

Rudolf Steiner's Concept of Mind **by Owen Barfield**

The true nature of human thought is a matter of concern to everyone, whether he knows it or not. Everyone is concerned, therefore, with Rudolf Steiner's concept of mind; but not everyone will wish to acquaint himself with the framework on which the exposition of that concept was first stretched and displayed, for not everyone is interested in the history of philosophy in the nineteenth century. Here, then, in the short space available, the attempt will be made to say what it was that Steiner thought about thinking, so far as the writer understands it, and without much reference to the framework within which it was originally presented.

It is founded on two axioms. Steiner himself does not call them axioms, or place them at the beginning of his exposition. He does, however, draw very special attention to them, pointing out that, though both are commonly overlooked, both are self-evident to reflection.

In the first place, a concept as such is not one of a series of perfect replicas; it is numerically identical in all the individual minds that think it. This proposition is not really even open to argument, because on it depends the very possibility of arguing. Yet, as Steiner himself points out in his major philosophical work, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*[1], it:

"conflicts with a common prejudice which is very hard to overcome. The victims of this prejudice are unable to see that the concept of a triangle which my head grasps is the same as the concept which my neighbour's head grasps"

It is easy to see how this prejudice comes about. The naive man believes himself-- with some excuse, as we shall see when we come to the second axiom -- to be the creator of his thoughts and he is led by this to assume that each person has his detached private concepts. Nevertheless, hard as it may be,

"It is a fundamental demand of philosophic thinking to overcome this prejudice. The one uniform concept of 'triangle' does not split up into a multiplicity because it is thought by many persons. For the thinking of the many is itself a unity."

Or, as Steiner put it elsewhere metaphorically: "The mind is related to thought as the eye is to light."

The second axiom is this: that thinking is our own activity. This, again, is a matter of direct experience. Our thoughts cannot be thrust on us, as our sensations are, from without. They demand our co-operation, our own activity before we can be said to have thought them -- before they can be our thoughts. Opinions, confessions, etc., brought about by modern techniques of persuasion, whether physiological or otherwise, are at most the exception which proves this rule. They are felt to be monstrous, precisely because they seek to compel that which bears upon it the very signature of the victim's own free act.

For the same reason --because the thought-process is so intimately and entirely our own act -- it is impossible to observe it in its actual occurrence. We do not notice it, because we cannot contemplate what we ourselves effect while we are in the act of effecting it. This is Alexander's distinction between 'enjoyment' and 'contemplation'[2] Steiner puts it as follows:

"There are two things which are incompatible with one another: productive activity and the contemplation of that activity. This is recognised even in the First Book of Moses. It represents God as

creating the world in the first six days, and only after its completion is any contemplation of the world possible: 'And God saw everything that he had made and, behold, it was very good.' The same applies to our thinking. It must be there first, if we would observe it."

But although we do not, and cannot, both think and observe ourselves thinking in the same moment, we never (while we remain sane) have any doubt that the thoughts in our minds are in fact 'ours'. So much so that, as already pointed out, we commonly -- though erroneously -- regard them as a sort of private world lodged within us. There is thus an important distinction to be made between thinking as an act, albeit an unnoticed act, and thought as the concept, which results from the act, and which we both notice and appropriate. Steiner emphasised that he made thinking his starting-point and not concepts and ideas, which are first gained by means of thinking:

"My remarks regarding the self-dependent, self-sufficient character of thinking cannot, therefore, be simply transferred to concepts. (I make special mention of this, because it is here that I differ from Hegel, who regards the concept as something primary and ultimate.)"

It is this, indeed, which distinguishes Steiner's Objective Idealism from the Subjective Idealism which, in one form or another, was predominant both in Germany and in England at the time when he was writing.

It was Rudolf Steiner's view that many philosophical errors have arisen from the fact that philosophers have been too ready to enquire what we can know and what we cannot know, without first enquiring what we mean by 'knowing'. This was, above all, the omission which he sought to rectify and it may be said that his own philosophy is primarily an epistemology, a theory of knowledge. Why is it so important that we should grasp the true nature of thinking? Because thinking is the 'instrument of knowledge'. A philosopher starting out to construct a true theory of knowledge must start, if he is faithful to his calling, from the very beginning. If we start from any assumptions at all -- astronomical or historical assumptions, for instance, or assumptions about the part played by the brain and the nerves or sense-organs in the process of knowledge -- we are clearly not starting from zero. We are starting from something on which cognitive activity has already been expended. The same remark applies if we start from the 'ego', or 'consciousness', or 'the mind', or by raising the question whether there is such an entity as the mind, or from the experience of a 'normal observer'. Only if we start from thinking itself, no such objection can be made. For thinking is the very first possible move we can make in the direction from ignorance towards knowledge. We cannot think about the world, or about anything at all, without thinking.

Thus, by way of example, it follows from the former of the two axioms that thinking is anterior even to the elementary distinction between subject and object. Thinking:

"produces these two concepts just as it produces all others. When, therefore, I, as thinking subject, refer a concept to an object, we must not regard this reference as something purely subjective. It is not the subject, but thinking, which makes the reference. The subject does not think because it is a subject, rather it conceives itself to be a subject because it can think. The activity performed by man as a thinking being is thus not merely subjective. Rather it is neither subjective nor objective; it transcends both these concepts. I ought never to say that I, as an individual subject, think, but rather that I, as subject, exist myself by the grace of thinking. Thinking is thus an element which leads me beyond myself and relates me to objects. At the same time, it separates me from them, inasmuch as it sets me, as subject, over against them."

"It is just this which constitutes the double nature of man. His thinking embraces himself and the rest of the world. But by this same act of thinking he determines himself also as an individual, in contrast with the objective world."

If, however, I owe my separate existence, as subject, to 'the grace of thinking', yet something else besides thinking is required to bring this separate existence about. This brings us to the other primary element with which any theory of knowledge must deal, namely perception. Unlike my thoughts, my perceptions are private and personal to me, inasmuch as they depend on my point of observation and my separate physical organism. It is the perceptual element in the totality of my experience which thinking makes use of, as the mean, to bring about my subjectivity -- that is, my separate existence apart from nature and apart from my fellow human beings.

This important, and from one point of view startling, proposition requires a little further consideration. It is startling because we are accustomed to accept precisely the perceptual element in our experience -- the evidence, as we say, of our senses -- as constituting the 'public' world that is common to all mankind; while we contrast with this the 'private', inner world of our thoughts. This is justifiable enough in the ordinary loose use of language, but how carefully we must distinguish under the strict discipline of an epistemological enquiry! It is just here that the difference between 'thought' (as the product of the act) and 'thinking', the act itself, is relevant. For if it is pure thinking, disentangled from all perception, to which we are directing our attention, then as we have seen, it is precisely this which is not private and personal to ourselves. And again, if it is pure perception, disentangled from all thinking, to which we are directing our attention, then it is precisely this which is private and personal to ourselves. Thus, it is not perception alone which can ever put us in touch with the solid, public, objective world, but only the percept mixed with thinking.

'Disentangled from all thinking', 'pure perception' -- we are of course going too fast; and it is impossible to avoid doing so in the brief space at our disposal. Concepts and percepts are, for Steiner, the bricks out of which the whole edifice of human knowledge is constructed; and the pure concept and the pure percept are accordingly the only elements on which an adequate theory of knowledge can be based. "The moment a percept appears in my field of observation, thinking, too, becomes active through me. A member of my thought-system, a definite intuition, a concept, connects itself with the percept." The terminology which Steiner employs to denote this important act of union between percept and corresponding concept may profitably be compared with the 'presentational symbolism' of Susanne Langer.[3] It is these conceptually determined percepts (he calls them *Vorstellungen* --representations) which makeup the public world of our actual, everyday experience.

A good deal has been said already of the nature of the concept. We must now ask what Steiner meant by 'percept'. But let it first be made clear (in view of what has just been said on the topic of 'subjectivity') what he did not mean. He did not mean anything in the nature of a subjective representation; he did not mean the same thing as perception. *Esse est percipi* was no part of his doctrine. 'It is not,' he writes, 'the process of perception, but the object of this process, which I call the "percept".' And again: ' "objective" means that which, for the perception, presents itself as external to the perceiving subject.' What are subjective, on the other hand, are the after-images of those determined percepts, which remain in the mind when actual perception has ceased. These he called *Ideen*[4] -- ideas; and it is these which are the principal source of error and illusion, and the cause of why the 'public' world-picture is by no means necessarily also an 'objective' one. The pure concept of a triangle is one and the same in your mind and mine --not so the perceptual trappings, which may have stuck, as it were, to the concept, left there by particular representations of triangles on particular blackboards.

Just as the concept unavoidably presents itself to us as the product of our own activity, so the percept unavoidably presents itself as not the product of our own activity. Indeed, that is almost its definition. The percept is all that in the totality of our experience which is not the product of our activity. It may, for that reason and to that extent, be properly described as 'given':

"What then is a percept? This question, asked in this general way, is absurd. A percept occurs always as a perfectly determinate, concrete content. This content is immediately given and is completely contained in the given. The only question we can ask concerning the given content is, what it is apart from perception, that is, what it is for thinking. The question concerning the 'what' of a percept can, therefore, only refer to the conceptual intuition which corresponds to the percept.

"Here it will be necessary to say something of Steiner's concept of 'the Given', which plays such an important part in his epistemology. We find that he uses the word in two different ways. William James, writing on man's experience of time, adopted from E. R. Clay that useful term 'the specious present'. By analogy with this use -- once more introducing a piece of terminology not employed by Steiner himself -- we will call his 'given', in the first sense, 'the specious Given'. [5] It is simply what we actually find, of any description whatever, when we look around us in the world. What we find, that is, at the point in our lives when we first decide to tackle the problem of knowledge (not, therefore, at the breast or in the cradle). We have made up our minds about the true nature of the instrument called thought. The next step is to apply our thinking for the general purpose of acquiring knowledge. And clearly we must start where we actually find ourselves. We have no right to start with assumptions of any sort. We have certainly no right to pretend that we start from some imaginary state of mind, such as a man might have who had perceptions but as yet no thoughts -- the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of which William James also wrote. What ever preceded the starting-point must, to begin with, be taken for granted. What we are actually surrounded by is a world of phenomena, both outer and inner -- trees, houses, books, theories, pains, pleasures, dreams, hallucinations and what you will -- some parts of which present themselves as connected or related wholes, while others are as yet unconnected and unrelated.

How, asked Steiner in his doctoral Thesis *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*, [6] do we start out upon the business of knowing about all this? We have to discover a bridge that leads from the picture of the world as given to the picture of it which our cognitive activity unfolds:

"Somewhere in the Given, we must discover the spot where we can get to work, where something homogeneous to cognition meets us ... If there is to be knowledge, everything depends on there being, somewhere within the Given, a field in which our cognitive activity does not merely presuppose the Given, but is at work in the very heart of the Given itself."

This spot, or field, is the activity of thinking. At all points and at every moment it keeps inserting us, as it were, into the very texture of the Given. Out for a walk, we hear a sudden whirring noise, which 'means' nothing to us; a moment later a partridge rises from the hedge near at hand. The concept of cause and effect arises in us to unite the two percepts and at once becomes part of the Given. Next time we heard the whirring noise, it carries its meaning within it.

And now, what proved such a disadvantage when our problem was to notice the act of thinking, to be aware of it-- namely, the fact that we 'enjoy' thinking and do not 'contemplate' it, because thinking is so much our own activity (so much our very self in action) --now this becomes the very stamp upon its passport to utility. For the problem of knowledge is always how to relate the knower to the known. What has the phenomenal world got to do with me, the observing outsider? Why should there, and how can there, be a link between them called truth, or knowledge? Well, it seems there is one point where

the two incompatibles coalesce; one point where 'the object of observation is qualitatively identical with the activity directed upon it.' And that point is, precisely, the activity of thinking.

Now if we reason back a little from the example of the whirring noise and the partridge, we at once have it brought home to us that the specious Given is positively full of such conceptual determinations. This applies even to that part of the specious Given which we call 'sense-data'. We owe it to our concepts that we perceive a world of shapes, forms, 'things' at all. 'The picture of the world with which we begin philosophical reflection,' wrote Steiner in *Truth and Science*,

"is already qualified by predicates which are the results solely of the act of knowing. We have no right to accept these predicates without question. On the contrary, we must carefully extract them from out of the world-picture, in order that it may appear in its purity without any admixture due to the process of cognition."

This brings us to his other use of the term 'given' -- according to which it coincides with the pure percept, prior to all conceptual determinations whatsoever -- to that element in experience which is wholly perceptual. Let us call it here the 'net Given'. It is important to be clear that the Given is never actually experienced 'net'. Thus, the net Given is something which a philosopher is concerned with, not as knower, but as epistemologist. This is a distinction Positivism fails to observe. Certainly we are not entitled to build up a picture of the world by starting from James's 'blooming, buzzing confusion' -- a thing we never experience. But that is not to say that we are entitled to treat the specious Given (i.e. the world as normally experienced) as though it were the same as the net Given. We arrive at the concept of the net Given, not empirically, but by analysis. We may say of it (as James said of what he called the 'real', in contrast to the 'specious', present) : 'Reflection leads us to the conclusion that it must exist, but that it does exist can never be a part of our immediate experience.'

To seek to limit the theory of knowledge by applying to it, for instance, the principle of verification is like seeking to use a well-cooked meal, not for eating, but as material for making pots and pans; or like hunting for your spectacles with the help of those very spectacles which are already (you have forgotten) lodged on your nose.

Steiner declared at the beginning of the introduction to the original edition of *Truth and Science*, that his aim was 'to reduce the act of cognition, by analysis, to its ultimate elements'. He showed that, if we analyse it, the sense-experience from which we take our start, discloses itself to be no such ultimate element. It may be a 'public', but it is nevertheless a highly subjective, picture of the world and one which is 'overcome' in the process of knowledge itself. Positivism (and -- insofar as it is based on an uncritical acceptance of positivist doctrine -- this is true of modern science also) treats this initial experience -- the specious Given -- as constituting also the ultimately given starting-point for all reliable knowledge. This was where Steiner differed from them both.

We start, he said -- as we must -- from the Given; but in the course of the adventure our epistemological analysis itself establishes that that starting-point was not, after all, 'given' in the absolute sense we had supposed. On the contrary, it is and was saturated at all points with the activity of thinking, past and present. Only unfortunately we cannot experience separately -- the one divided from the other -- either the thinking activity or the net Given which is independent of it. Two courses are therefore open to us. We can reject the analysis -- on the ground perhaps that it raises questions which 'cannot be asked' -- and go on pretending to ourselves that the specious Given is as independent of thinking as the net Given. We shall then conclude that the only thing to do is to learn all we can 'about' the specious Given, with the help of precision instruments and mathematical generalisation, on the footing that our

observing minds are mere onlookers, quite detached from it. Or we can, as Steiner did, deem illegitimate the refusal to distinguish because we cannot divide. In that case we shall conclude, with him, that an edifice of knowledge or science erected on the specious Given is incomplete and unreliable -- for we know that the latter already includes the results of thinking -- and may well, therefore, be tainted with subjectivity and error. We shall then be obliged to abandon the common assumption that all thinking and knowing is thinking 'about', and knowing 'about', and that truth is an ideal reproduction of some given object. We shall conclude, instead, with Gabriel Marcel, that 'all knowledge is contingent on a participation in being, for which it cannot account because it continually presupposes it.'

With this we really reach the end of our exposition of Steiner's concept of mind and are already beginning to survey its consequences and application. But the following should perhaps be added before we close.

If we are determined to eliminate all subjectivity and to be uncompromisingly empirical, if we insist on verifying from experience at all points, from the very start onwards, our only course is to find some way of penetrating with full consciousness into that unconscious no-man's-land (or should one say 'every-man's-land?') which lies between the net Given and the specious Given. This is the realm where thinking performs the function of Coleridge's 'primary imagination', or what Susanne Langer calls 'formulation'. It is, incidentally, the realm where language is born.[7]

It is obvious that this penetration cannot be effected with only the techniques and disciplines which science has so far developed. Instrument after instrument of ever greater precision and power is invented and applied, but, for our purpose, the mind itself must be treated as an instrument and its precision and power systematically augmented.[8] It follows from all that has been said of the relation between thinking and perceiving that the strengthened thinking to which the discipline inculcated by Steiner is directed, must also result in widening the field of perception or observation themselves as those words are ordinarily understood). This aspect he deals with in his *Introductions to Goethe's scientific writings* and in his short treatise *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung*[9] which, together with the two books previously referred to in this article, contain the fundamental principles underlying Rudolf Steiner's concept of mind.

Moreover, since thinking is at one and the same time the activity of man himself and his only guarantee of objectivity, we have no right to assume that sense-perception is the indispensable witness to reality. Thinking is --and strengthened thinking will be aware of itself as being -- that factor in man 'through which he inserts himself spiritually into reality'. It will make direct contact with reality somewhat in the manner we normally attribute to perception and if, on the one hand, it is 'an active process taking place in the human mind', on the other hand it will be 'a perception mediated by no sense-organ ... a perception in which the percipient is himself active, and a self-activity which is at the same time perceived.'[10]

It is with the detailed results, both of that enhanced faculty of observation and of these purely spiritual perceptions, that so large a part of Steiner's books and lectures are concerned. But long before he began to bring them before the public, he had laid, in purely philosophical form, the epistemological foundation on which his investigations were based, and it is this foundation we have briefly tried to sketch here.

[1] Translated into English under the title: *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1949).

[2] See the opening pages of S. W. Alexander's well-known 1916-18 Gifford Lectures, published as the book, *Space, Time and Deity* (Macmillan, 1920).

[3] Professor Langer's books, *Feeling and Form* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) and *Problems of Art* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), are gaining increasing recognition on this side of the Atlantic among those who are interested in symbols and symbolism. Her most intensive treatment of the aspect here considered will be found in the earlier *Philosophy in a New Key* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

[4] Mental images.

[5] The initial capital is intended merely to indicate that the adjective is used substantively.

[6] Translated into English under the title: "Truth and Science" (in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, G. P. Putnam & Sons, London and New York, 1922).

[7] In this connection it is interesting to consider the work of the late Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (*Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*, tr. R. Mannheim, Yale and Oxford University Presses, 1953) appeared two or three years before Steiner's death and was first translated into English during the 1950s. For it is on the basis of an historical approach to language, looked at in this way, that Cassirer builds up his own theory of knowledge as mental activity.

[8] The impotence of ordinary, unstrengthened thinking to deal effectively with any subject-matter except the specious Given has been more than sufficiently elaborated by the linguistic variants of positivist doctrine which have been developed in the West since Steiner's death.

[9] Translated into English under the title: *Goethe's Conception of the World* (Rudolf Steiner Press, London and Anthroposophic Press, New York City, 1928).

[10] See *Goethe's Conception of the World*, by Rudolf Steiner, Rudolf Steiner Press, London.