INTUITIVE THINKING AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

RUDOLF STEINER

A Philosophy of Freedom

Centennial Edition

CLASSICS IN ANTHROPOSOPHY
Intuitive Thinking
as a Spiritual Path

A Philosophy of Freedom
CLASSICS IN ANTHROPOSOPHY

The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity

Theosophy

How To Know Higher Worlds
INTUITIVE THINKING
AS A SPIRITUAL PATH
RUDOLF STEINER

A Philosophy of Freedom

Translated by Michael Lipson

ANTHROPOSOPHIC PRESS
This volume is a translation of Die Philosophie der Freiheit (Vol. 4 in the Bibliographic Survey, 1961) published by Rudolf Steiner Verlag, Dornach, Switzerland. The previous translation of this text in English was published as The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity by Anthroposophic Press, Hudson, N.Y., 1986.


Published by Anthroposophic Press, Inc.
RR 4, Box 94 A-1, Hudson, N.Y. 12534

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steiner, Rudolf, 1861–1925.
[Philosophie der Freiheit. English]
Intuitive thinking as a spiritual path : philosophy of freedom / Rudolf Steiner ; translated by Michael Lipson. p. cm.—(Classics in anthroposophy) Includes index.
ISBN 0-88010-385-X (pbk.)
1. Anthroposophy. I. Title. II. Series.

Cover painting and design: Barbara Richey

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in critical reviews and articles.

Printed in the United States of America
CONTENTS

Translator’s Introduction vii
Introduction by Gertrude Reif Hughes xiii

Preface to the Revised Edition, 1918 1

PART I: THEORY
The Knowledge of Freedom

1. Conscious Human Action 5
2. The Fundamental Urge for Knowledge 18
3. Thinking in the Service of Understanding the World 27
4. The World as Percept 49
5. Knowing the World 73
6. Human Individuality 97
7. Are There Limits to Cognition? 104
PART II : PRACTICE

The Reality of Freedom

8. The Factors of Life  127
9. The Idea of Freedom  135
10. Freedom-Philosophy and Monism  163
11. World Purpose and Life Purpose
   (Human Destiny)  173
12. Moral Imagination
   (Darwinism and Ethics)  180
13. The Value of Life
   (Pessimism and Optimism)  194
14. Individuality and Genus  225

FINAL QUESTIONS

The Consequences of Monism  231

Appendix 1 & Appendix 2 (1918)

Bibliography  259
Index  263
The real heartbreak of translation does not come from the distance between German and English, but from the gap between spiritual and word-bound consciousness. It was Steiner’s life-long sacrifice to engage in this translation, the constriction of spirit into speech. Whether the language he had to use was philosophical, theosophical, or any other, he remained painfully aware of the impossibility of his task.1

In each year of his life after 1900, Steiner continued to recommend this book (formerly called simply The Philosophy of Freedom) as well as his other epistemological works to his students.2 He insisted that his later “occult” communications presupposed, as a first step to

understanding them, the radical change in *thinking* consciousness for which this book can serve as a partial training manual. A transformation of consciousness appropriate to our age begins with the intensification of thinking as we know it in ordinary mental life; it moves beyond, but never denies, the achievements of Western philosophy.

Yet Steiner was capable of calling the book a “stammering”—not in false modesty, but to acknowledge that what we say about higher kinds of cognition is inevitably partial and easily susceptible to distortion. A book like *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* can incite or goad us into inner practices, but it does not even attempt to deliver a fixed content for us to possess. Further, as Steiner emphasized in one lecture, “I surely know that this *Philosophy of Freedom* bears all the pockmarks of the children’s diseases that afflicted the life of thinking as it developed in the course of the nineteenth century.”³ It therefore has both intrinsic, and cultural/historical, grounds for a certain incompleteness.

It is an incompleteness we, the readers, are called upon to remedy. For Steiner approached the problem of spiritual expression in a supremely tactical way. Instead of establishing a fixed terminology to give his meaning a specious uniformity, he took the opposite course. Without fanfare, he used ordinary words, like “thinking,” “feeling,” and “willing,” to denote processes of cosmic proportions. Without indicating his shifts, he used such

---

³ Rudolf Steiner, Lecture of December 19, 1919 (GA 333).
words now in the humblest, now in the most exalted sense. And he was content to use several different words, at different times, to express similar meanings. The cumulative effect of these maneuvers is to encourage the reader to develop an especially active style of reading: “How does he mean this?” is a question we should often find ourselves asking. At the end of Chapter 7, Steiner gives explicit prominence to the question of vocabulary, and puts us on notice that he will use language with a rare sense of license. He thus anticipates the constructivists and hermeneuts of our own day, by setting the responsibility for the effects of the book on us, his readers.

The current translation attempts to make the text as contemporary in sound and style as possible while preserving accuracy. This effort owes much to the editorial assistance of Christopher Bamford and Andrew Cooper, as well as an enormous debt to all previous translations, especially that of Michael Wilson. Many happy formulations have been simply lifted from that book, because I could not match, much less improve them. Interested readers should also refer to Wilson’s helpful notes on some of the words that present difficulties of translation and interpretation. Among these are Geist, here most often rendered as “spirit”; Vorstellung/Vorstellen, here most often “mental picture/mental picturing”; Erkennen, here “cognition” or “cognizing”; Wollen, “wishing,” “wanting,” “willing”; Begriff, “concept”; and Wahrnehmung, “percept.” These especially thorny words, like others, are given variously

in English depending on the meaning they take in each passage. Of these, only “cognizing” for Erkennen represents a real break with previous translations. I use “cognition” and “cognizing,” despite their Latinate, alienated quality, because they convey the mind’s active grasp of specific meanings in a way that “knowledge” or “knowing” do not. The act of “cognizing,” rather than the relatively passive “knowing,” fits better to a text Steiner originally hoped would bear the English title, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.5

By suggesting an alternate title in English, Steiner again proved himself flexible regarding terminology. We have taken this as permission to retranslate the title and we have called it, this time, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*. The new title emphasizes the unique focus of Steiner’s work, among all the spiritual movements of our time, on the development of thinking consciousness into something altogether different from its manifestation in ordinary mental life. The thinking appropriate to an understanding of the perceptual world necessarily includes a development in how we perceive, and so we could also have used some such title as *Intuitive Thinking and Perceiving as a Spiritual Path*, if it were not both awkward and hard to understand. It is clear from Steiner’s emphasis on the two “directions” from which experience comes to meet us that both thinking and perceiving are susceptible of infinite exercise and development.

Despite terminological fluidity, Steiner was exact in his use of the words *wahr* (true) and *wirklich* (real). Truth, as a feeling, applies to our sense of the world of thinking; the real, as a feeling, applies to our sense of the world of perception. Cognition of the kind Steiner points to in this book brings us to a new world of “true reality” that involves both the evidentiary clarity of thought (truth) and perception (the real). I have therefore tried to translate these terms consistently, even when it does some violence to English usage, to underscore the precise duality Steiner indicates and overcomes.

I have also tried to preserve Steiner’s implicature. He had many ways of hinting, rather than declaring — subtly alerting us to knowable, if elusive, sources of the known world. One technique was his frequent use of the outmoded “that which” (*dasjenige, was*) construction (as in, “that which we can form mental pictures about.”) 6 I have resisted the linguistic pressure to collapse such constructions and dry out their suggestiveness. They bear a lineal and substantive relation to the great “that which” of I John 1:1, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life . . . .”

6. Cf. *Dokumente zur Philosophie der Freiheit* (Dornach, Switzerland: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1994) pp. 40 and 90 *et passim*, where Steiner’s 1918 revisions to the text emphasize the importance of just this construction.
We should recall that Steiner’s goal was to stimulate the exercise of a thinking independent not only from words, but from the physical body and brain. In keeping with this goal, we are well justified in re-translating *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* into English from time to time, both to reflect evolving understandings of the book and to liberate ourselves from a nominalistic equation of words with concepts. In this way, we have an advantage over German-language readers, who are tempted to imagine their version of the text as final. By approaching Steiner through inadequate and changing English terms, we are the more likely to face the inadequacy of all terms, and leap to his meaning.

---

Rudolf Steiner’s study of human freedom is really a study of human ways of knowing. Steiner made knowledge a key to freedom and individual responsibility, because he discovered that the processes of cognition, which he usually just called “thinking,” share an essential quality with the essence of selfhood or individuality: each could, in some sense, know itself. Accordingly, his “philosophy” of freedom is actually a meditation on human capacities to know and on individuality as a basis for socially responsible action. These three elements—freedom, thinking, and individuality—interweave in Steiner’s work like three strands of a single braid, uniting through their dynamic cooperations the subtle interconnections of a complex and powerful vision.

Steiner’s argument may sound technical, as though one needs to be particularly competent in epistemology or the history of philosophy to follow him. In fact, expert knowledge may be a hindrance. His book is designed to stimulate more than to instruct. If it is read responsibly
but without the distractions of either assent or dissent, it arouses confidence in the possibility of human free will and a desire to work toward developing it.

Steiner is interested in freedom as a creative force. Instead of focusing on the various legal, biological, or cultural conditions that foster or inhibit freedom, he presents it as a potential for human beings to realize more and more fully in their personal and interpersonal lives. Every chapter of his book calls us to become free by recognizing and developing the spiritual nature of our human cognitive powers.

In his preface to the revised edition of 1918, published on the book’s twenty-fifth anniversary, Steiner emphasized the centrality of thinking, apparently because early readers had missed its significance. If you want to investigate the limits that biological or social conditions place upon human freedom and responsibility, he recommended, first try to settle a prior question: Can absolute limits be set to human knowledge? He showed that such limits make no epistemological sense because, in the very act of identifying something as unknowable, our thinking renders it known. Enormous consequences for human freedom follow. If there is no theoretical limit to what humans can know, then we cannot authorize our actions by claiming that some unassailable dogma allows them. Demonstrably the authority for any human action must derive from what human beings can, at least in principle, understand for themselves. Nothing need be taken on faith.

Readers sometimes find it daunting to have to consider such matters closely. Steiner, however, was not just devising an elegant argument against determinism, he was
sounding a challenge to live responsibly with urgent questions about the conduct of life. He wanted to awaken in his readers a disposition to act both independently and constructively. His book speaks to us if we seek the basis for human freedom in an understanding of human thinking and knowing so that our moral decisions can be based on knowledge, not just on belief.

Thinking has a bad reputation with many people, perhaps especially with those who incline toward a spiritual path. Steiner’s emphasis on it sets him apart from other writers who concern themselves with soul life. Compared to the warmth of feeling and the visibility of action, thinking seems cold and remote. “No other activity of the human soul is as easily misunderstood as thinking,” he says in his 1918 addition to Chapter 8, “The Factors of Life.” He uncovers the reason for this misconception by contrasting “essential thinking” with merely remembered thinking. Usually only our remembered thinking is evident to us; we notice only what we’ve already thought, not what processes are occurring right now as we think those thoughts.

When we merely remember our thinking, we remember it as much less vital than our emotions and desires. But “whoever turns toward essential thinking finds within it both feeling and will” in their deepest reality. As distinct from merely remembered thinking, “essential thinking” consists of the unique property that Steiner discovered: thinking can notice itself. Simple to say, the phenomenon is hard to experience because it is so comparatively subtle and because we are not disposed to pay attention to it.
When we do notice our thinking—not our thoughts but the processes that produce our thoughts—what do we notice it with? The very same activity that we call thinking. “Essential thinking” is an exceptional case of knowing in the same way that the pronoun, “I,” is an exceptional case of pronoun reference. Just as “I” always refers to the sayer of “I” and to no one else, so, in the special case when thinking notices itself instead of anything else, observer and observed are identical. Hidden in this obvious yet elusive property of thinking lies a long list of powerful implications for personal and social life: that thinking is essentially intuitive, that it is neither subjective nor objective, that we as individuals can undertake to cultivate its intuitive nature and so develop moral insight, and that our moral insights, though individually achieved, can serve rather than alienate our fellow human beings. To appreciate what these interconnected implications mean for the practice of freedom, it is helpful to turn first to the other strand in the threefold braid, individuality.

Like thinking, individualism has a bad reputation, particularly among socially concerned people. Once prized and still valued for its entrepreneurial power, individualism is now also widely regarded as the cause of sexual, racial, and economic injustices. How, then, can individualism enhance freedom, and what does either of them have to do with thinking or cognition? Answers to both questions evolve from Steiner’s view that human beings can practice an “ethical individualism” as he sometimes called it.
When Steiner speaks of “ethical individualism” he means that it is communitarian rather than antisocial. Instead of conceiving individuals and society at one another’s expense, Steiner notes that social arrangements are produced by individuals for the benefit of individuality. Codes of law and morality do not exist independently of human beings, to be restrictively imposed upon us. We ourselves create the codes and we ourselves can change them. “States and societies exist because they turn out to be the necessary consequence of individual life. . . . [T]he social order is formed so that it can then react favorably on the individual,” who is “the source of all morality.”

Of course, individualism may provoke conflict, but it can also create a matrix for mutual understanding. Instead of competing with you selfishly, I can use my selfhood to recognize yours. When human beings manage to respond to individuality rather than to type, they are most likely to achieve social harmony. When we view one another generically we cannot hope to understand one another. The real opposite of individual is not “society” but “genus” or type. Steiner devotes an entire chapter, “Individuality and Genus,” to this point. To illustrate, he uses misunderstandings and inequities based on gender:

We are most obstinate in judging according to type when it is a question of a person’s sex. Man almost always sees in woman, and woman in man, too much of the general character of the other sex and too little of what is individual.

Generalizing or generic thinking erases individuality. When sex is constituted as a genus, individuals of either
sex tend to become invisible as individuals. This is particularly true of women, at least when they are considered to be the second sex and men the first, as is usually the case. Steiner continues:

The activity of a man in life is determined by his individual capacities and inclinations; that of the woman is supposed to be determined exclusively by the fact that she is, precisely, a woman. Woman is supposed to be the slave of the generic, of what is universally womanish.

The opposition between the individual and the generic also produces a useful way to counter the standard fear that individualism creates anarchy. When I perform a criminal act, Steiner says, I do so not from what is individual in me but from shared instincts and urges that I have accepted uncritically without deciding consciously whether they are appropriate for me:

Through my instincts, my drives, I am the kind of person of whom there are twelve to the dozen; I am an individual by means of the particular form of the idea by which, within the dozen, I designate myself as I.

Far from being in conflict with freedom, individualism as Steiner presents it is the expression of freedom. In this more profound sense, a free society requires of its members not less individualism but more.

But individualism will express freedom, and freedom will accommodate all individualities, only if motives can be brought to a certain level. Steiner’s discussion of motives brings his findings about thinking to new heights of
individual responsibility and liberty. At this high point of Steiner’s increasingly powerful exposition, the activity of thinking—in the form of an intuitive understanding of motive—takes on its full significance as the starting point for a path of spiritual development.

The argument, which centers around the scope and nature of intuition, goes like this: To identify a motive for action that can be freely chosen by a particular individual in a specific situation requires a particular kind of cognition, the ability to intuit. Intuition knows without arguments, demonstrations, or other discursive means. For Steiner, the intuitive is not the instinctual or dimly felt but that which is directly knowable, without mediation. In a classic description, he calls it “the conscious experience, within what is purely spiritual, of a purely spiritual content.” Then he links intuition to the activity of thinking: “The essence of thinking can be grasped only through intuition.”

In other words, thinking and intuition overlap because of a simple but subtle fact that Steiner discovered about the “essence of thinking”—that thinking can “know” itself intuitively. Because it knows itself intuitively—that is, without the intervention of anything other than itself—thinking, like all other intuitions, qualifies as an essentially spiritual experience. Other intuitions may be beyond our ordinary powers, but by learning to notice our own thinking activity, not just its results, we become aware that thinking itself constitutes the very cognitive experience, intuition, that Steiner describes as “conscious experience, within what is purely spiritual, of a purely spiritual content”—something qualitatively different from a mere
Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path

addition to our store of informative ideas, something essentially spiritual.

In its intuitive essence, thinking is a universal human capacity. Its intuitive (that is, spiritual) essence exists as a potential. It awaits our attention. When, with the help of Steiner’s book, we recognize that thinking is an essentially spiritual activity, we discover that it can school us. In that sense—Steiner’s sense—thinking is a spiritual path. We set out on it when we start learning to concentrate at will and begin to feel both need and desire for this willed focus. If we can free our attention from its habitual modes and associations, and if we can focus it at will as we ourselves decide, then we can have, without entering a trance or invoking mystical aids, a conscious experience of a spiritual content. Steiner sometimes called it pure thinking—will-filled or body-free thinking—and he presented it in a style designed to stimulate it in his readers.

Steiner stressed that thinking is not to be viewed as merely personal or subjective, even though it usually feels like a private experience. He firmly refutes the widely held, unexamined assumption (not to say dogma) that thinking must be subjective: “Thinking is beyond subject and object. It forms both of these concepts, just as it does all others.” Developed in one’s own unique way by each individual who undertakes to do so, the thinking capacity can become reliable intuition, allowing one to find the motivation for what one “must” do and to choose it freely. In such choices, individuality and cognition unite to produce freedom, freely undertaken actions that are both fully individual and socially constructive.
No outside authority, however benign or exalted, can motivate a free deed. Steiner emphatically rejects obedience. It is not an appropriate motivating force for free individuals. If my moral decisions merely conform to social norms and ethical codes, I am just “a higher form of robot.” Instead of trying to obey, I should strive “to see why any given principle should work as a motive.” Even the most highminded obedience is not free unless I have first decided for myself why this code should govern me at this moment. General standards, no matter how admirable, can perhaps help one develop an inclination toward responsible actions, but they cannot authorize free deeds. Habit, inertia, and obedience are all anathema to free action. It can come only from individually discovered motivation that is prompted by warm confidence in the rightness of the deed itself, not by a desire for its outcome, not even by a concern for its beneficiary.

According to Steiner’s lofty yet practicable ideal, conduct worthy to be called “free” has to be motivated by a particular person’s own intuitions as to what she or he should do in any particular case. A free being asks, What can I myself do and how do I know what it is right for me to do in this particular situation? If it is cultivated, the essentially intuitive nature of thinking can bring answers. At this level of insight and morality, what motivates is not duty but something like love, a warmly interested yet unselfish desire that cannot be coerced but can arise in us as an intuited intention. “Free beings are those who can will what they themselves hold to be right.”
xxii  Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path

Steiner designed all his books to discourage passive collecting of information and to encourage instead conscious pondering and questioning, particularly of hitherto unexamined notions. Like Steiner’s other writings, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* offers a mode of inquiry rather than a set of creeds, pieties, or doctrines. His style makes us practice a more active thinking so that we can become aware of its power, vitality, and essentially spiritual nature. His work stimulates our soul’s own activity, stirring our latent powers and strengthening them so that we may eventually become able to think his insights ourselves.

We need to awaken to the functioning presence of spiritual realities in our lives. They are much more subtle, less sensational, more delicate, less crude, than we may expect. Consequently they are easy to overlook. One hundred years ago, at the close of the nineteenth century, Steiner gave to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a new understanding of an ordinary human capacity—thinking. He showed that it is essentially a spiritual activity. At the close of the twentieth century, we can become more receptive to the existence of this commonly held, if ordinarily dormant, human ability by developing it. If we don’t use it, we will lose it. *Intuitive Thinking* shows how and why to begin.

*Middletown, Connecticut, 1995*