

The modern scientific way of thinking and the worldview of Goethe in Rudolf Steiners work

by

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The essence for us here is the result of Steiner's epistemological research², which can be stated as: "If a theory of knowledge is really to explain the *whole* sphere of knowledge, then it must start from something still quite untouched by the activity of thinking and, what is more, from something which lends to this activity its first impulse. This starting point must lie *outside* the *act of cognition*, it must not itself be knowledge. But it must be sought *immediately prior* to cognition, so that the very next step man takes beyond it is the activity of *cognition*." This next step, however, tears apart the hitherto unity of perception and thinking; the activity of cognition creates a chasm between perception and thinking—it is where the activity of cognition starts. This split is necessary to be able to know the world; I cannot know the world without this split, and moreover, the world does not care how I am organized to be able to know it. All further activity then has as its purpose to reunite this artificially created split between perceiving and thinking. "The perception is the part of reality that is given objectively; the concept is the part given subjectively (through intuition...). Our spiritual organization tears reality apart into these two factors. The one factor appears to perception, the other to intuition. Only the union of both, the perception incorporating itself lawfully into the universe, is full reality. If we look at mere perception by itself, we then have no reality, but rather a disconnected chaos; if we look at the lawfulness of our perceptions by itself, we then have no reality, but rather a disconnected chaos; if we look at the lawfulness of our perceptions by itself, we then have to do merely with abstract concepts. The abstract concept does not contain reality; but the thinking observation does indeed do so, which considers neither concept or perception one-sidedly by itself, but rather the union of both."³

¹www.thepresentage.net. Version 1.2. Translated from German by a group of friends. If the translation seemed particularly difficult we retained the original word in brackets. We encourage the widespread use of this copy; however, the link to the website should be retained. We are grateful for any remaining grammatical errors, logical inconsistencies, and confusing wording pointed out to us at [editorspresentage\[at\]use\[dot\]startmail\[dot\]com](mailto:editorspresentage[at]use[dot]startmail[dot]com). Comments and suggestions are of course also welcome.

²Rudolf Steiner, *Truth and Knowledge*, Chapter 4. Taken from http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA003/English/GC1981/GA003_c04.html

³Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, The Consequences of Monism. Translation of William Lindeman, 1986.

Goethe did not ask what perception represents by itself, as one half of reality—to which thinking provides the other half to make it full reality. He only required that perception and thinking interpenetrate and amend each other into a world of perceptions that have been ordered by thinking. Goethe said: “The highest aim would be to realize that all facts are already theory... One should not seek anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the teaching.” Also, Goethe does not want to think about thinking itself. He only wants to apply his thinking to the phenomena—to bring those into a higher ordering with, at their very end, the archetypal phenomenon [Urphänomen].

Philosophers think about thinking. Natural scientists observe phenomena. They think about observations. But their thinking does not lead *behind* the phenomena. Because natural scientists are not satisfied with the world of phenomena, they build hypotheses about what may be underlying them.

The natural scientist proceeds like someone who finds a clock. He disassembles it and studies the working of the mechanics of the clock. He understands how the clock is working. He finds all the thoughts that constructed the clock. But no matter how detailed he studies the clock; he will never find the maker of the clock by studying. The clock represents the sense world [Sinneswelt]. The relationships within this world can be found. About the origin of the sense world there are only hypotheses. These hypotheses, however, are of such a nature that they represent the sense world as something, which should not be perceivable, if the hypotheses were true. That is because the natural scientist thinks about the sense world as totally separate from our self. But only *that* can truly be called the sense world, which can become part of the self, part of the I-experience [Ich-Erlebnis].

If one wants to know what underlies the sense world, one should not look for it in the sense world—just as one should not look for the maker of the clock by thinking about the clock. Thus one has to understand that, in attempting to understand the origins of the sense world—that is, if one does not attempt to understand the mechanics of the clock, but if one attempts to understand why there is something like a clock in the first place—then one has to accept that what underlies the sense world, the “given”, cannot itself be part of that given. Of course philosophers as well as scientists know this. And because they believe themselves to know, philosophers talk about limits of knowledge, and scientists build their hypotheses. Yet can one really identify the limits of knowledge here? By no means. There is a limit, but this is the limit of the *normal* consciousness, which is bound to the senses and the brain as its instruments. The world that underlies the sense world proves itself simply as one that is not experienced by the *normal* consciousness. That is, it proves itself to be a

transcendental [übersinnliche] world.

In fact, by introducing hypotheses about the world that is not experienced, one stands on the same more or less clear standpoint of the sense of touch [Tastsinn]. An unprejudiced reflection on the sense of touch shows that the *particular property* of this sense is the following: it allows only for subjective experiences through itself, and this subjective experience finds its own boundary at the boundary of the outer object. The sense of touch, therefore, only provides experiences within the subjective body; everything else that is experienced, through the sense of touch, is unconsciously deduced. (The inadequate epistemologies of Locke, the modern physiologists, and so on were greatly aided by unjustly extending that, which is right about the sense of touch to other senses.) Bumping against the limits of knowledge means touching the transcendental world.⁴ Now the question arises whether one only can touch the transcendental world. As long as one does not cross this boundary, but has to go backwards, like a crab, the normal consciousness is not left for the transcendental consciousness. It now can be known that there is indeed a transcendental world, because one bumps against it. But nothing can be known about it because the transcendental world does not accept one. It is possible to somehow force oneself across the threshold, and believe oneself to be one with God—and perhaps that way something is experienced about the transcendent world. *Science*, however, does not come about this way. And the topic here is *science* of the transcendental. Science has its foundation on cognition, and cognition on epistemology. The task here is to show that there exists an epistemology of the transcendental consciousness, and that this epistemology results from a correctly understood epistemology, which Rudolf Steiner established for the normal consciousness. This epistemology is of such kind that the epistemology of the transcendental consciousness results naturally from it, if one accurately distinguishes the differences of the distinct levels of consciousness. One of the differences is that, in going from perceiving with a sense organ to perceiving the transcendental, the receiving and active attitudes interchange. Hence, the first transcendental organ is not an object like the eye or the ear, but it is an activity: the activity of thinking. “The world of ideas and concepts is built by itself, and complete in itself. We do not create it, we only attempt to conceive it. The thinking activity does not create it, but perceives it. It is not producer, but an organ of perception.”⁵ One has, of course, to distinguish: perceiving thoughts; forming concepts by the thinking activity; and the content of thoughts or concepts, the substance of ideas of the world, which completely rests in itself. When we

⁴R. Steiner, *The Case for Anthroposophy (Von Seelenrätseln)*, p. 22. “Realizing such boundaries becomes an experience for the soul that is comparable with the touch-experience in the sense world.”

⁵Rudolf Steiner, *Goethean Science*.

think, our attention is either focused on the contents of our thoughts, on the concepts, or on our own *thinking activity*, which forms the thoughts. The latter are not only given, but also created during the act of cognition. Their conceptual content, however, is given and rests in itself fully: it is a mere given. The concepts appear in the act of cognition; however, their essence is not created. Hence whilst for normal consciousness, the *perception* half of reality is the given and the *thinking activity* half of reality is the not-given, in the transcendental consciousness, the perception half of reality is the not-given—the through thinking activity formed thoughts—and the completing half, the *content* of thoughts, a mere given. In the transcendental thus, perception is not a mere given, it is something *active*. Therefore, the starting point for an epistemology of the transcendental is not to find something that is not given within the given, but to find something that is given within the not-given. Where can we find something within the not-given which is given, that is, within the activity of thinking a mere *given*? Apparently in the *content* of the thinking activity. My thinking—which completely relies on my own activity and is therefore not experienced in its true essence with normal consciousness, but is rather, stripped from its transcendental vitality, remembered—is imbued with a content that is entirely depending on itself. Let us suppose that there is a being, which has developed precisely that consciousness, which is present in its embryonic form within human thinking, then the following amounts to this being:

1. This being does not have thinking and perception (thus the not-given and the mere given) next to each other like the human being, but it can always experience either the given or the not-given. Unlike a human, who experiences independently an external and an inner world, such a being would experience those worlds alternating, either one or the other. What perception is for the human being would correspond to the not-given for this conjectured being. This is because there is this inversion that exists at the passage from the normal into the transcendental consciousness, which causes that the active and receiving attitude interchange. The conjectured being thus would experience *itself* when doing that, which corresponds to the perception, meaning it would experience something not-given; while it experiences that, which corresponds to the thinking, as something with a spiritual content that rests on itself, meaning it would experience something given.
2. If one would start not with the thinker, who only experiences the thinking afterwards, but with him, who experiences the current thinking as something alive and not as deadened, through remembrance experienced, then one could think about a being, which has unfolded the embryonic consciousness of the human being. For this being,

the not-given and given would be present simultaneously, like perception and thinking for the human being. Yet because of the inversion in the transcendental world, the not-given would correspond to perception and the given to thinking. This conjectured being would experience itself in its outward activity, and at the same time experience its own activity as a given for its inner life. Therefore, the given and the not-given ought to be the *same*. This being would thus experience its own activity, as far as it is an inner experience, as given, that is, as something that it did not bring about. Hence its activity would not have the nature of an activity of this being, but have the nature of an objective occurrence. We would thus have a being where the outwardly directed self-experience becomes an inner experienced objective occurrence.

3. Finally, one could make clear a third transcendental consciousness by starting with the inversion of the will. An idea about this third consciousness can be acquired by subjecting the will to a particular treatment. By this, we do not mean something ideally- moralistic, but a treatment that leads into actual under-realms [Untergründe] of the human subject. Steiner indicates the following about this will-process:⁶

“The will must also become engaged in a different way and in a different direction, so to speak, than for experience in mere sense-perceptible existence. In ordinary life one feels oneself to be at the centre of what one wills or what one wants. For even in wanting, a kind of held-back will is at work. The will streams out from the ‘I’ and down into desire, into bodily movement, into one’s action. A will in this direction is ineffective for the soul’s awakening out of ordinary consciousness. But there is also a direction of will that in a certain sense is the opposite of this. It is at work when, without any direct look at an outer result, a person seeks to direct his own ‘I’. This direction of the will manifests in a person’s efforts to shape his thinking into something meaningful and to improve upon his feelings, and in all his impulses of self-education. In a gradual intensification of the will forces present in a person in this direction there lies what he needs in order to awaken out of his ordinary consciousness. One can particularly help oneself in pursuit of this goal by observing the life of nature with inner heart [Gemü] involvement. One seeks, for example, to look at a plant in such a way that one not only takes up its form into one’s thoughts, but also, as it were, feels along with

⁶See GA 20, taken from http://wn.rsarchive.org/GA/GA0020/English/MP1990/GA020_c05.html

its inner life, which stretches upward in the stem, spreads out in the leaves, opens what is inside to what is outside with its blossom, and so on. In such thinking the will is also present in gentle resonance; and there, will is a will that is developed in devotion and that guides the soul; a will that does not originate from the soul, but rather directs its activity upon the soul. At first, one quite naturally believes that this will originates in the soul. In experiencing the process itself, however, one recognizes that through this reversal of the will, a spiritual element, existing outside the soul, is grasped by the soul.

When will is strengthened in this direction and grasps a person's thought-life in the way indicated, then, in actual fact, out of the circumference of his ordinary consciousness, another consciousness arises that relates to his ordinary one like this ordinary consciousness relates to a weaving in dream pictures. And this kind of a seeing consciousness is in a position to experience and know the spiritual world. (In a series of earlier books, the author of this work has presented in a more detailed way what is only indicated here briefly, as it were. In such a short presentation, objections, misgivings, etc., cannot be taken up; this has been done in my other books; and there one can find many things presented that provide the deeper foundations for what is expressed here. The titles of the relevant books are listed at the end of this book.)

A will that does not tend in the direction just indicated, but rather toward everyday desiring, wishing, and so on, cannot—when this will is brought to bear upon one's thought-life in the way described—lead to the awakening of a seeing consciousness out of the ordinary one; it can lead only to a dimming down of this ordinary consciousness into waking dreams, phantasmagoria, visionary states, and such like.

The processes that lead to what is meant here by a seeing consciousness are entirely of a soul-spiritual nature; and their very description protects what is attained by them from being confused with pathological states (visions, mediumism, ecstasies, and so on). All these pathological states push consciousness down beneath the level it assumes in the waking human being who can fully employ his healthy physical soul organs.”

In normal consciousness, the will streams out from the 'I' and is directed outwards.

After the inversion of the will, however, the will streams from outside inwards, that is, it is steering its own nature. For this being, the not-given would be the from outside viewed and processed own nature, and the given would be the through the inversion of the will attained higher self, in which the conjectured being would feel itself. As far as this is something given, this being would *receive* its true nature. At the same time, it would look on its lower self, out of which it distanced itself, as on its product, precisely as on a not-given. For the conjectured being experiences the true nature of the outer world as *itself*, and because the lower self is a product of the outer world, it appears as a creature of this higher being. The outer world, that is, the world that he experiences, who looks from the touch-sense point of view [der auf dem Standpunkt des Tastsinnses Stehende], would prove itself in its spiritual inversion as the organizing force of the own nature.

These considerations show that there are higher sorts of consciousness present in its first form in normal consciousness; and how, just as the normal consciousness finds *its* reality in the penetration of perceptions with concepts and ideas, so the three steps of transcendental knowledge find, but in a different way, *their* reality. By demonstrating the epistemology of this science, we have shown that a science of these three steps of transcendental knowledge does in fact exist.