

Philosophy of Freedom

The *Philosophy of Freedom* is the fundamental philosophical work of the philosopher and esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). It addresses the question of whether and in what sense man or his will can be said to be free. Originally published in 1894 in German as *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, the work has appeared under a number of English titles, including "The Philosophy of Freedom" (1916), *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (1921), and more recently *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* (1995).

Part One of the *Philosophy of Freedom* examines the conditions for freedom of *thought*, and includes accounts of knowledge and perception; Part Two examines the conditions for the freedom of *action*.

Historical context

Steiner had had the idea of writing a philosophy of freedom in mind since at least 1880.^{[1]:212–3} The book was preceded by his publications on Goethe focusing on epistemology and the philosophy of science, particularly *Goethe the Scientist* (1883)^[2] and *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception* (1886).^[3] There followed Steiner's presentation of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Rostock in 1891, an epistemological study that included discussion of Kant's and Fichte's theories of knowledge.^{[1]:221} A year later Steiner's revised version of his thesis was published in book form as *Truth and Knowledge: Introduction to The Philosophy of Freedom*.^[4] *The Philosophy of Freedom* considers the views of diverse authors, including Eduard von Hartmann^[5] and Max Stirner.^[6]

Overview

Steiner tells us that the potential for freedom can be actualized to begin with in thinking. About thinking, he writes ^[7],

...thinking must never be regarded as merely a subjective activity. Thinking lies beyond subject and object. It 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 that makes the reference, but thinking. The subject does not think because it is a subject; rather it appears to itself as a subject because it can think. The activity exercised by man as a thinking being is thus not merely subjective. Rather is it something neither subjective nor objective, that transcends both these concepts. I ought never to say that my individual subject thinks, but much more that my individual subject lives by the grace of thinking.

An important part of the book analyzes and rejects the view that subject and object (mind and world) are sharply divided from each other and that a person cannot experience the world itself but only subjective images somewhere inside the brain (or in the soul inside the brain). Steiner points out the inconsistency of treating all our perceptions as mere subjective mental images inside the brain. If that were true, the brain itself, which after all is a perception, would have to be a mere subjective mental image inside...the brain. The absurdity of that becomes evident in Steiner's more detailed discussions, during the course of which a profoundly different understanding of perception dawns.

With regard to freedom of the will, Steiner observes that a key question is how the will to action arises in the first place. Steiner describes to begin with two sources for human action: on the one hand, the driving forces springing from our natural being, from our instincts, feelings, and thoughts insofar as these are determined by our character - and on the other hand, various kinds of external motives we may adopt, including the dictates of abstract ethical or moral codes. In this way, both nature and culture bring forces to bear on our will and soul life. Overcoming these two elements, neither of which is individualized, we can achieve genuinely individualized intuitions that speak to the particular situation at hand. By overcoming a slavish or automatic response to the dictates of both our 'lower' drives

and conventional morality, and by orchestrating a meeting place of objective and subjective elements of experience, we find the freedom to choose how to think and act.^{[8]:Chap. 9} Freedom for Steiner does not lie in uninhibited expression of everything subjective within us, but in being able to love our own actions because we are acting lovingly, thoughtfully, and creatively. He wrote^[9]

There are many who will say that the concept of the free man which I have here developed is a chimera nowhere to be found in practice; we have to do with actual human beings, from whom we can only hope for morality if they obey some moral law, that is, if they regard their moral task as a duty and do not freely follow their inclinations and loves. I do not doubt this at all. Only a blind man could do so. But if this is to be the final conclusion, then away with all this hypocrisy about morality! Let us then simply say that human nature must be driven to its actions as long as it is not free. Whether his unfreedom is forced on him by physical means or by moral laws, whether man is unfree because he follows his unlimited sexual desire or because he is bound by the fetters of conventional morality, is quite immaterial from a certain point of view...Only let us not assert that such a man can rightly call his actions his own, seeing that he is driven to them by a force other than himself.

Steiner coined the term *moral imagination* for the free inner act which conceives free actions in the world. He suggests that we only achieve free deeds when we find a moral imagination, an ethically impelled but particularized response to the immediacy of a given situation. This response will always be individual; it cannot be predicted or prescribed. This radical ethical individualism is, for Steiner, characteristic of freedom.^[10]

Freedom arises most clearly at the moment when the spiritual individuality of the human being becomes active in pure thinking; this is, for Steiner, spiritual activity.^[10] The goal that follows is to learn to let an ever larger portion of one's actions be determined by thinking in its purest form, rather than by habit, addiction, reflex, or involuntary or unconscious motives. Pure thinking then becomes what Steiner calls "moral intuition" (ideas for action), "moral imagination" (developing concrete images of how ideas for action might be realized), and "moral technique" (the how-to aspect of making real the images and ideas of action).

In Ch. III, Steiner interprets Descartes' famous dictum, *I think, therefore I am* of the "Meditations" and the "Discourse on the Method", and takes it further:

My searching first comes onto firm ground when I find an object from which I can derive the sense of its existence out of it itself. This I am myself, however, in that I think, for I give to my existence the definite, self-sustaining content of thinking activity. Now I can take my start from there and ask whether the other things exist in the same or in a different sense.

Structure

In the first part of the *Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner discusses freedom in thinking, and the question of thinking's reliability as a means to knowledge, i.e. the epistemology of freedom. In the second part of the book, which depends on the first, he examines the conditions necessary for freedom of action.^[10] This twofold structure partly parallels Hegel's description of freedom: "Ethical life is the *Idea of freedom* as the living good which has its knowledge and volition in self-consciousness, and its actuality through self-conscious action."^[11]

However, Steiner differs from Hegel in an essential way: Steiner finds the ongoing *process* and *activity* of thinking to be something much greater and more real than the formed and finished ideas that result from that activity and fall out of it like sediment:

*"My remarks concerning the self-supporting and self-determined nature of thinking cannot...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 original. -- end of first paragraph, Chapter 4, *The Philosophy of Freedom*"^[12]*

Steiner seeks to demonstrate that inner freedom is achieved when we bridge the gap between our perception, which reflects the outer appearance of the world, and our cognition, which gives us access to the inner structure of the world. He suggests that outer freedom arises when we bridge the gap between our ideals and the constraints of external reality, letting our deeds be inspired by the *moral imagination*.^[10]

Understanding freedom

Steiner begins by saying, in Ch. I, that we must look for freedom in conscious action. He doesn't say that we will necessarily find it! He explores the various compulsions of motives at different levels, and points out that freedom does not exist if we are still within the grip of the various forces acting within us. He quotes Goethe here:

Two souls dwell, alas, in my breast
 Each would from the other split;
 One clutches, in its dullish lust
 Tight to the world with its organs' grip;
 The other raises itself forcibly from dust:
 High ancestral fields are its quest.

Faust I, lines 1112-7

The polarity in consciousness is between perception through the senses, which gives us access to the outer nature of things, and perception through thinking, which gives us access to the inner nature of things. Steiner treats thinking as an organ of perception as valid as the senses themselves, albeit at a higher level; both are subject to illusion and distortion, but both can reveal true and ever new aspects of the world to us. Steiner tells us however that what he means by "pure thinking" is not the dry, gray, or abstract experience people often mean by "thinking". In what might seem a paradox, he says pure thinking is one with feeling and will in the depths of their reality; it is the power of love in its spiritual form. If we were to see deeply enough into pure thinking, we'd realize that gray abstractions are just the left over remains, the corpses of what once was alive but has since fallen away from pure thinking. Pure thinking, in its depths, is a living, warm, luminous, entry into the creative depths of the world. Elsewhere in the book, Steiner says that thinking, in its purest form, is "the conscious experience, in pure spirit, of a purely spiritual content." Steiner there intends the word "spiritual" to mean "non-material," "non-physical," "immaterial."

In works written after 1900, Steiner began to explain how thinking can evolve to become an organ of perception of higher worlds of living, creative, spiritual beings. Before 1900, Steiner was still laying the epistemological basis upon which higher modes of perception could be grounded as clearly as possible in science and philosophy. In *the Philosophy of Freedom*, which comes from this earlier period, Steiner explains that thinking is unique in our access in it to the true inner reality of the world at least in one corner. We can become conscious of our thought processes in a way that we cannot be of our feelings, will or sense perceptions. Once we learn, by dint of great efforts, to peel out all externals and sense-perceptible elements from our thought experiences, and arrive at what Steiner calls pure thinking, we can know that what we are experiencing as pure thinking is exactly what it seems. Appearance and reality become one. We observe a corner of reality where we see into the innermost core of the world. By contrast, our feelings appear as percepts whose meaning is not so directly apparent. We only perceive the meaning of the percept after some form of thinking has been brought to bear, even if only so briefly and quickly that the thinker barely notices. We understand our perceptions (for example, we give the right spatial meaning to the visually converging lines of railroad tracks) through our conceptual framework. Thinking is thus necessary if we are to properly interpret our perception.

Only when we bring thinking to bear upon perceptions (including the perceptions to be had from experiments) can we obtain scientific clarity about them. On the other hand, mathematics is a kind of thinking in which thought itself forms the perceptions; no sense-perceptions are needed to form a basis for mathematical principles. Mathematics could be said to be a science of the inner side of things, or rather of that portion of the inner side of things that

resembles numerical relations. To do mathematics we need not know anything about outer appearances.

Though our experience at first leads us to the illusion of dualism, in reality we are experiencing two sides of a single phenomenon when we perceive it and think about it: two sides of a single, unified world. Steiner tells us that we only experience the full reality of something when we have united its percept with thinking—the percept by itself is incomplete, only a half reality.

Steiner explains that our consciousness is "dualistic" in that the unity of the world (and of every object or element of the world), is at first only available to us split in two, because of our two basic modes of perception. Thus the world comes to us as "inner" and "outer," or "thought" and "percept," or "concept" and "given". It is the work of the human mind or spirit to uncover the fundamental unity of these two aspects, to recognize that they are two poles of a single reality, not two absolutely separate things. Though they are different, yet at the same time each contains in its innermost core something of the other. In his book *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception* (1886), one chapter is titled "Thinking as a Higher Experience within Experience."^[13] That chapter title exemplifies the way in which Steiner finds thinking and perception to be simultaneously one and yet distinct, an inwardly differentiated unity, not two elements.

Steiner says that we have the capacity to overcome the dualism of experience by discovering the inner unity, at first hidden, of perception with thinking.^[14] For example, when observing a thinking process with sufficient energy, perceiving and thinking can begin to become one for us.

Steiner tells us that we think in perceiving, and perceive in thinking. Consider the first part of that sentence: thinking is more pervasive in our ordinary perceiving than we often recognize. If for example we had not as infants learned, unconsciously, to think with our eyes and limbs, then our eyes, even if functioning perfectly in a physical sense, would see only something like what the philosopher William James referred to as a "blooming buzzing confusion," or what Steiner referred to in his Ph.D thesis as a highly chaotic stage of the "given." We would not perceive spatial or temporal structure or recognize distinct qualities. If that conclusion seems surprising, that's because the thinking-in-perceiving that we learned to do as children has usually become habitual and automatic long before we reached adulthood and full consciousness; so we rarely become conscious of the key role thinking plays in even the simplest perceptions.

Thus Steiner finds thinking in perceiving. But what does he mean by perceiving in thinking? As became increasingly apparent in Steiner's works after the *Philosophy of Freedom*, thinking for him is not only that which enables us to recognize and perceive form, temporality, and qualities; it is the most accessible experience of the spiritual world, and through development can permit us to perceive the spiritual beings "within" material realities; thinking can lead to progressively higher and higher forms of spiritual experience, including experience of spiritual beings and processes, which Steiner described in many books and lectures.

There are limits beyond which our understanding does not presently go, but both our perception and our thinking can be extended beyond their present abilities. The telescope and microscope offer us radical extensions of the range of our perceptions; we can look to extend our powers of thought until they become organs of perception for higher worlds. Steiner thus challenges the philosophy of his (and our) time: it is not enough simply to define the limits of possible knowledge; it is necessary to work to extend these as well.^[14]

Steiner's writes that "The unique character of the idea, by means of which I distinguish myself as 'I', makes me an individual." And then, "An act the grounds for which lie in the ideal part of my nature is free." Steiner there is using the term *ideal* to refer to pure ideation or pure thinking in Steiner's sense. "The action is therefore neither stereotyped, carried out according to set rules, nor is it performed automatically in response to an external impetus; the action is determined solely through its ideal content."^[15] What is individual in us is to be distinguished from what is generic by its ideal character. If an act proceeds out of genuine thinking, or practical reason, then it is free.

Exercising freedom

Steiner begins the second section of this work by emphasizing the role of self-awareness in objective thinking. Here he modifies the usual description of inner and outer experience by pointing out that our feelings, for example, are given to us as naively as outer perceptions. Both of these, feelings and perceptions, tell about objects we are interested in: the one about ourselves, the other about the world. Both require the help of thinking to penetrate the reasons why they arise, to comprehend their inner message. The same is true of our will. Whereas our feelings tell how the world affects us, our will tells how we would affect the world. Neither attains to true objectivity, for both mix the world's existence and our inner life in an unclear way. Steiner emphasizes that we experience our feelings and will - and our perceptions as well - as being more essentially part of us than our thinking; the former are more basic, more natural. He celebrates this gift of natural, direct experience, but points out that this experience is still dualistic in the sense that it only encompasses one side of the world.

This all is by way of introduction and recapitulation. Steiner then introduces the principle that we can act out of the compulsions of our natural being (reflexes, drives, desires) or out of the compulsion of ethical principles, and that neither of these leaves us free. Between them, however, is an individual insight, a situational ethic, that arises neither from abstract principles nor from our bodily impulses. A deed that arises in this way can be said to be truly free; it is also both unpredictable and wholly individual. Here Steiner articulates his fundamental maxim of social life:

Live through deeds of love, and let others live with understanding for each person's unique intentions.

Here he describes a polarity of influences on human nature, stating that morality transcends both the determining factors of bodily influences and those of convention:

A moral misunderstanding, a clash, is out of the question between people who are morally free. Only one who is morally unfree, who obeys bodily instincts or conventional demands of duty, turns away from a fellow human being if the latter does not obey the same instincts and demands as himself.

For Steiner, morality is completely situational and individual; true morality depends upon our achieving freedom from both our inner drives and outer pressures. To achieve such free deeds, we must cultivate our *moral imagination*, our ability to imaginatively create ethically sound and practical solutions to new situations, in fact, to forge our own ethical principles and to transform these flexibly as needed - not in the service of our own egotistical purposes, but in the face of new demands and situations. This is only possible through *moral intuitions*, immediate experiences of spiritual realities that underlie moral judgments.^{[10][14]} Moral imagination and intuition allow us to realize our subjective impulses in objective reality, thus creating bridges between the spiritual influence of our subjectivity and the natural influence of the objective world in deeds whereby "that which is natural is spiritual, that which is spiritual is natural".^[16]

Steiner concludes by pointing out that to achieve this level of freedom, we must lift ourselves out of our group-existence: out of the prejudices we receive from our family, nation, ethnic group and religion, and all that we inherit from the past that limits our creative and imaginative capacity to meet the world directly. Only when we realize our potential to be a unique individual are we free. Thus, it lies in our freedom to achieve freedom; only when we actively strive towards freedom do we have some chance of attaining it.

Philosophical antecedents

Philosophers referred to in the book include Kant, Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Eduard von Hartmann, though von Hartmann, as an acquaintance of Steiner, is mentioned more than others.^[17] Steiner was influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey and Franz Brentano, who later became important for the phenomenological movement in philosophy, led by such thinkers as Edmund Husserl, Ortega y Gasset, and Paul Ricoeur. Like those thinkers, but before them, Steiner was seeking a phenomenological way beyond the subject/object split that had been more or less regnant in various forms for several centuries within philosophy and science. While in Vienna, Steiner had attended lectures on moral philosophy given by Franz Brentano, at the time a Privatdozent at the University of

Vienna. Steiner's ideas of freedom were in part a response to those contained in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* and the works of Goethe. Steiner believed that both of these writers had not focused sufficiently on the role of thinking in developing inner freedom.^[18] Fichte's distinction between formal and material freedom might be viewed as parallel to Steiner's division of his subject into the knowledge of freedom and the reality of freedom, except that for Steiner, knowledge is not merely formal like a mere orderer or arranger of the real; for Steiner knowledge is substantial and produces its own real content. Steiner is at times critical of Fichte's philosophy, including a critique in chapter six of a "fundamental mistake" in Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*. In his later lectures, Steiner mentions Vladimir Solovyov, whose understanding of consciousness corresponds to some extent to Steiner's. Solovyov (somewhat obscurely) writes that "In human beings, the absolute subject-object appears *as such*, i.e., as pure spiritual activity, containing all of its own objectivity, the whole process of its natural manifestation, but containing it totally ideally - in consciousness."^[19]

Steiner's philosophy neither evaluates the moral value of an action only according to its consequences (utilitarianism), nor does it allow any categorical imperative, whether Kantian or otherwise, to be the moral arbiter of human actions. For Steiner, the highest morality exists when a person's inner life actively connects with the external world through deeds of love by means of individually developed moral imaginations,^[10] a view that has affinities with the "dilige et quod vis fac" ("Love, and do what you will") of St. Augustine.^[20]

Quotations

To live in love towards our actions, and to let live in the understanding of the other person's will, is the fundamental maxim of free men.^[8] :Chapter 9

Only to the extent that a man has emancipated himself in this way from all that is generic, does he count as a free spirit within a human community. No man is all genus, none is all individuality.^[8]:Chapter 14

Translations and editions

The first edition of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* was published in 1894. A second revised edition appeared in 1918. Further German editions reprinted the 1918 text until 1973, when a revised edition was produced based on Steiner's corrections of the galley proofs of the 1918 edition. Minor changes, particularly corrections of Steiner's often inaccurate citations, were made in the 1987 German edition.^[21]

English translations

English translations include:

- 1916: *The Philosophy of Freedom*^[22], trans. Hoernlé and Hoernlé, ed. Harry Collison. This is the only English translation of the first German edition. (This edition uses a non-standard chapter numbering.)
- 1922: *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. Based on 2nd German edition, trans. Hoernlé and Hoernlé.
- 1939: *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*^[23], trans. Hermann Poppelbaum, based on Hoernlé and Hoernlé translation
- 1963: *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*^[24], trans. Rita Stebbing
- 1964: *The Philosophy of Freedom: The Basis for a Modern World Conception*^[25], trans. Michael Wilson
- 1986: *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity: Basic Features of a Modern World View*^[26], trans. William Lindeman
- 1995: *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*, trans. Michael Lipson, based on Wilson translation
- 2011: 'Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophie der Freiheit* as the Foundation of the Logic of Beholding. Religion of the Thinking Will. Organon of the New Cultural Epoch', trans. Graham B. Rickett, with commentary by G.A.Bondarev' [ISBN 978-1-105-05765-6]

There is a comparison tool^[27] to compare most of the above translations.

- [24] http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/English/RSP11963/GA004_index.html
[25] http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/English/RSP1964/GA004_cover.html
[26] http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/English/AP1986/GA004_index.html
[27] <http://www.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/Compare/index.php>

External links

- The Philosophy of Freedom/Spiritual Activity (<http://www.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/>) complete text in English (various versions), and other languages including the original German.
 - The Philosophy of Freedom, PDF Downloads of complete text in English and German, various versions (<http://philosophyoffreedom.com/node/3452>)
 - *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (<http://geisteswissenschaft.home.att.net/PDF04.pdf>), original German text
 - Intuitive Thinking As A Spiritual Path, Audiobook (<http://rudolfsteineraudio.com/POSA/posa.html>), read by Dale Brunsvold
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