



Key to LIFE

*An Introductory Sketch
to Rudolf Steiner's
Philosophy of Freedom*

IDDO OBERSKI

KEY TO LIFE

AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH TO RUDOLF STEINER'S
PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM

by

Iddo Oberski



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This book is dedicated to all who work for peace by developing their own spiritual freedom. Know yourself!

With thanks to
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PREFACE

It is a rare experience to come across a book that claims to solve the riddle of life and succeeds in doing so. Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom* (abbreviated PoF, translation Michael Wilson, Rudolf Steiner Press, London 1999), first written in German in 1898, provides a key to the understanding of life and the world. It opens doors to a kind of knowledge that can form a firm foundation upon which to build all further knowledge. While I cannot (yet) claim to understand every single one of Steiner's ideas, I now have sufficient grasp of it to lead me to the firm conviction that this is the book of the new millennium. It just happens to have been written about one hundred years before its time!

I have come across many people who know about this book, who have even tried to read it, but who have pulled away because of the effort involved in breaking through the philosophical approach and somewhat formal language Steiner uses. Yet, those who do persevere invariably find that there comes a point when confusion begins to dissolve,

clarity emerges and real treasures are revealed. Once this point is reached, it seems to become progressively easier to assimilate Steiner's meaning with subsequent readings, each of which is likely to lay bare further layers of understanding.

However, the fact remains that though written for the general public, PoF is not an easy read. This is partly for the reasons outlined above, and partly because Steiner explores his two main questions from a fairly exhaustive range of different perspectives, causing us often to lose sight of the key ideas he develops.

Yet, in the opening chapter he himself also proclaims, in relation to overly complex philosophical treatises on the question of freedom of the will, that all that really matters is “the straightforward train of thought” (p. 4). But PoF is no ordinary philosophical treatise. It is a living, breathing, journey through the landscape of human potential. As such it evokes and necessitates the reader's total engagement, to ensure not merely an understanding of the logical argument, but a first hand experience of the reality of the idea of freedom. So Steiner did not intend this to be an easy read, but carefully crafted his book to draw his readers into the experiences required to understand his argument. Nevertheless, however much I love the PoF itself, I do believe there is a need for a more gentle introduction to it, written in simple, contemporary language.

So the purpose of my short book is twofold: (1) to provide a condensed outline of the main train of thought that runs through the PoF and (2) thereby to inspire readers to take up the study of Steiner's book itself. I am not at all under the illusion that in the following pages I could provide a complete picture of PoF. My book should not be thought of as being a substitute to studying the original; there simply is no substitute for that and my attempt at easing the way in is far from perfect.

But if by reading this much shorter sketch you are encouraged to then forge ahead with the study of Philosophy of Freedom itself, the effort of writing this has paid off. For there is much more of value in Steiner's book than the simple train of thought presented here. Steiner's book opens many doors to experiences and insights that are full of life and gives many glimpses of a most fundamental understanding of life.

So here's what to do. Read this introductory book so you get the essence (or bare bones) of the line of thought. Then read and reread the PoF itself, from beginning to end, from the end to the beginning, or pick out specific chapters or passages. Reading and understanding that book is an experience of thinking and through that also a living encounter with the foothills of the spiritual world. However, it is not easy, and Steiner knew this. He remarks more than once that insight into what he is teaching us comes through internal struggle and perseverance, just like insight into any branch of human knowledge comes only after sacrificing time and effort.

To come to understand PoF is indeed a struggle. But it is well worth it. This struggle involves in-depth reading and reflection and if possible, discussion with others. And even though progress may be small, the fruits of every small step towards understanding are sweet indeed! That is not just my own experience, but also of many others I have met over the years and with whom I have shared many hours discussing the content of PoF. They all agree that studying the Philosophy is a real experience. And my book about PoF can never do what a persistent study of the actual book itself can do, but hopefully it helps you make a start.

Over the next decades and centuries, PoF will gain in importance, as the 'New Age' takes root and more and more people refuse to take on a creed handed down to them by their parents. But while rejecting, or simply being ignorant

of, one's spiritual heritage is one thing, finding an authentic nourishment for the desire to know the spiritual, rather than to merely believe, is quite something else. The Aquarian Age is supposed to be about thinking for yourself, being independent, being free. The Philosophy of Freedom, though written in the 19th Century, is a guide to the development of an independent thinking that goes beyond most current modes of thinking. It is a guide to a living, feeling, loving thinking that can form the very foundations of human life in the 21st Century and beyond.

In what follows, I have closely followed the chapter structure of the Michael Wilson translation and have focused on the key argument in Part One and the first few chapters in Part Two. Please remember that I have attempted to give a condensed version of Steiner's argument, not my own, but the way I have represented his views is completely my own responsibility. I have tried wherever possible to paraphrase rather than quote Steiner, but often I remain very close to Steiner's own words. This will help you identify our place in the original argument. You may also find it helpful to familiarize yourself with Steiner's earlier book, *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*.

The rest of Part Two of PoF is concerned with a range of far-reaching philosophical questions treated from the perspective of the view developed in part one. However, once the key ideas are clear, these further chapters are relatively easy to come to grips with, despite their somewhat technical nature. Therefore I felt justified in omitting them in this brief sketch.

If nothing else, this book no doubt illustrates the extent of my own understanding or lack of it. Comments, both positive and constructively critical are therefore more than welcome. My email is joberski@gmail.com

Iddo Oberski, Edinburgh, Hogmanay 2009

“I give myself to the Spirit's revelation
And gain the light of cosmic Being;
The power of thought grows strong and clear
And gives my own true self to me;
By thinking's power the sense of self
Awakens and is freed.”

(From Rudolf Steiner's Calendar of the Soul, Translation ©
John B. Thomson 2004)

INTRODUCTION

If you are already perplexed by life and full of questions that you are just craving to answer, then you could skip to the next chapter. Otherwise, let me try and whet your appetite.

What is life?

Is it:

- ? An accumulation of chemical and physical processes.
- ? A coincidental non-purposeful self-replicating organic machinery.
- ? Created by an all-powerful God.

Who am I?

Am I:

- ? A specimen of a human species, which evolved over millions of years in response to the environment.

- ? A physically and chemically determined entity driven solely by the need to eat, sleep and reproduce.
- ? An animal like all other animals.

How can I find out what the world, life and myself are all about?

- ? We can find the explanation for everything in the world through science.
- ? Cause and effect only operate within the narrow bounds of the physical.

I have put question marks before these statements to allow some room for openness when it comes to understanding the world. Try to let go of these ideas for a minute and see if you can regain some of the wonder about life and the universe that pre-scientific generations may have had and that is simply based on your experience before learning about science.

Look at a stone. It is hard, solid material. It does not move by itself, nor grow (although some crystals of course do 'grow'). Where do its colors come from? What about its shape? Where did you find it and how did it get there? With a stone we can possibly trace its whole journey as a chain of causal events acting on it. Or can we? There is no drive or movement or change coming from within the stone itself.

Look at a rose, or any other plant, growing in the earth. Look at the colors. The earth is black and brown, an indeterminate mass of decomposed organic matter with only darkness holding it together. Then look at the plant and its flower. A well-organized and growing, living thing, with different shades

of green, well defined forms (leaves, thorns, stems etc.) and brightly red or yellow or orange flowers. How is it possible for all this order, colour and growth to emerge out of a dark, undefined, moist mass of earth? It is incredible. Is it simply the sun and rain acting on the earth, producing the plant? No, of course there was a seed first. But the seed produces the plant out of itself, given the right environment for it to do so. Very unlike the stone. The seed is alive.

Look at an animal, your dog, the neighbor's cat, a fox, a blackbird. It is no longer rooted in the earth, but seemingly self-sufficient. Where did it come from? How is it possible for an animal to survive by eating plants or other animals and drinking water? The blackbird eats berries, the fox eats rabbits, the cat eats mice, the squirrel eats nuts, yet they do not take on the form of what they eat. Instead they somehow manage to convert whatever they eat into their own form, like the plant. But the things they eat are themselves alive. They cannot survive by eating earth. But unlike most plants, animals can move and make sounds and feel things, they can form relationships and recognize where they are. How does a mass of chemical and physical processes (there is my scientific thinking again) set a pair of wings in motion? What is it in the fox that makes it capable of looking after its cubs? Plants don't look after their seedlings.

Now look at yourself, a human being. You also need to eat and drink like the animal and you do not take on the form of the things you eat and drink, but keep your own, human form. You also can move and make sounds and feel things. You sleep and wake up being the same person.

But now look at all the things you can ask and wonder about. You can wonder about stones and plants and animals and yourself as a human being. Where does this wondering come from? Do animals wonder about things? Do they think?

What is thinking? How do you know if your thinking actually helps you find the truth? Who thinks in you? Is your thinking simply a chemical process in your brain? How is it possible for logic to exist, for one thought to follow from another by necessity? Could you live without thinking? Could you understand anything without thinking?

When it comes to religion, I struggle with the idea that you simply have to believe in God. This is something most religions have in common. You have to take the holy books and the priests at their word that God exists, even if you have no direct experience of God yourself. You have to BELIEVE. And though I can try to see and feel God in everything around me, really if I am honest, I don't see God, or certainly not in the way that I see other things around me. Now of course there are lots of other things I believe without having had first hand experience of it. For example, I believe the newsreader on TV when she says that eight soldiers were killed in Afghanistan. (But I take the weather forecast with a pinch of salt!). And I believe my daughter when she says she had pasta for dinner on her sleepover. But these things are all possible within my personal experience. I know people get killed in wars, in fact my own grandparents were. Also, we regularly eat pasta at home so I know it is possible. It is rather more difficult though to believe that Moses parted the sea, or that Jesus walked on water.

Would it be possible to know the spiritual world in a similar way, with the same certainty that we have in our knowledge of the material world? So that I do not have to believe, but can come to know out of my own experience? I want to be able to relate the mysteries of the world to my own experience, I want to know them and not merely believe in what others tell me. Rudolf Steiner helps us to do exactly this, sketching out the first steps we need to take towards knowledge of the spiritual world, based entirely on our own experience, without needing

to believe anything other people tell us. Maybe I am only halfway there, but if nothing else, I now know with certainty that it is possible to achieve this. This is why I love Steiner's Philosophy of Freedom.

HOW TO READ PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM

The Philosophy of Freedom is divided into two parts. Steiner sets out his main ideas in answer to the two fundamental questions he poses, namely “Are we free in our actions?” and “Is there a self-sustaining view of the world that can form the foundation of all our knowledge?” In Part One he essentially develops an argument that leads to a self-sustaining view of the world and provides thereby the foundation for answering the first question, which he then does in Part Two.

My own understanding of the book is continually developing and over time I have become more relaxed about how to read it. Initially, I tried to read it from cover to cover, failing at least three times, though getting slightly further each time. The key I think is not to try and understand every single idea or argument at first, but to read loosely. When you get all confused, just accept it but keep reading. It won't be long before you reach a point where Steiner summarizes, or rephrases the essence of what has gone before, allowing you then to

pick up the thread and read on.

Start by reading the prefaces and the additions at the end of some chapters. I find that these often provide just those ideas that somehow remained implicit in the main text or perhaps were developed so deeply that I lose the thread. It is also helpful to just pick out a particular chapter, or section, or even just a paragraph or sentence for in-depth contemplation. Read it, go over the main ideas in your own mind and see if you can really sense the connections being made. Can you experience for yourself the path of thinking that Steiner has laid out for us?

Try not to get bogged down too much in single words or sentences, as often the meaning is more diffusely distributed across larger sections. Sometimes you may find you get really fed up with the book, become irritated by your own lack of understanding or you begin to find Steiner's approach really tedious. It feels like a kind of mental indigestion. Just stop, put the book aside and forget about it. Then a few days, weeks or sometimes even months or years later you find yourself coming back to it after recovering your sense of wonder about life! I always know where my copy is, have often had to lay it aside, give it a rest and digest. Then over time again and again I am drawn back to it, as my soul grows hungry again.

Over time you will find that each reading builds up a new layer of understanding. Then suddenly something will click and give you a sense that this really does provide answers to the riddles of the world. This will then motivate you to keep reading and rereading until the seed of understanding grows roots, a stem, leaves and eventually a flower!

It can also be tremendously helpful to have a small group of people to discuss the book with, as speaking about it and listening to others can progress your own and

others' understanding considerably, as well as clarify any misunderstandings. If you live somewhere where there is an Anthroposophical Society, there will very likely be a reading group discussing PoF. But you may wish to set up your own one, because the discussions within the society groups often get drawn towards Steiner's later works. And although his later books are all built on the theory of knowledge he develops in the Philosophy of Freedom, ideas about Karma, Angels, Temperaments and soul anatomy, to name but a few, often creep into the discussion and give the impression of belief, rather than knowledge. You will not find any reference to such entities in the Philosophy of Freedom.

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