

**THE
PHILOSOPHY
OF
SPIRITUAL
ACTIVITY**

**By
RUDOLF STEINER**

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION, 1918

Everything discussed in this book centers around two problems which are fundamental to the human soul-life. One of these problems concerns the possibility of attaining such insight into human nature that knowledge of man can become the foundation of all human knowledge and experience of life. We often feel that our experiences and the results of scientific investigations are not self-supporting; further experiences or discoveries may shake our certitude. The other problem is: Has man any right to ascribe freedom to his will, or is freedom of will an illusion arising out of his inability to recognize the threads of necessity on which his will depends, just like a process in nature? This question is not artificially created. In a certain disposition it arises quite spontaneously in the human soul. And one feels that the soul lacks in stature if it has not at some time faced in deep seriousness the question of free will or necessity. In this book the intention is to show that the inner experiences caused by the second problem depend upon what attitude man is able to take toward the first problem. The attempt will be made to show that it is possible to attain such an insight into man's nature, that this can support all the rest of his knowledge, and further that this insight completely justifies the concept of freedom of will, provided only that first the region of soul is discovered where free will can unfold.

This insight in relation to the two problems is such that, once attained, it can become a living content of man's soul life. A theoretical answer will not be given which, once acquired is merely carried about as a conviction, retained by memory. For the whole manner of thinking on which this book is based, such an answer would be no answer. Such a finished, limited answer will not be given, but a region of experiences within the human soul will be pointed to, where, through the soul's own inner activity, living answers to the questions are to be found ever anew and at every moment when man needs them. Once the region of soul is discovered where these questions unfold, a real insight into this region provides man with what he needs for the solution of these two problems of life so that, with what he has then attained, he can penetrate further into the breadth and depth of life's riddles, as need or destiny leads him. - It will be seen that a knowledge has here been outlined, which proves its justification and validity, not only through its own existence, but also through the relationship it has with the entire soul-life of man. These were my thoughts about the content of this book when I wrote it twenty-five years ago. Today, again I must write similarly if I am to characterize the aim of this book. In the first edition I limited myself to saying no more than was in the strictest sense connected with the two fundamental problems described above. If anyone should be surprised at not finding in this book as yet, any reference to that region of the world of spiritual experience described in my later writings, then he must consider that at that time it was not my purpose to describe results of spiritual research, but first to lay the foundation on which such results can rest. This "Philosophy of Freedom" does not contain any special results of this kind, any more than it contains special results of the natural sciences. But what it contains cannot, in my view, be dispensed with by anyone who strives for certainty in such knowledge. What I have said in this book can also be acceptable to many who, for reasons of their own, will have nothing to do with the results of my spiritual scientific research. But one who can regard these results of spiritual scientific research as something to which he is drawn, will recognize as important what is attempted here. It is this: to prove that an open-minded consideration

of just the two problems I have indicated, problems which are fundamental to all knowledge, leads to recognition of the fact that man is living within the reality of a spiritual world. In this book the attempt is made to justify knowledge of the realm of spirit before entering upon spiritual experience. And this justification is undertaken in such a way that, for anyone able and willing to enter into this discussion, there is no need, in order to accept what is said here, to cast furtive glances at the experiences which my later writings have shown to be relevant.

Thus it seems to me that, on the one hand, this book occupies a position completely independent of my writings on actual spiritual scientific matters, and yet, on the other hand, it is also most intimately connected with them. All this has caused me now, after twenty-five years, to republish the content of this book practically unaltered in all essentials. I have, however, made additions of some length to several chapters. The misunderstandings of my argument which have come to my attention seemed to make these detailed extensions necessary. Alterations have been made only where what I said a quarter of a century ago appeared to me clumsily expressed. (Only ill-will could find in these changes occasion to suggest that I have changed my fundamental conviction.)

The book has been out of print for many years. Nevertheless, and in spite of the fact, apparent from what I have just said, that to me it seems that to-day must be similarly expressed what I did express twenty-five years ago about the problems I have characterized, I hesitated a long time about the completion of this revised edition. Again and again I have asked myself whether at this point or that, I ought not to define my position toward the numerous philosophical views which have been put forward since the publication of the first edition. Yet the heavy demands on my time in recent years, due to purely spiritual scientific research, prevented me doing as I might have wished. Also, a survey, as thorough as possible, of the philosophical literature of the present day has convinced me that such a critical discussion, tempting though it would be in itself, has no place in the context of what this book has to say. All that, from the point of view of the "Philosophy of Spiritual Activity," it seemed to me necessary to say about recent philosophical tendencies, may be found in the second volume of my "Riddles of Philosophy."

Rudolf Steiner

April, 1918

1. THE CONSCIOUS HUMAN DEED

Is man in his thinking and acting a spiritually free being, or is he compelled by the iron necessity of natural law? Few questions have been debated more than this one. The concept of the freedom of the human will has found enthusiastic supporters and stubborn opponents in plenty. There are those who, in moral fervor, declare it to be sheer stupidity to deny so evident a fact as freedom. Opposed to them are others who regard as utterly naive the belief that the uniformity of natural law is interrupted in the sphere of human action and thinking. One and the same thing is here declared as often to be the most precious possession of humanity, as it is said to be its most fatal illusion. Infinite subtlety has been devoted to explaining how human freedom is compatible with the working of nature, to which, after all, man belongs. No less pains have been taken to make comprehensible how a delusion like this could have arisen. That here we are dealing with one of the most important questions of life, religion, conduct and science, is felt by everyone whose character is not totally devoid of depth. And indeed, it belongs to the sad signs of the superficiality of present day thinking that a book which attempts to develop a "new faith" out of the results of the latest scientific discoveries, contains, on this question, nothing but the words:

"There is no need here to go into the question of the freedom of the human will. The supposed indifferent freedom of choice has always been recognized as an empty illusion by every philosophy worthy of the name. The moral valuation of human conduct and character remains untouched by this question."

I do not quote this passage because I consider that the book in which it appears has any special importance, but because it seems to me to express the only view which most of our thinking contemporaries are able to reach, concerning this question. Everyone who claims to have advanced beyond an elementary education seems nowadays to know that freedom cannot consist in choosing at one's pleasure, one or the other of two possible courses of action; it is maintained that there is always a quite definite reason why, out of several possible actions, we carry out a particular one.

This seems obvious. Nevertheless, up to now, the main attacks by those who oppose freedom are directed only against the freedom of choice. Herbert Spencer, who has views which are rapidly gaining ground, says:

"That everyone is able to desire or not to desire, as he pleases, which is the essential principle in the dogma of free will, is negated by the analysis of consciousness, as well as by the contents of the preceding chapter."

Others, too, start from the same point of view in combating the concept of free will. The germs of all that is relevant in these arguments are to be found as early as Spinoza.³ All that he brought forward in clear and simple language against the idea of freedom has since been repeated times without number, but usually veiled in the most complicated theoretical doctrines so that it is difficult to recognize the straightforward train of thought on which all depends. Spinoza writes in a letter of October or November, 1674:

"I call something free which exists and acts from the pure necessity of its nature, and I call that compelled, the existence and action of which are exactly and fixedly determined by something else. The existence of God, for example, though necessary, is free because He exists only through the necessity of His nature. Similarly, God knows

Himself and all else in freedom, because it follows solely from the necessity of His nature that He knows all. You see, therefore, that I regard freedom as consisting, not in free decision, but in free necessity.”

“But let us come down to created things which are all determined by external causes to exist and to act in a fixed and definite manner. To recognize this more clearly, let us imagine a perfectly simple case. A stone, for example, receives from an external cause acting upon it a certain quantity of motion, by which it necessarily continues to move after the impact of the external cause has ceased. The continued motion of the stone is a compelled one, not a necessary one, because it has to be defined by the thrust of the external cause. What is true here for the stone is true also for every other particular thing, however complicated and many-sided it may be, namely, that each thing is necessarily determined by external causes to exist and to act in a fixed and definite manner.”

“Now, please, suppose that during its motion the stone thinks and knows that it is striving to the best of its ability to continue in motion. This stone which is conscious only of its striving and is by no means indifferent, will believe that it is absolutely free, and that it continues in motion for no other reason than its own will to continue. But this is that human freedom which everybody claims to possess and which consists in nothing but this, that men are conscious of their desires, but do not know the causes by which they are determined. Thus the child believes that he is free when he desires milk, the angry boy that he is free in his desire for vengeance, and the timid in his desire for flight. Again, the drunken man believes that he says of his own free decision what, sober again, he would fain have left unsaid, and as this prejudice is innate in all men, it is not easy to free oneself from it. For although experience teaches us often enough that man, least of all, can temper his desires and that, moved by conflicting passions, he sees the better and pursues the worse, yet he considers himself free, simply because there are some things which he desires less strongly and many desires which can easily be inhibited through the recollection of something else which is often remembered.”

Because here we are dealing with a clear and definitely expressed view, it is also easy to discover the fundamental error in it. As necessarily as a stone continues a definite movement after being put in motion, just as necessarily is a man supposed to carry out an action when urged thereto by any reason. It is only because man is conscious of his action, that he regards himself as its free originator. But, in doing so, he overlooks the fact that he is driven to it by a cause which he has to obey unconditionally. The error in this train of thought is soon found. Spinoza, and all who think like him, overlook the fact that man not only is conscious of his action, but may also become conscious of the causes which guide him. No one will deny that when the child desires milk, he is unfree, as is also the drunken man when he says things he later regrets. Neither knows anything of the causes working in the depths of their organisms, which exercise irresistible power over them. But is it justifiable to lump together actions of this kind with those in which a man is conscious, not only of his actions but also of the reasons which cause him to act? Are the actions of men really all of one kind? Should the deed of a soldier on the field of battle, of the research scientist in his laboratory, of the statesman in complicated diplomatic negotiations, be placed, scientifically, on the same level with that of the child when he desires milk? It is indeed true that it is best to attempt the solution of a problem where the conditions are simplest. But inability to

SECOND APPENDIX

In this Appendix is repeated, in all essentials, what served as a kind of “Foreword” to the first edition of this book (1894). In this edition I place it as an appendix because it conveys the kind of thoughts that occupied me when I wrote the book twenty-five years ago, rather than having any direct bearing on the content. It is not possible to omit it altogether, since the opinion crops up, again and again, that because of my writings on the science of the spirit, I have to suppress some of my earlier writings.

Our age is one in which truth must be sought in the depths of human nature. Of Schiller’s two well-known paths, it will be the second that most appeals to modern man:

“Truth seek we both - Thou in the life without thee and around;
I in the heart within. By both can Truth alike be found.
The healthy eye can through the world the great Creator track;
The healthy heart is but the glass which gives Creation back.”

“Wahrheit suchen wir beide, du aussen im Leben, ich innen
In dem Herren, und so findet sie jeder gewiss.
Ist das Auge gesund, so begegnet es aussen dem Schöpfer;
Ist es das Herz, dann gewiss spiegelt es innen die Welt.”
(transl. by E. Bulwer Lytton)

A truth which comes to us from outside always bears the stamp of uncertainty. Only that truth which appears to us as coming from within ourselves do we trust.

Only truth can bring us security in developing our individual powers. In someone tormented by doubts, the powers are weakened. He can find no goal for his creative powers in a world that appears to him as an enigma.

No longer do we merely want to believe; we want to know. Belief demands acknowledgement of truths which are not quite clear to us. But what is not clearly recognized goes against what is individual in us, which wants to experience everything in the depth of its being. Only that kind of knowing satisfies us which is not subjected to any external standard, but springs from the inner experience of our personality.

Nor do we want a kind of knowledge which has become hardened into formulas and is stored away, valid for all time. Each of us considers himself justified in proceeding from his immediate experience, from the facts he knows, and from there going forward to gain knowledge of the whole universe. We strive for certainty in knowledge, but each in his own way.

Our scientific teachings, too, should no longer take a form that implies their acceptance to be a compulsion. Today no one should give a scientific work a title like that Fichte once gave a book: “A Pellucid Report for the Broader Public concerning the Essential Nature of Recent Philosophies. An Attempt to Compel the Reader to Understand.” To-day no one is to be compelled to understand. We demand neither acceptance nor agreement from anyone unless his own particular, individual need urges him to the view in question. Today even the still immature human being, the child, should not have knowledge crammed into him; rather we should seek to develop his faculties so that he no longer needs to be compelled to understand, but understands.

I am under no illusion concerning these characteristics of the present age. I know how much of a stereotypical attitude, lacking all individuality, is prevalent everywhere. But I also know that many of my contemporaries strive to order their lives in the direction I have indicated. To them I would dedicate this book. It is not meant to be the “only possible” way that leads to truth, but it describes a path taken by one whose heart is set upon truth.

This book at first leads the reader into abstract regions, where thought must have sharp outlines if it is to reach secure conclusions. But the reader is also led out of these arid concepts into concrete life. I am convinced that one must raise oneself up into the ethereal realm of concepts if one wants to experience existence in all its aspects. One understanding only the pleasures of the senses, misses the essential enjoyments of life. Oriental sages make their disciples live a life of resignation and asceticism for years before they impart their own wisdom to them. The Western world no longer demands pious exercises and ascetic practices as a preparation for science, but it does require that one should have the good will to withdraw occasionally from the immediate impressions of life and enter the realm of pure thought.

The spheres of life are many, and for each of them special sciences develop. But life itself is a whole, and the more the sciences strive to penetrate into the depths of the separate spheres, the more they withdraw themselves from seeing the world as a living unity. There must be a knowledge which seeks in the separate sciences the principle that leads man back to the fullness of life once more. Through his knowledge the researcher in a special branch of science wants to become conscious of the world and how it works; in this book the aim is a philosophical one: science itself must become a living, organic entity. The various branches of science are preliminary stages of the science striven for here. A similar relation is to be found in art. The composer’s work is based on the theory of composition. This latter is a knowledge which is a necessary prerequisite for composing. In composing, the law of composition serves life, that is, it serves true reality. In exactly the same sense philosophy is an art. All genuine philosophers have truly been artists in concepts. For them, human ideas become the material for art, and the scientific method becomes artistic technique. Abstract thinking thereby gains concrete, individual life. Ideas become life-forces. We then have not just a knowledge of things, but we have made knowledge into a real organism, ruled by its own laws; the reality of our active consciousness has risen beyond a mere passive reception of truths.

How philosophy as an art is related to human freedom (spiritual activity), what freedom is, and whether we do or can participate in it, is the principal problem dealt with in my book. All other scientific discussions are included solely because they ultimately throw light on this question which, in my opinion, is man’s most immediate concern. These pages offer a “Philosophy of Freedom.”

All science would be nothing but the satisfaction of idle curiosity if it did not strive to elevate the value of existence of the human personality. The sciences attain their true value only through presenting the significance of their results in relation to man. The ultimate goal of the individual cannot be the ennoblement of one single soul-faculty only, but a development of all the capacities that slumber within us. All knowledge has value only insofar as it is a contribution to the all-round unfolding of man’s entire nature.

Therefore, in this book the relation between science and life is not regarded in the sense that man must bow down to ideas and let them enslave him; rather the relation should be that man conquers the world of ideas in order to make use of it for his human aims, which go beyond the aims of mere science.

One must be able to confront the idea in living experience, or else fall into bondage to it.

About Rudolf Steiner



Rudolf Steiner (Feb. 27, 1861-Mar. 30, 1925) was born in Kraljevic, Austria, where he grew up the son of a railroad station chief. As a young man, he lived in Weimar and Berlin, where he became a respected and well-published scientific, literary, and philosophical scholar, known especially for his work with Goethe`s scientific writings. At the beginning of the twentieth century, he began to develop his earlier philosophical principles into an approach to systematic research into psychological and spiritual phenomena. Formally beginning his spiritual teaching career under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, Steiner came to use the term *Anthroposophy*, or spiritual science, for his philosophy, spiritual research, and its results. The influence of Steiner`s multifaceted

genius has led to innovative and holistic approaches in holistic medicine and therapies, philosophy, religious renewal, Waldorf education, education for special needs (including the Camphill Village movement), threefold economics, biodynamic agriculture, Goethean science, architecture, and the arts of drama, speech, and eurythmy. In 1924, Rudolf Steiner founded the General Anthroposophical Society, which today has branches throughout the world. He died in Dornach, Switzerland.