The Philosophy of Rudolf Steiner

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An Introduction

By

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For Annie

Without normal common sense all thine efforts are in vain.

-Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*

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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 20th 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