric [*life*] body a certain structure. If we look at thinking now, it runs its course in the physical body. (*MAT*, Lect. 10)

Let us approach this overwhelming idea as simply as possible. When we say that someone inclined to deep thought is "lost in their own head" what are we referring to? What is it to be so deep in thought that the perceptible world is, in a significant way, "shut out"? Is such thinking a palpable demonstration of a kind of mental activity that is contained in physical dimensions of the human body or brain? And is this what Steiner is referring to when he describes this shift from *life body* to physical? In a certain important respect, the answer is yes.

What, after all, is the phenomenon of someone becoming mentally detached from their surroundings, so as not to hear the conversations spoken around them, or notice the traffic lights turn green? For Steiner, such trifling daily examples of mental distraction are symptomatic of modern consciousness. In these and many everyday examples we find a mental world unto itself, an interior subjective world of mental experience made possible because of the evolution of consciousness into the physical body. Indeed, Steiner calls the thinking made possible by this form of consciousness a kind of "physical thinking". Naturally, this form of consciousness and thinking reinforces a "split". Primarily it is a split between inner mental experience and the outer perceptible world. But more complex formations of this split can be known by regarding cultural and intellectual expressions of modernity symptomatically.

We have already considered the aesthetics of verisimilitude and Kantian dualism for the ways these forms of representation establish an objective-subjective split. At finer levels too, the ways by which meaning and knowledge is established or communicated in the dominant discursive forms of modernity can also be explained as symptomatic of modern

consciousness. Not only do the broad concepts and models of reality we use reflect our modern consciousness, but also the ways we think, rationalise and communicate.

Language here becomes very important. As the eminent anthroposophist and literary scholar Owen Barfield has discussed, the ways humans have related to language, made meaning from language and established knowledge through language, all suggest historical changes with developments in consciousness. Barfield writes:

> It has only just begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone… the part history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map… language has preserved the living inner history of man's soul.[6]

In his book *History in English Words* Barfield engages in a detailed study of this history, noting how the use and meaning of words (or their etymological roots) shifts radically over epochs to represent entirely different concepts, epistemologies and cosmologies.

Most pertinently for us, Barfield stresses again and again the shift in words from what modern language would refer to as "objective" to "subjective". He writes:

> When a Roman spoke of events as *auspicious* or *sinister*, or when some natural object was said in the Middle Ages to be *baleful*, or *benign*, or *malign*, a herb to possess such and such a *virtue*, an eye to be *evil*… it is true that these things were described from the human point of view, but the activity was felt to emanate from the object itself. When we speak of an object or an event as *amusing*, on the contrary, we know that the process

[6] Barfield, Owen, *History in English Words* (London: Faber & Facer, 1967) p. 18

> indicated by the word *amuse* takes place within ourselves… Perhaps the somersault was turned most neatly by the old Aristotelian word *subjective*, which developed in the seventeenth century from its former meaning of "existing in itself" to the modern one of "existing in human consciousness".[7]

In these and many other instances Barfield suggests that although modernity has inherited words and concepts from classical and medieval cultures, the conceptual "meaning" (or perhaps more accurately, the "referent") of these words has turned inside-out (or "outside-in" rather) to describe a subjective experience of consciousness. The qualities of experience have in modernity become the domain of the subjective world. Such changes of course may be attributed sheerly to structural developments in language, not to any significant changes in human thinking. But Barfield, following Steiner's lead, proposes we explain these changes not simply with reference to structural or cultural changes, but rather by taking the leap to consider how human consciousness has changed over the epochs to experience thought more independently of the perceptible world.

While Barfield subtly considers in detail the evidence in language of a revolutionary historical change in human thinking, Steiner confronts the phenomenon of language more directly. He speaks explicitly about how the relationship of a concrete word and its conceptual meaning alters with developments of consciousness. According to Steiner the evolution of consciousness (and resultant human thinking) brings with it a new kind of distinction between the concrete word and its concept, or the signifier and the signified. In far more ancient forms of consciousness, he explains, "the word content and the ideal, conceptual content of consciousness were experienced in an undifferentiated manner". (*MAT*, Lect. 3) If we can imagine it, the word and its concept or meaning were experienced in early epochs as a unity. As an example, think perhaps of mantras and how the

[7] *Ibid*, pp 175-6

sound and form of a word like “OM” cannot be abstracted and separated from its concept. There is no point in substituting a definition or synonym for OM. The word must be spoken. The living sound of the word is integral to its meaning. OM is in this way an essential expression of its meaning (a meaning which cannot be adequately expressed without the word itself). This is a limited example, but it gives us some sense of Steiner’s notion of the earlier forms of consciousness and the relationship to language.

Steiner stresses that with the intellectual culture of ancient Greece concrete word and “conceptual content became separated”. (*MAT*, Lect. 3) For the first time, in Greek thought, a concept and a word had distinguishable “lives”, so to speak, and could be conceived of independently. The new form of consciousness of the Greeks enabled a new form of language, establishing the basis for a different kind of intellectual discourse. Thus, Steiner finds the rise in Greece of an early form of analytical philosophical discourse which functions as a kind of “mirror” to accurately represent and explain reality descriptively (a discourse we recognise as the beginning of philosophy). Put more simply, the Greeks had both a language and a consciousness enabling philosophy.

Steiner emphasises that in the age of modern consciousness the word content and the ideal have continued to separate, such that words today can freely shift between and have multiple concepts. The “loosening” of words and meanings has indeed led to a powerful form relativism, whereby language can be easily manipulated and exploited for authoritarian ends, leading to what is often called a “post-truth” discourse. But beyond stressing this troubling fragmentation and relativisation of language, Steiner wants us to understand what is behind it, that more foundational change in our consciousness. This, he explains, has to do with the rise of abstraction,

something that was only nascent in Greek thinking and has become very dominant in the modern age.

What is abstraction with regards to consciousness? Let us first consider how we use the term in different contexts. If we say a lecture is too "abstract" we probably mean the lecturer introduced too many concepts without providing enough concrete examples for us to genuinely grasp the key ideas. If we call a personality "abstract" it might be because their intellectual characteristics are dominant over their emotional or physical characteristics. They might spend a great deal of time "in their head", concerned with mathematical formulae or analytical philosophy. Paintings are sometimes referred to as "abstract" if they do not represent any referential object, but are simply colours, shapes and patterns. Music is often referred to as itself an "abstract" art because it does represent the world but is a form of expression unto itself. In the academic sense, "abstract" refers to the reducing down to the essentials, the distillation of thesis in a statement. This is a meaning contained in the Latin root word *abstrahere*, which means to "strip down" or, indeed, to "split". It is especially with regards to this last meaning that modern consciousness, according to Steiner, can be said to be in an essential way abstract.

If we were to clarify a concept to define abstraction, we might say that abstraction presupposes a field or a realm of mental experience that is separate to, or at least distinct from, everything else. In other words, intellectual abstraction exists in a purely intellectual realm. It has no empirical reality. Think, quite simply, of an algebraic equation: $A + B = C$. The constituents of this formula cannot be seen, nor touched. $A + B = C$ is a purely abstract conceptual formula. However, the formula can be validated with reference to any number of tangible quantities.

The systematising of phenomena by means of abstraction is everywhere to be seen. School assessments "abstract" the student's learning to measure it on a level of theoretical equivalence with other students. To receive a grade of *A* or *B* or *C* is of course an abstraction of a complex, dynamic and ongoing process of learning. The proclamation "all men are created equal" is likewise an abstraction, as are all "negatively" conceptualised human rights. Rights must indeed be applicable regardless of context. They must be, in an important sense, abstractions.

In Steiner's terms, pure abstraction might be said to be a kind of thinking entirely belonging to the realm of *concept*, independent of *percept.* The systems of abstraction belong to a conceptual realm separate from any specific perceptual context. As an activity of thinking, abstraction therefore would seem to rely on an independent field of mental experience, a phenomenal world of the mind like Kant suggested, in which purely mental operations of thinking can take place. According to Steiner's evolutionary framework, abstract thinking is an evolutionary capacity made possible by the human capacity to think independently of perception, in a purely mental space. The human capacity to think in abstractions is, in other words, symptomatic both of a "split" in human consciousness and a development of the human "I".

So if we are to accept Steiner's description of abstract thinking as an evolutionary development, does not the human capacity for abstract thinking therefore prove or at least endorse Kant's and others' dualistic separation of mind and world? It makes sense to ask this: if abstract thinking takes place independently of perception, as Steiner describes, is this not because the human experience of mental pictures is in an essential sense independent from the sensible world? Steiner's answer to this problem is to argue that abstraction is not in fact the true nature of mental experience, but

rather symptomatic of a mis-development in the evolution of human thinking. He explains how a separation of conceptual and perceptual in human thinking developed over the course of modernity, enabling more abstract thinking and limiting the development of intuitive thinking.

Steiner notes that it was the Arabic culture of the early Islamic period which first moved into what might be called pure abstraction. In early Islamic culture's non-representative aesthetics (geometric patterns) and intellectual developments (most famously algebra) we can recognise forms of abstraction with no precedent in classical cultures. With these forms of expression and knowledge, Arabic culture was the first intellectual culture works to develop systems of knowledge reliant on no empirical referents. Such thinking itself establishes its own systems, which can then be applied to different quantities in the world. Steiner explains Arabic knowledge systems as a monumental development in human thinking, symptomatic of an evolution in human consciousness, a transformation of Greek thinking into the realm of pure thinking. He explains it in the following way:

> The attempt had been made to take what the Greeks had experienced as the relationship between the soul-spiritual element … what they had seen in full physical and soul-spiritual clarity and formative force, and to raise it up into the region where the ego could be fully comprehended … What Avicenna and Averroes brought across, what Aristotelianism had turned into in Asia, so to speak, struggles with the comprehension of the human "I". (*MAT*, Lect. 17)

Steiner's language is, in a spiritual sense, quite literal here. The thinking still active in the *life body* in ancient Greek philosophy, still as a phenomenon connected with the world, is in Arabic knowledge turned to that spiritual realm of the human being that exists independently of the world: the human "I". As we have learned, the "I" (or the Ego) is that place where thinking can refer and exist unto itself, independent of the conditions of space and time, as demonstrated most evidently in the intellectual process

of memory. Thus, in the thinking of Arabia was the intellectual foundation for abstraction established.

Steiner explains that the evolutionary development of a new modern form of consciousness (which he describes as beginning in the early Arabic period and culminating in the 15th century) enabled this abstract thinking to be taken much further. He notes that the early modern intellectual cultures of Europe explode with developments in the application of abstract thinking: in law, religion and of course in science. He explains the theories of Newton, for example, are enabled not only by a new scientific method, but by a new capacity for abstract thinking, which makes possible an exponentially more complex approach to systemisation and deduction of laws.

The role of Descartes is once again fundamental here. Descartes is for Steiner the essential and primary articulator of the new abstract thinking. In Descartes' system of knowledge, the independence claimed by the thinking "I" assumes a sovereignty as the basis for all knowledge. The "I think, therefore…" becomes a place-unto-itself, the first principle. As a result, in Descartes' thinking, everything else becomes subject to doubt, tested by means of the theoretical frameworks established by the thinking "I". With this first principle in place, scientific knowledge of the world aims for empirical reliability, but it also assumes philosophical validity only within the framework of theory; that is to say, as an abstraction. As an abstraction the knowledge is always in doubt, always in some sense hypothetical. The independent field by which abstract thinking comes to its conclusions is also a field that requires its conclusions to always remain in doubt.

As we know, Steiner is not dismissive of modern scientific theoretical knowledge, nor is he naïve to astonishing developments abstract thinking has brought. But he is emphatic that the problems with this thinking be

recognised and resolved. The problems (and here we must register the *essential problems Steiner wishes to make clear about the modern age*) are that the abstract thinking made possible by our evolved consciousness is not being developed in the appropriate ways. In fact, according to Steiner, the kind of excessively abstract thinking that has arisen with modern consciousness is a disastrous mis-development.

Steiner asks, what has the independent realm of abstract modern thinking been most preoccupied with? What have abstract knowledge systems been most rigorously applied to? The answer, of course, is the physical world. Increasingly, over the course of modernity the abstract world of thought has been preoccupied not with experiencing and knowing thinking, but with theoretically knowing the physical world.

This is what Steiner wishes us to recognise as the paradox of modern thinking. A spiritual faculty of thinking has remained undeveloped by virtue of it being focussed on the physical world:

> Simply because they were now in a position to carry out something completely nonphysical with their physical body, namely, intellectual activity, human beings thus became completely spiritual beings in regard to their activity. But… they denied this spirituality. People related what they grasped mentally only to the physical world. (*MAT*, Lect. 11)

Though taking form in the subjective realm of abstract thinking, modern knowledge systems paradoxically, in Steiner's words, "restrict science to what is revealed through the senses and the intellect that serves them". (*ES*, p. 13) Modern thinking in Steiner's view is thus grossly limited because its field of knowledge and indeed perception is restricted within the confines of the physical, which of course it remains separated form. The ramifications of this limitation are qualitative as much as quantitative,

affecting our way of thinking as much as the concepts we use and reinforcing the split of mind and world (both conceptually and experientially) rather than resolving it.

Steiner is clear that this paradox did not become a significant cultural problem until well into the modern period. Not until the mid-19th century, he explains, did the paradox of modern thinking develop fully into a materialist form of intellectual theorising, whereby phenomena are explained in abstractions in reference to material conditions. (Again, although the materialist premise stretches back to the pre-Socratics like Democritus, it was not until the mid-19th century that the materialist framework assumed a kind of intellectual cultural dominance.) If we needed a brief survey of those influential materialist theories which arose in the mid-19th century, we would of course include Darwinism (which bases its evolutionary theory on genetic mutation), Marxism (which applies a theory of historical materialism) and neuropsychology (which develops theories of thought and behaviour in reference to the physical brain). The ongoing influence of these and other materialist theories is self-evident.

At the core of the materialist worldview is a conception of the human being that Steiner wishes to expose for its fanatical imbalance. In Steiner's words:

> [Materialism] signifies the view regarding the human being primarily as the sum of the material processes of his physical body… Still more or less in its first beginnings, final conclusions have already been drawn from it in regard to a world view. Man has been explained as the confluence of these physical forces; his soul nature is declared to be merely something that is produced through the workings of these physical forces. (*MAT*, Lect. 1)

Materialism, in short, establishes physical matter as the only basis for human knowledge, the only reality. Thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams and spiritual experiences are all explained by the materialist framework as

products or symptoms of the body. Steiner's key point is that this materialist conception of the human being naturally informs the way everything else is conceived. Put simply, if human beings are perceived and understood as being only material, everything else must be too.

Steiner's explanation for why this intellectual development of materialism occurred is most curious. Materialism culminated in the mid-19th century when, he explains, the materialisation of consciousness from the *life body* into the physical body reached its fullest realisation or incarnation. In other words, he explains materialist theories of the day as a symptom of an evolution in consciousness allowing a fully physical kind of thinking:

> It need not surprise us that when people of the nineteenth century had the feeling that they could think particularly well, they were actually driven to materialism. For what aided them in this thinking the most was the physical body. But this physical thinking was connected with the special form of memory that was developed in the nineteenth century. It is a memory that lacks the pictorial element and, wherever possible, moves in abstractions. (*MAT*, Lect. 1)

The premises and conclusions of 19th century materialist theories are for Steiner symptomatic of the evolutionary condition of physical thinking which enabled a new form of abstraction, or as he puts it a "memory without pictures". The way materialist theories explain the material world by means of abstracted systems are evidence of this. For all its preoccupations with matter as the total field of reality, materialism is indeed powerfully abstract. If we consider the astonishing confidence of, for example, Darwin's or Marx's grand theories, we can indeed recognise a kind of abstract thinking of unprecedented scope: the explanation human history and the evolution of natural phenomena by means of abstract systems. This is what Steiner wishes us to recognise about these theories: their appeals to empiricism and materialism conceal their essentially abstract premises.

According to Steiner the modern paradox which culminates in 19th century materialism is that human thinking comes to stress the physical as the sum-total of reality and yet equally establishes such a principle by means of an entirely abstract thinking. In other words, the epistemological means of materialism (abstraction) do not justify the theoretical ends of materialism (the knowledge of physical reality). The abstract means in fact would seem to deny the material ends. This inherent problem Steiner had in fact made clear at the outset of *The Philosophy of Freedom*:

> Materialism can never provide a satisfactory explanation of the world. For every attempt at an explanation must begin with one's forming *thoughts* for oneself about the phenomena of the world… Thus it already has two different realms of facts before it: the material world and thoughts about it. (*PF*, p. 18)

Taking the observation further in his later life, Steiner explained in spiritual terms what the paradox of materialism means for human beings spiritually. "It is the secret of materialism", he states, himself somewhat paradoxically, "that human beings turned to matter because of their spirituality. This is modern man's negation of his own spirituality". (*MAT*, Lect. 8) Materialism, according to Steiner, is in fact of a misdirected spiritual nature. For it is through a spiritual activity (of abstract thinking) that materialism establishes its material premises for knowledge.

Steiner thus asks us to comprehend materialist abstract thinking as a misdirected activity of thought, potentially engendering a dysfunctional relationship between human beings and the world. Indeed, he explains that the longer materialist thinking remains dominant in modern cultures, the more incongruent with human consciousness it will be, and the more destructive the potential consequences. At its worst, this activity has resulted in the imposition of false and dangerous static models onto an evolving human society and indeed on ecosystems. And here we might note

that the postmodernist critique of metanarratives (the rigorous critique of how a certain theoretical model assumes its validity) has to a point concurred with Steiner's position.

But, you may ask, was not Steiner himself therefore guilty of such a paradox? After all, if anyone is to be accused of presenting grand evolutionary narratives it must be Steiner. At this question we find ourselves confronting that more useful problem set out at the beginning of this chapter: How can Steiner's ideas be integrated into dominant intellectual frameworks? For when approached within a certain framework, a certain kind of thinking, Steiner indeed would seem to represent the worst kind of materialism, a bald-faced combination of abstract intellectual theorising which claims the sanctuary of spiritual wisdom. From this point of view, Steiner presents an abstracted narrative of super-sensible phenomena and then asks our acceptance of his explanations, even if we are not "spiritually developed" enough to perceive these phenomena.

How do we overcome this cynical cul-de-sac that charges Steiner with the very problem he highlights? There would seem no way out if we remain fixed within a discourse that requires any explanation to be framed in the very terms that created the problem. And here we see the limitations of this book, and indeed any attempt to contain knowledge of Anthroposophy within a sheerly intellectual discussion. To begin any escape, we must first recognise that the problem Steiner finds with materialism is not simply that it is essentially self-contradictory. Beyond that observation, we must then recognise Steiner proposes a problem not just with theoretical premises but with the very intellectual activity of thinking itself. This is the problem of abstraction, a problem relating to the *activity* of human thinking, a problem he believes to have an increasingly detrimental impact for human consciousness.

For Steiner, abstract thinking is a form of spiritual activity (being independent of material conditions), but it is also an activity "blocked" from

real or living spiritual experience. Abstractions are in an important sense not "living", much like the shadows in Plato's cave. Indeed, as we have already learned, "shadow thinking" is precisely the term Steiner uses for abstract thinking. He states:

> Try to realize what this shadowlike intellect actually contains. It cannot really understand the human being himself; it comprehends the minerals. That, after all, is the only thing the shadowy intellect can understand to a certain degree. Already the life of the plant remains a riddle for it; this is true even more so of the life of the animals, and its own life becomes completely obscure for it. (*MAT*, Lect. 13)

Approaching the content of Steiner's philosophy with such abstract thinking is therefore bound to fail. Quite simply, Steiner's philosophy will remain inherently contradictory as long as it is discussed in abstract terms. And therefore, of course it will be reduced to the most nonsensical materialism. This, perhaps more than any reason, is why he insisted on a different term to philosophy to describe the nature of his knowledge: Anthroposophy.

And so, we come full circle somewhat, back to intuitive thinking, or *living thinking* as Steiner also calls it. The problems created by abstract thinking will be resolved if we develop living thinking. Living thinking is, by Steiner's account, the activity of thinking proper to our present state of modern consciousness. Living thinking is a thinking that arises not when the intellect remains encased in an abstract mental world, but when the two worlds of concept and percept meet, when the duality of consciousness insisted by Kant to be an unassailable dichotomy is resolved through human activity, a unifying process. Thinking by this process enters into a living relationship with the creative world of nature. (Indeed, Steiner explains it is the creative principle in the natural world that our thinking "I" must come to know and connect with.) The dead spiritual world of the pure concept is enlivened and warmed with the living creative processes of nature. And, as we have learned, this kind of thinking we can cultivate through meditations

(on living and dying processes, on mineral forms, on life forms, on forms of consciousness and ultimately on our own spiritual self, our "I"). By degrees, such meditations enable our thinking to, in Steiner's words, "turn once again from the mere shadowy, intellectual developing of thoughts to a pictorial, concrete one". (*MAT*, Lect. 13) The development of imagination, inspiration and intuition are the possible higher stages of this pictorial consciousness.

In this book we have not gone to such heights. We have endeavoured simply to keep our feet on the ground and consider Steiner's key ideas in the same way we might those of any other philosopher. So, it remains to ask: is Steiner of any relevance when treated as a philosopher? What use are his ideas when applied in an intellectual framework that effectively negates his first principle of intuitive thinking by insisting on intellectual abstractions and proof with reference to empirical evidence? Indeed, was it not the recognition of this hopelessness that led Steiner in the first place to abandon academic life and to pursue his philosophy on his own terms? Is Steiner's esoteric spiritual philosophy just that, a spiritual philosophy best kept to personal spiritual experience of the individual and not to be muddied in the confusions of public discourse? But if so, why did Steiner maintain that his knowledge was and should be intelligible to the intellect? As he insisted from beginning to end:

> Most people will say: If we have not ourselves become clairvoyant, we can at most study these matters. Good and well, but one can study them, and it has been said again and again that the ordinary intellect can grasp them. (*MAT*, Lect. 9)

# CONCLUSION

> In their differences, Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific ones are considered so disparate as to be "incommensurable" or "irreconcilable" on cosmological, epistemological and ontological grounds.
> -Martin Nakata, *The Cultural Interface*[1]

Steiner's work is as diverse and as bizarre as the work of any modern thinker. Yet within the overwhelming diversity of Steiner's preoccupations, we have found a genuine philosophical consistency. The tolling bell that rings throughout all of Steiner's work is loud and clear. The modern crisis is primarily (though not only) a crisis of thinking. For Steiner, as long as the definition of modern human thinking remains limited to rationalist schemas, and as long as the activity of modern thinking remains unconscious, the crisis of modernity will continue to manifest in ever more destructive, incoherent and paradoxical ways. Humans will continue to form an antagonistic and destructive relationship with their own selves, others and the planet, until such time as the project of modernity completely fails.

Steiner insists that to successfully navigate our way through the crisis of late modernity human beings need to develop a conscious relationship with their own thinking. For Steiner, new theoretical models will not open substantial and lasting solutions until there is a change in human thinking, namely, the conscious development of intuitive or living thinking. This is not a challenge without precedent for humanity. Steiner's explanations of historical development describe many epochs facing their own crisis. The entire story of humanity is, for Steiner, in one aspect the story of people meeting the challenges of their age with consciousness. But in our age the

[1] Martin Nakata, "The Cultural Interface" in Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, Volume 36 (2007) p. 8

challenge takes the most serious form. For never before, according to Steiner, has our consciousness required a development so at odds with the intellectual and cultural framework (or discourse) that we inhabit and perpetuate. The materialist discourse that dominates our intellectual and cultural lives blocks and negates the inspiration for spiritual activity, being the human need to develop consciousness. This is the case even with the simple acts of sitting and meditating a few minutes a day. Materialism denies the necessity of such uncommodifiable mediational practice as "unproductive", "irrelevant" and most of all "unprofitable". There is, to put it simply, every reason in the material world *not* to pursue the inner path Steiner lays out… indeed, not even to begin it.

But if it is to begin, it begins with the activity of our thinking. We must address a change in our thinking if anything else is to successfully change. Without a change in the activity of our thinking, Steiner insists that new models (social, economic, democratic, "eco-political" *etc*) will continue to replicate old models. New ideas will continue to inhabit old forms. We see such replication again and again, even when a new idea is ostensibly innovative and in opposition with the framework it is challenging, such as when:

1) The arguments of evolutionary theory replicate the doctrinal fundamentalism of religious doctrine.
2) The socio-economic relations of socialist models replicate those of capitalism.
3) The political programme of environmentalism adopts industrialist revolutionary ideology.
4) So-called 'post-colonial' efforts to develop structures to address the consequences of colonialism reinforce the structural disempowerment of Indigenous peoples.
5) When even the postmodern critique of normativity becomes itself institutionalised as an authoritarian and equally incoherent discursive system.

These ideological paradoxes, whereby an innovation comes to replicate its antecedent within the same old structure, apply even to the still nascent world of Anthroposophy, and especially in Steiner education. Under pressure it happens all too easily. Schools adopt the outward aesthetics of Steiner's philosophy but ignore the pedagogical foundations. What results is a mere "implanting" of distinctively Steinerian pedagogical traits on the old educational model, a model and outlook that is and remains fundamentally a continuation of the principles of 19th century rationalism and standardisation. This is, Steiner often pointed out, precisely how the destructive element of materialism works. The innovation comes to replicate the problem it set out to resolve. George Orwell of course depicted the problem starkly through the pigs of *Animal Farm* and Goethe in *Faust* alluded to the undermining element itself as "the great Negator".

What brings hope to this bleak scenario? When academies of learning are buckling and being replaced with a fragmentary and relativised knowledge via information media, what chance is there of a message like Steiner's ever being heard by many people? One possibility may be that Steiner's relationship to the canon of Western thought (his developments of Hegel, Aquinas, Plato and Aristotle, for example) will be more substantially studied. I have done little more than allude to these connections in this book. But perhaps another answer is not to look to Steiner's role and status as a philosopher in any traditional academic sense, but rather to look to the connections his philosophy establishes between Western discursive traditions and those discursive traditions of other intellectual cultures.

This is a concern which continues to be voiced from many corners: the directions needed to surmount the crisis of materialism are to be found in cross-cultural dialogue with other knowledge systems, in particular those knowledge systems which Western imperialism and colonialism has done much to destroy. To put it very simply, the great potential of Steiner's philosophy may, I think, be found in its cross-cultural applications. Despite

Anthroposophy's superficial appearance as a kind of melange of 19th century Germanic tropes, the application of Steiner's philosophy need have nothing essentially to do with the Germanic cultural context out of which Anthroposophy was developed. Steiner's philosophical principles, when boiled down like I have done here, can be applied in any number of cultural contexts.

It must be emphasised here that Steiner's premises do cohere with other discursive systems, especially many so-called Indigenous discursive systems, in ways that Kantian and other dominant Western philosophies simply do not. Explaining some of those connections is for another book. But I do suggest here that it is by finding the points of connection with other discursive systems, whereby the principles of one knowledge system may be successfully translated with the concept and equilibrium maintained, that Steiner's philosophy can be of most benefit for contemporary intellectual discourse. Here in Australia, we colonisers continue to be told by First Nations Indigenous leaders and intellectuals of the "gap" between colonial and Indigenous ways of knowing. These ways of knowledge are, they tell us, so different as to make cross-cultural dialogue impossible. The key ideas in Steiner's philosophy, I am suggesting here, offers one possibility for the development of at least some kind of interpretive framework accommodating both Western and some Indigenous knowledge frameworks.

An explanation of how such cross-cultural discursive connections and translations might be made, and what this might lead to, is not within the scope or ambition of this book. I am merely making a gesture as to what the integration of Steiner in contemporary intellectual discourse might look like. It is, however, noteworthy that communities across the world, especially in India, are integrating Steiner's principles enthusiastically with apparently little sense of cultural confusion, dissonance or incoherence. There are perhaps many cultures in the world which will not find Steiner's core ideas so unusual, whose cultural systems of knowledge and education

accord with many of the principles laid out by Steiner. Another way of saying this is to suggest that Steiner's philosophy, perhaps by virtue of its strong connection with traditional European knowledges, signals the connections between "pre-modern" or "pre-rationalist" European knowledge systems and other traditional knowledge systems.

I am increasingly inclined to think this is the case, that the philosophical "odd one out" in this picture is not Steiner's philosophy or those knowledge systems of many different Indigenous cultures, but rather the intellectual framework of rationalism and its cultural expression as materialism. The intellectual culture which finds Steiner's philosophy most confronting, most uncomfortable and most incommensurable may indeed be precisely the culture of materialism, which Steiner most directly challenged.

This is by no means to suggest that Steiner's philosophy has no future cultural applications in Western frameworks. Anthroposophy is still overwhelmingly a middle-European phenomenon and will, I imagine, remain so for some time. But, so far in the West the seeds planted by Steiner and those after him have been sown well off the beaten track. Anthroposophy and the broader Steiner school movement have developed most successfully as small, relatively isolated communities. These communities are, like older spiritual communities, as a rule run by passionate people wanting something better for their families and for themselves. It is therefore no surprise they choose some distance from the world. Such conditions are appropriate for early growth and as we have seen these conditions were established by Steiner himself when he made the decision to leave the academy and work within the Theosophical Society. But life in a glasshouse is eventually no life at all, and sooner or later the real test of something comes in its full entry into the world. Steiner's spiritual philosophy must surely be ready for this; to step into dialogue, to articulate its key ideas, to know itself in its relationship with other philosophies and other knowledge systems.

Steiner frequently referred to this possibility himself. The true realisation of Anthroposophy, he thought, might be in its disappearance into the world, its absorption into different cultures, its applications in different places for different purposes. The image here is much like the principle behind formula 500 used in biodynamics, a tiny substance which is mixed into water and then spread across a vast field. Perhaps Steiner's philosophy and his ideas on education require such mixing into the mainstream. Cutting back the many tangled cultural specificities of Steiner Education (the Eurocentric aesthetics, the study of Occidental "epochs" and European festivals) and instead clarifying the conceptual essence of Steiner's philosophy, we can perhaps build a bridge to greater relevance and practical applications for young students in need of a better education. Such a bridge will eventuate only if Steiner's philosophy leaves the nest and enters into a clear and mature dialogue with other knowledge systems. Evidently, such work is to be done. The outcomes of such a dialogic process could, I imagine, be extremely beneficial.

# GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Anthroposophy:** Although Steiner established the Anthroposophical Society in 1912, it should be acknowledged that the core teachings of Anthroposophy date back to Steiner's earliest work in the late 19th century. The key texts referred to in this book (those published before 1912) are all key Anthroposophical texts. Likewise, Steiner's esoteric work during his time as head of the German section of the Theosophical Society should be regarded as a developmental period for Anthroposophy. As a spiritual philosophy Anthroposophy is difficult to define, but it can be said to be concerned primarily with the spiritual development of human consciousness, which is primarily explained in terms of the human relationship between thinking and perception. The esoteric explanations of supersensible phenomena that characterise Anthroposophy are all dependent on this spiritual development of human consciousness. As a holistic movement (or community) Anthroposophy extends Steiner's core spiritual philosophy into practical applications in many areas of human life, including education, health, science, art and agriculture. Powerfully inspired by Goethe, Anthroposophy seeks to develop practical living forms of knowledge and social organisation which transform in relevant and meaningful developmental relationships with the world. Anthroposophy is therefore, by its very nature, very difficult to define as it is in constant state of metamorphosis.

**Epistemology:** Epistemology (the theory of knowledge) concerns the nature of knowledge, the relationship between human mind (or thinking) and knowledge and the relationship between human experience and knowledge. In this book, epistemology is used mainly to refer to the fundamental difference between the two epistemological models put forward by Kant and Steiner. Whereas Kant insists on a fundamental division between human experience/knowledge and the knowable world, Steiner insists on the possibility that human thinking can engage and interact

with the world. Steiner's core epistemological disagreement with Kant establishes the basis for his very different explanation of the conditions of human knowledge.

**Ethical Individualism:** Explained in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, ethical individualism refers to the social realisation of intuitive thinking. Steiner proposes that if individuals do develop their capacities for intuitive thinking, they will equally develop their moral imaginative capacities to make ethical choices. As a result of the structure of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner's proposal of ethical individualism may appear somewhat arbitrary. In other texts however, it becomes clear that intuitive thinking and ethical individualism are developed co-dependently. One cannot, Steiner makes clear, develop spiritually in their thinking without developing in their moral imagination and consciousness.

**Evolution of Consciousness:** Steiner's explanations of human development refer to his much broader outline of the evolutionary development of human consciousness. For Steiner, the differences we can find between historical cultures are symptomatic not just of different cultural and historical norms but also of different forms of consciousness. To frame his explanation along a historical timeline, Steiner posits an essential distinction between "Atlantean" consciousness and "post-Atlantean" consciousness (that being the consciousness which has developed in humans since the fall of Atlantean civilisation some ten thousand or years ago). Steiner explains that post-Atlantean human consciousness can be first recognised in the early cultures of ancient India. It has evolved through a series of developmental stages (ancient Persian, Egypto-Chaldean, Greco-Latin) to the point where abstract or "purely spiritual" thinking is now possible for humans. Steiner explains that the evolutionary development of spiritual thinking in the modern age has been disastrously misapplied as a result of our reliance on physical matter as the referent for knowledge. He proposes forms of spiritual development as a means to resolve the schism between our evolved faculties of consciousness and the discursive materialist frameworks constraining and misdirecting human thinking.

**Evolution of Cosmos:** Steiner speaks at length in a multitude of texts and lectures on the evolution of the Cosmos, and in particular on the evolution of our planetary system. Although the range of Steiner's explanations cannot be covered here, it can be established that Steiner's explanation of evolution of the Cosmos does not simply refer to the manifestation of material (gas, rock, organic matter etc) over a linear time span. Instead, Steiner proposes a series of spiritual "stages" or "cycles" whereby the different spiritual aspects of the Cosmos have evolved. He refers to this evolutionary process as occurring in spiritual time not reduceable to a linear chain of cause and effect. Put very simply, the physical matter of the Earth and other planets is, according to Steiner, the oldest spiritual substance which has progressively materialised. The more recent elements of the Cosmos (such as *life body* and *astral body* phenomena) are more recent and are still in a more spiritual state. The direction of cosmic evolution, according to Steiner, is towards the materialisation of spiritual phenomena.

**Evolution - Human Development:** Steiner's holistic approach refers key early human developments to his picture of the fourfold human being. Steiner puts forward four major developmental periods in early human life from physical birth to the age of around twenty-one, each marked by the "birth" of a fourfold body. From physical birth to around the age of seven years he explains a developmental stage of physical experience and imitation. From the full "birth" of the *life body* at around seven years to the start of adolescence he explains a developmental period of picture consciousness and repetition. From adolescence he explains a stage of self-awareness and self-expression brought about by the "birth" of the *astral body*. The development into adulthood at around twenty-one years is marked with the "birth" of the "I", realised through self-consciousness, intuitive thinking and ethical individualism. It should be noted that Steiner's explanations of human development continue beyond these early stages to account for the spiritual and physical changes of middle and later life.

**Fourfold Human Being:** Steiner insists on a holistic model of the human being which relates physical aspects to non-physical (or spiritual) aspects, such as emotion, thinking and consciousness. The fourfold human being is

Steiner's term for the human being when considered in all its physical and spiritual aspects. The fourfold human being is comprised of a physical body, a *life body*, an *astral body* and an "I".

(1) Physical body**:** In Steiner's holistic fourfold model, the physical body refers only to the mineral constituents that make up the body. In other words, the physical body is for Steiner only the actual physical material of which the body is composed. Without the influence of other forces, the physical body cannot live.

(2) *Life Body***:** According to Steiner the *life body* is the "second body" of human beings (and all other living organisms). The *life body* is a spiritual phenomenon which stimulates the organic processes necessary for the organism's life. The *life body* is responsible for stimulating the growth and organic systems in the living form of an organism. Without a *life body* an organism is only a physical body of mineral constituents and decomposes. Steiner proposes that for humans the birth of an independent *life body* occurs at approximately seven years of age.

(3) *Astral Body***:** The *astral body* is the "third body" in Steiner's fourfold model of the human being. The astral body is the spiritual phenomenon bringing soul, consciousness and will to animals and human beings. The *astral body* establishes the conditions for subjective experience whereby an organism is not wholly determined by outer conditions. In more evolved organisms, emotions are also symptomatic of the *astral body*. According to Steiner, for humans the *astral body* is born into full independence around the age of fourteen when self-awareness and soul independence begins to manifest in adolescence.

(4) The "I"**:** According to Steiner the "I" is the fourfold element of human beings which is the most recently acquired and has been the least developed. The "I" enables the activities of human thinking and human pictorial memory. Steiner insists that while animals have consciousness and soul, they do not have the kind of human

thinking and memory made possible by the "I". The "I" also makes possible self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Steiner insists that the faculties of the "I" remain little understood but can be developed through spiritual practice. He proposes that the spiritual development of the "I" can bring people through stages of transformation. He names these stages "Spirit Self", "Life Spirit" and "Spirit Man". These stages involve the spiritualisation, through the development of the "I", of the other bodies: *astral*, *life* and physical. The full birth of the "I" is said by Steiner to occur around the age of twenty-one.

**German Idealism:** A German development of rationalism, first substantially developed by and most associated with Kant, though also influentially developed and adapted by Hegel, Schelling, Fichte and Schopenhauer. Idealism's most basic premise is that philosophy fundamentally concerns the human mind: the mind produces or structures all knowledge. The theory of knowledge is therefore, in Idealism, primarily the theory of mind. However, different Idealists disagree radically on the nature of the human mind and therefore the nature of knowledge. As a philosophical tradition, German Idealism had more influence on Steiner than any other philosophical movement (as it did on many philosophers). Steiner's argument in *The Philosophy of Freedom* was powerfully motivated by his disagreement with Kant, while his notion of the conceptual as being of a spiritual nature was encouraged by Hegel. In his unique way, Steiner applies many of the core concerns of Idealism to a phenomenological approach.

**Intuitive Thinking:** Intuitive thinking (or living thinking) is Steiner's most fundamental principle. It informs all of his philosophy. Intuitive thinking refers to a kind of thinking attainable through disciplined spiritual practice. Steiner posits that the knowledges attainable through intuitive thinking unifies (or transcends) the divisions of knowledge set by the dominant rationalist philosophies, especially Kant's. Steiner insists that the conceptual knowledge made possible by intuitive thinking does not assume fixed structural forms and is in a constant state of transformation in relationship with the perceptual world. Steiner further explains that the

development of intuitive thinking can lead to forms of spiritual knowledge inaccessible to analytical or critical thinking.

**Phenomenology:** Phenomenology is a specific approach to epistemological questions concerning the nature of the relationship between human experience, mind and knowledge. Though extremely complex in its many elaborations, phenomenology can be very simply described as emphasising human experience as the reference and condition for all knowledge. Phenomenology is thus primarily the theory of human experience. Although Steiner is not categorised as a phenomenologist, he applies a phenomenological approach in his disagreement with Kant in *The Philosophy of Freedom* and in his directions on the development of intuitive thinking in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment*. Steiner's emphasis on the activity of thinking activity as first condition of freedom is in phenomenological terms an emphasis on knowledge by experience.

**Theosophy:** A spiritualist religion (or systematic religious philosophy) founded established by Russian clairvoyant Helena Blavatsky in the United States the late 19th century. Theosophy posits a shared religious system at the core of all major religions, known as the Secret Doctrine, and asserts its primary goal as the establishment of a universal spiritual community for all people of any religion or ethnicity. The teachings of Theosophy are characterised by eclectic references to diverse religious and philosophical traditions, a characteristic that had a major influence on Rudolf Steiner. Steiner became head of the German section of the Theosophical Society in 1902 and held this position while he developed his own esoteric philosophy and wrote his key introductory texts. Steiner and his wife Marie von Sievers made many innovations to Theosophy until philosophical and religious differences led Steiner to break from the Theosophical Society and establish the Anthroposophical Society in 1912.

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# INDEX