

Running Head: Thinking Towards Freedom

Thinking Towards Freedom:  
Rudolf Steiner's Epistemology and its Consequences for Human Freedom

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*Modern thinking throws light on everything – but  
provides no light for the producer of this light!*  
- Georg K ulewind

## **Part I – Knowledge, Cognition, and the Given**

### **Introduction**

A fascinating confluence is taking place in the world of science today: insights from physics, biochemistry, neurophysiology, and cognitive science are more and more being brought to bear on one of the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of humanity – consciousness. Although thoughts about consciousness have primarily fallen to philosophers, advances in technology have led to a burgeoning flow of insights which bear directly on the nature, formation, and manifestations of consciousness in a way that increasingly seems to make the issue scientifically addressable. This has led to a wonderful situation in which scientists, psychologists, religious adepts and philosophers of various stripes are finding themselves unable to address the topic of consciousness without also having some background in the works and thoughts of those outside their own specific discipline.

Yet we must not look at this confluence uncritically, but rather should endeavor to discern the major streams – and their sources – which now are flowing into the ocean of consciousness research, because they each bring unique threads which weave together to create the shifting tapestry that is our understanding of ourselves. The rise of the scientific disciplines that deal with consciousness in various ways are of particular importance in this regard. This is because of certain elements and assumptions contained in the predominant scientific stream which tint its water in such a way that it overlays all the other streams until they are similarly colored.

The tint in question consists of the predominantly materialist tendency of much of modern scientific thinking about consciousness, in which, through one mechanism or another, consciousness is identified as something arising directly from the physical body, particularly the brain. Thus, a large portion of modern scientists who are working on the “problem of consciousness” implicitly or explicitly identify the solution of the problem in the realm of the material, and feel that someday, when we have amassed enough knowledge concerning how the brain and body work, we will understand everything that there is to understand about consciousness, its nature, processes, and manifestation.

To many this project will sound eminently practical and achievable, given the proper technologies, a sufficient amount of time, and enough graduate students to do the grunt-work. Wouldn't that be wonderful – if the only problems barring our way as a species to understanding such a fundamental part of our individual and collective experience were merely technical! To conceive of the project in this way, with such a foundation, is indeed tempting. Yet there is a fundamental problem with such an approach that undermines its very foundation, which comes to it by virtue of a misunderstood and inconsistent view of the fundamental aspects in which the “problem of consciousness” is posed to begin with.

What is needed, and what this paper attempts to bring to light, is a closer look at the nature of the problem, along with an attempt at showing how such a problem can be addressed in a way that helps to rephrase the issue and put it on more solid ground.

### **The Fundamental Problem**

When scientists speak about the way a volcano forms, or measuring the half-life of radioactive substances, there is little debate about anything other than minor details. The basic explanatory picture they provide in such instances seems to make sense to those who are willing

to do the work to understand the content of the basic ideas. Yet when scientists start speaking about consciousness in the same way that they would about the magnetosphere or fuel-cells, we can start to feel a little uncomfortable. Why is this?

This has to do with an issue of long philosophical history, yet whose foundation can be experienced easily by your average human being: the simple fact that my experience appears to be structured in the form of *subject* and *object*, or inner and outer. I experience myself to be a subject that has some kind of inner experience, while also having experiences that only arise by virtue of something outside myself, the object. This is the naïve view which leads to the Cartesian split between mind and body as separate but somehow interacting substances. The view is naïve simply because it rests on what is at first appears to us<sup>1</sup> experientially in a way that can seem totally obvious, even unquestionable. On this basis we more or less divide the world into things happening “out there” and things happening “in here”. Supposedly, therefore, external events are “objective” and internal ones – mental ones – are “subjective”.

Modern science has built much of its successes on concentrating on the objectivity of the ‘external’ world while ignoring (or ridiculing) the ‘subjective’ as a valid means of gaining knowledge. The technological successes allowed by the intentional dehumanization of the scientific project are significant. The simple fact that such advances have actually been made is often put forth (at least by laymen and others who are less careful about the nature of the scientific method) as some kind of implicit ‘proof’ that the underlying principles upon which the discoveries are based are in fact ‘true’ (for otherwise things just wouldn’t work, right?). This is

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<sup>1</sup> It is also naïve because the “us” here is also unquestioned, as if everyone were “like me” in this experience. It is assumed that everyone is thus more or less an adult human with basic thinking capacity and background (i.e. naïvely: similar brains and therefore experiences). Clearly this is an oversimplification that cannot serve as a foundational principle.

actually an error, and yet has contributed a great deal to the momentum to the view that the world is essentially material.

Now that science is in the beginning stages of coming to grips with consciousness, this momentum is carrying the assumption of materialism into its treatment of consciousness, resulting in the conclusion that consciousness is a material phenomenon, ultimately to be found in the brain. It ‘objectifies’ consciousness into that which is material. The result, taken to its logical endpoint, is that what we experience inwardly as consciousness is in fact *reducible* to material elements and processes – i.e. consciousness is epiphenomenal. We shall see that this conclusion is as unfounded as the assumption it is based upon.

### **The Seed of Epistemology**

The scientific disciplines rightly teach us to be critical – to think in a way that is penetrated with logic. Its conclusions are purported to be valid precisely because they follow naturally from this type of thinking. The *thinking* forms the basis from which conclusions can be drawn about the world. Without cognition, no logic could be formed, no conclusions made. This simple fact is generally ignored by the scientific disciplines, because to deal with its consequences fully would mean explaining the basis for thinking in the first place, and its relation to knowledge: i.e. epistemology.

Epistemology thus provides the foundation for all scientific disciplines: that of cognition itself, which is assumed but unexamined by every other science. Without it, science is impossible – every conclusion or relation formed in our thinking is suspect until thinking itself has a basis. Yet what is this basis? How can we understand cognition if our understanding can only take place through cognition itself?

Science does have an explicit basis in epistemology, and this is seen in its reliance upon the various forms of the ‘scientific method’ as an explanation for the means by which knowledge is gained. Yet the scientific method presupposes cognition itself, taking it as an unexamined fundamental principle. A proper epistemology is precisely one in which there should be no prior presuppositions about cognition itself, inasmuch as this is possible.

There are two naïve<sup>2</sup> or uncritical views which must be avoided with respect to the foundations of epistemology. The first is that of naïve realism, which accepts the reality of the world as something purely external. The other is that of naïve idealism, which takes the view that the world is merely something which takes place in our own consciousness and has no reality apart from it. These two views hold the extremes on the epistemological scale: the world is purely *not-me* or is *only me*.

Naïve realism abandons any attempt at understanding the way in which the organism of the subject influences the perception of what appears to be external, or it takes this as evidence that the senses are corrupt and cannot be trusted (only objective logic can be trusted). Naïve idealism takes hold of this insight that the organism of the subject is *indispensable* for the way in which the world-content appears to us and tries to make it fundamental, so that in fact the world itself becomes our idea of it. Yet the way in which naïve idealism arrives at this conclusion is by taking as its foundation the world view presupposed by naïve realism. It must assume precisely that which it tries to deny. Clearly, neither of these views can give us a proper epistemological foundation (whether or not their conclusions are ultimately correct).

The rest of this paper will explore this dilemma further through the unique perspective offered in the work of Rudolf Steiner, a difficult to categorize genius of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>2</sup> Naïve in this sense merely means unexamined. A naïve view could easily be *correct*, but would not be able to identify *why* it was correct from within itself.

whose works and influence span the gamut of philosophy, science, art, medicine, agriculture, education, religion, architecture, drama, dance, and spirituality. Steiner was able to recognize and formulate a way through the epistemological situation described above, and to utilize the results in practice as the foundations for anthroposophy, a modern spiritual-scientific movement encompassing all aspects of life. What follows is a working through of Steiner's basic epistemological framework, found primarily in his Ph.D. Thesis "Truth and Knowledge" (Steiner, 1981) and his seminal work "The Philosophy of Freedom" (1999), along with some discussion of its relevance to the modern scientific understanding of the issue of consciousness.

### **The Roots of Epistemology**

What then can our starting point for an epistemology be? We cannot, as the previous views, including the one underlying the usual formulations of the scientific method, begin an epistemology on a foundation that already presupposes the act of cognition, for it is just this act that must in fact be explained by the epistemology. Are we then left in a double-bind, an impossible situation from which there is no exit?

Perhaps there is a way out. If an epistemology is to provide the foundation for the whole of knowledge, for an understanding of the nature of knowledge itself, it cannot itself be founded upon any facts already existing within that sphere. The starting point of an epistemology must itself lie outside of the act of cognition – it must not presuppose it. Instead, the roots of cognition must be found in another soil, in what lies *immediately* before cognition, so that the very next step leads us to the act of cognition itself.

What is the soil which is not cognition itself but lies just beneath it? It cannot be the "I" or "Self", as these already depend up on the capacity of cognition for their recognition. We cannot find cognition's basis in the "I", but rather can only discover the "I" through cognition.

In fact our epistemology cannot rely upon *any distinction whatsoever*, as every distinction requires cognition. We see then that we must, in a very real sense, actually dismantle the act of cognition, trace it backwards, and by attempting to *eliminate* it, see where it leads. Admittedly, this can only be done as an act of cognition.

Readers at this point may be wondering about my use of the term “cognition”. The point I am attempting to make here is that any abstract definition of cognition cannot be sufficient, no matter how descriptive, as any such definition must already rely upon the activity of cognition. Cognition can never fully encompass the nature of its own activity in a description. Thus, a major goal of this essay is to point the reader towards an *experience* of cognition, such that further descriptions of it could later be forthcoming out of a direct experience of its nature. What is *not* meant by cognition is some vague inner state, the content of any particular thought, or emotions. The reader is thus invited to ask seriously the very question: *what is cognition?*

This puts us in an interesting situation: we are looking for what lies immediately before the act of cognition, but cannot rely upon the fruits of cognition – knowledge – to make this realm appear for us. The best we can do is *bring into awareness*, by taking out of our experience all that is mediated to us through our cognition, the necessity for this realm, which we can call the “given”, or the directly given world-picture. This given can only be pointed to, but not grasped, by cognition. Every picture formed of it, every thought we may have about it, is already of necessity mediated by the act of cognition, yet our goal is to show how this realm, which is free of all predicates and to which nothing can be ascribed is the substrate upon which cognition rests. It admits no distinctions whatsoever, no cause and effect, no substance or essence, no material or spiritual, no reality, knowledge, or self. In this sense, the given is similar to a Zen koan in that it brings us to the limits of our own cognition directly. It is only in the



shape of the hole created in cognition, by this very act of cognition itself, that we can be directed towards what is “given”. With this understood, let us proceed to push cognition so that it finds its boundary in the given.

The reader can perhaps get a sense that we are approaching cognition in a way that is unique – our *concepts* about cognition cannot be our guide, for until cognition has found its basis, its results cannot be used in this manner. We must experientially direct ourselves towards to the first possible place from which cognition arises – what we have called the given. We have seen that if the given is precisely that which lies before cognition, it must be completely undefined, for all definition takes place through cognition. Yet we can only approach this undefined, this pre-predicated, through what seems to be a purely negative act.

The claim might be brought at this stage to the effect that “the given” is, and must always remain, a concept; that it precisely something *defined* by cognition, and thus cannot be its foundation, any more than any other *concept* will serve the same purpose – such as our concept of the brain (more on this later). Yet it must be made clear that we are not trying to *establish* anything in speaking of the given. Rather, we are attempting to direct our attention to the fact that, when cognition sheds from itself all that we experience, all concepts, all knowledge, *there is still something left*. The concept of the “directly given” includes no information about what precedes cognition itself, but instead serves the function of ‘pointing to the Moon’ in the Zen tradition: only through the pointing itself can one recognize that the pointing is not the object pointed at.

To get a feel for the membrane between the given and our cognition, we are necessarily restricted in our approach: we can only do so from the side of cognition. To this end, we can, as in the Hindu meditative practice of “neti-neti” (not this – not that), take the *results* of what arises

through the act of cognition and throw them, as it were, at this membrane between the given and cognition, to filter out all *cognition* itself, so that all that is left is bereft of judgment, distinction, definition, or of any predication whatsoever.

Imagine that a fully formed, intelligent human being was suddenly created out of nothing and was placed in the world. The *very first* impressions arising in her through her senses and her thinking would characterize the given. Of course this situation never actually occurs, not even in a new-born child – one never experiences the given itself without the act of cognition already at work. Those familiar with the alchemical tradition in the West may recognize the given in the “prima materia” – a formless substance out of which all forms arise. Similarly in the East we find the Unnamable Tao, which shares many aspects of what is here being described as the given. The point is simply that *there is a world* available to cognition, which has yet to be cognized, and in this sense is prior to the activity of cognition, which then takes this world as its object through its own activity.

This leads us further: we cannot find a definitive dividing line between the directly given and the ‘known’ – not even when considering the stages of individual human development. The distinction between what cognition brings us as knowledge and what is given to us directly can only be made *artificially*. This division can be made at *any* stage of development, as long as we correctly distinguish what is directly given from what cognition subsequently makes of the given. Thus, we can see that the given includes not just what appears to our senses when unmediated by cognition, but even concepts, ideas, and other cognitive content, such as “I”. This is a subtle but important point: the *contents* of cognition are *just as ‘given’* as the perceptual, sensory ‘given’.

If all of this is part of the given, where then in the given is the basis for cognition itself? If everything were *only* given, then no cognition would ever arise: we would be mere passive spectators of the given, staring indifferently into the given inner world and the given outer world as if we were blank slates upon which the given could write itself. We would at most be able to *describe* phenomena, but never would we be able to *understand* them. If we want a foundation for *knowledge*, it must be solid! Knowledge requires that our concepts have more than a purely external relationship to their referents – they must relate inwardly.

If the given were all that existed, we would have no starting point upon which cognition could be based. Yet it has already been shown that if cognition is to have a foundation, it can only be within the given itself. If any materialist from the world of science has been able to work with the discussion as it has proceeded so far without abandoning it in disgust over its ignorance of the ‘real’ world, then something like the following would likely be proposed at this point: If the foundation for cognition must be found within the sphere of the given, then it can only be in the brain itself. The brain must give rise to cognition.

Yet we must be aware of what lies beneath this statement. When someone states that the brain gives rise to cognition, then cognition is already presupposed, because the content of the thought “brain” can only come to us through an act of cognition that separates out a particular aspect of the given. In other words, we could say that the *concept* of the brain is a more accurate assessment of what modern science uses as the foundation of consciousness – but unconsciously. We do not generally recognize our own cognitive activity at work beneath the forming of our definition of the brain itself – we assume it to be wholly external, other, and objective. But in order for any aspect of the given to become *distinct* for us, it must be mediated by an act of cognition. In a very real sense, our modern sciences of the brain – which rest upon scientist’s

actual capacity for cognition – effectively obfuscate the very thing required for to have a theory of the brain in the first place. Many scientists wish to say that the brain is the foundation for cognition and consciousness, without recognizing that it is *firstly* cognition which forms the basis and content of their theory – it is actually left out of the formulation, to be tacked on at the end as the ‘result’ rather than recognized as *central* to the whole endeavor not just all the way through, but also as the primal beginning point of any such theory (epistemology). In other words, we cannot get rid of cognition by talking about the brain – it is essential to recognize the actual order of events. If we really try to enter into this as a question, we find that we have no choice but to recognize that cognition is not a *result*, but rather is the living process out of which all the results fall, like salt precipitating of a saturated solution. This experience necessitates a sort of reversal of the usual unconscious ‘thoughting’ process; we must trace our thoughts in reverse, back to the *thinking* activity which produced them. This experience serves as the fundamental foundation for the epistemology – it is not abstract or theoretical. “The brain” – as concept – does not *declare itself, out of itself*, the necessity for cognition. “The brain” is rather a passive element of the given, equivalent in this way to “a truck” or “the self” – none of these can provide a proper foundation for cognition, no matter how detailed and thorough the concept of “the brain” becomes. The whole point is to not begin in the middle, but at the beginning. In this respect the “brain” – *which is only what it is because of how we approach it in and through our cognition* – cannot be a proper foundation, as it is ‘in the middle’ as it were. It, along with any other content of our knowledge, cannot form the proper basis for an understanding of epistemology (and hence all knowledge), because *IF* we are to have such a basis it cannot lie in the products of the very process we are trying to explain. This is why we need to find that which declares cognition actively from within the given as a necessity.

This is precisely what leads us into the situation in which modern philosophy finds itself in relation to brain science: it can only progress to the point of making the *distinction* between the “hard” and “easy” problems of consciousness. The easy problem is that of finding what are known as the neural correlates of consciousness – the physiologically measurable activity occurring in brain processes that correlate in some direct way with the contents of consciousness. The hard problem is that of explaining why the contents of consciousness have a very *specific inner, subjective feeling* – qualia – to them: the *redness* of the red, the *hardness* of the floor, the *sharpness* of existential angst.

No amount of work on the easy problem will help when we turn our attention to the hard problem. Yet, because the trend in philosophy has been to ‘philosophize about’ subjects such as qualia, *rather than about the foundation for philosophizing itself in the act of cognition*, philosophers are generally spinning their wheels when it comes to dealing with the hard problem, as there simply is no place in which they can find traction.

For we who are trying to discover the foundation for knowledge, this insight leads us to the second element in our epistemology: there must be something which at first appears to be a formal part of the given, but which is not merely passive. Rather, there must be a place within the given which is active, out of which the *necessity* for cognition naturally arises. It must be something which declares the necessity for cognition from within itself, out of itself. Only finding such a starting point will allow cognition to have traction in the given, a foundation upon which it can build. In other words, by insisting on the given *as given*, we are led to the discovery that not everything *is* given, but that a part of the given, upon closer scrutiny, shows itself to be something other than given.

We have already recognized that we can only approach the given through cognition. Because of this, we must be aware that it is only by an act of cognition that we can in the first place determine what characteristics the starting point for cognition must have in the given. There is nothing else that we *can* do, other than decree what this starting point for cognition must look like. Remember that our original task to discover what must be the case if knowledge is to be possible. If it is admitted that knowledge is something that arises through the cognitive activity of humankind, then in order to explain knowledge, we must create a foundation for cognition. Therefore, if knowledge is to be explained, such a foundation must exist – otherwise cognition has no basis and all knowledge is reduced to opinion. Laying the foundation for cognition in the brain will not suffice for reasons discussed above. In fact, there is no *specific content* within the given that can serve in this respect. The question is, rather, where within the given do we find something that is not passively given, but is given only to the extent that it is actively being produced in the act of cognition? We cannot rely upon the given inasmuch as it is given through our sense impressions, because we cannot know directly the extent to which our sense impressions are free from our own activity – this can only be discovered later through examination of the physical and physiological aspects of our being. The only place within the given about which we can be *directly* sure that it *only* arises through our own activity is in our ideas and concepts. Every other aspect of the given has the characteristic that it must be *given* in order for us to experience it. Only in our ideas and concepts is there a place where this situation is reversed: it is only through the act of cognition that our ideas and concepts arise and come to us as a part of the given. *We must produce them* if they are to be experience for us – every other aspect of the given can arise in our experience passively, *as given*.

Thus, what at first was merely a part of the given is shown to be a part of the given *only by means of cognition* itself. No specific idea or sense impression can thus serve as a basis for discovering where cognition meets the given – only through the cognitive act of cognition recognizing the source of itself beneath the given *qua* concept, can cognition awaken to itself, to its foundation. This must be the first act of cognition in founding a science of knowledge.

### **The Fruits of Epistemology**

With this basis in mind, we can proceed to elaborate results of this epistemology, and how it explains and provides a secure foundation for knowledge. We have used cognition to arbitrarily separate something out of the given world picture – the sphere of ideas and concepts. This was found to be the most suitable starting place because no other aspect of the given has the characteristics deemed necessary for cognition to take hold.

Where then does knowledge arise? Not out of what has already been discussed, which only provides the barest formal beginning for epistemology. What was once a unity – the given – has been torn apart through cognition. Yet we must recognize that what has been thus separated from the given still maintains an essential connection to it, regardless of how we arrived at just this part in particular.

Knowledge, then, can only consist of the restoration of the unity of the given *in thinking*. By thinking about the world *as given*, we bring about an actual union of the two parts of the given which had previously been separated: the part which exists at the liminal boundary of our cognition and that part which must be produced in the act of cognition before it can become a part of the given. The *act* of cognition is a synthesis of these two elements. It is an essential characteristic of the act of cognition that one part of it – the idea – is only produced within the

act itself, and would never otherwise arise. Yet the result of this act is that the idea itself becomes a part of the given.

Our epistemology is only properly founded because at its starting point it *recognizes* that the whole realm of ideas and concepts appears as given initially, and *then* seeks to discover how cognition arises. Having done this, we can see how knowledge can only arise when thinking approaches the given world content through its own activity.

When we think about the given, *something new is produced*: an idea, a content which is then added to the given. Cognition is only a problem in the first place because the entire content of the given is not created by us. If we created the content of the world (solipsism), then cognition would not exist. It would be impossible to even need an epistemology in the first place if the whole content of the world were our creation – it is only because something is given to us which we do *not* create that we encounter the need to explain it, to find its basis. To the extent that the content of cognition arises through cognition itself, nothing else is required by cognition to explain those contents, as they are *determined* in the very act of cognizing itself. By cognizing it, it is illuminated wholly for us, as if from within. Thus, a *description* of thinking itself constitutes its science – nothing further can be added. This helps to explain why logic cannot explain itself. Why is the logical logical? Logic itself is a description of thinking, and cannot arise before thinking, but arises when cognition turns itself towards itself to discover how it is moving. Thus the concept of “proof”, which arises out of logic, can never go so far as to prove proof itself – as Gödel so clearly pointed out in a more formal way after Steiner’s time. Proof ceases in the realm of pure thinking – it can only be, at most, a description of thinking. Proof arises through the laws inherent in thinking, but it is *thinking* that discovers these laws in



its own activity – not outside of it. Proof is therefore only something needed when the realm of thinking is brought into connection with the rest of the given world content.

Thus, having found its proper basis, cognition's task becomes finding the right way of bringing itself back into connection with the given so that the initial rending of itself out of the given is healed in the act of knowledge. How does this take place?

We have already seen what occurs when thinking takes itself as its object. But if we wish to know something of the world, we can only do so by means of our thinking. The work of thinking is to bring some kind of order into the initially unitary and completely chaotic world of the given. In this case, thinking must separate out for itself some particular aspects of the directly given world content. Then, thinking produces something of its own and relates the aspects to each other through this content, while also seeing what the outcome of this relation produces. Because precisely those aspects which are not at first produced by thinking are now related to each other through its own activity, thinking cannot arbitrarily decree its own "truth", but can only see what results arises of their own accord from the given. If the elements of the given, being thus related by thinking, *actually had no such relationship*, then thinking would fail in this respect and would need to start over. This can only be determined when thinking not only makes a relationship, but also sees its results. All knowledge thus depends upon the capacity for thinking to restore a relationship between elements of the world content in a way that actually corresponds to what the given already brings to it of its own accord.

### **Further Explorations**

From the above discussion, we can see that in order for our concepts to be more than mere opinion, the foundation of our thinking must be experienced in the act of cognition. In order to *know* that we know, we cannot rely upon an external metaphysics, nor on a physics of

the brain, but rather must come to the very foundation of knowledge itself in the act of cognition. This is truly an *act*, and can only be experienced *actively*. Knowledge, fundamentally, is *not* the content of ideas, but rather the act which produces them. Knowing is not a passive state, but an active one – it is a doing.

The results of this process of cognition, which we could call *living* thinking, as it is a thinking which is alive with itself, are dead. Living thinking dies into our thoughts. The content of an idea, a thought – these are things presented to us as a part of the given. They can only be perceived because they are no longer becoming in the act of thinking, but have been extruded, as it were, into the world. In this sense, every *thought* is objective, a throwing out of cognition, while only the living thinking is subjective. Even what we normally wish to hold in our experience as ‘subjective’, upon closer reflection, also comes to us as part of the given – as something objective: this is who I am.

Thus our everyday consciousness lives only by virtue of these finished thoughts. Our consciousness needs the dead corpses of our already completed ideas in order to recognize itself. They act as a mirror in which consciousness, through the specific content given to it through thinking, can say to itself: “Look! There *I* am!” In this way, our everyday consciousness takes on the character of the solidified thoughts and is like a corpse itself, for the mirror it holds in order to grasp itself is already itself a corpse. But beneath this consciousness lies the actual activity of living thinking itself, which stands *before* the content of the thought, and through which the thought is called into being and added to the world.

When most people, scientists included, speak of consciousness, they speak of this consciousness, the everyday consciousness, which in fact is a consciousness of the *past*. It is what occurs after an unconscious activity separates out part of the world content in order to let

consciousness have something to hold onto. Precisely *this* consciousness is amenable to the methods employed in modern science that give us various neural correlates of consciousness – but the living thinking is beyond its present boundaries. Our science will be more and more able to illuminate all that appears to us in our experience as arising from specific brain processes, and its discoveries will not be false. Yet this science will only be able to describe the consciousness that is itself already dead, and we will have a dead science describing a dead object; and all the while, the actual living source from which the corpse arises remains obscure. The problem suggests its remedy. Modern science is a science of the material world, and has formed its content according to what it sees in the mirror held up by a thinking that selects from the given what can be illuminated wholly from without. In this case, thinking selects precisely those elements of the given which do *not* lead to thinking itself in its living form, allowing thinking to remain obscured *by its own activity*. Our science has been so successful specifically because of just this tendency, therefore when it tries to turn its attention towards consciousness, it can only do so as an *object*. As long as it does so, it will fail in the most important regard, and will even be harmful, because its pronouncements will have the effect of pushing the experience of living thinking even further from human consciousness. It will place before us a series of extremely detailed pictures of the physical aspect of the human organism and claim that “this is what you are”; and we will believe them if we have not been able to penetrate our own activity of thinking for ourselves! This is why an epistemology that understands thinking is so important – it makes no pronouncements about the laws of the natural world, nor prescribes a particular philosophical viewpoint, but provides the foundation upon which philosophy and natural science can build without falling into delusion.

The need for this foundation was clearly recognized by Rudolf Steiner, who was able then to take up the next step: examining how it could be possible, and what would it mean, to experience the *act* of cognition rather than its results. Rather than simply thinking *about* thinking – which would result in merely another train of thought, another series of dead ideas added to the pile lying before us – he was able to show how it can be possible for thinking to experience itself, and how this leads to a fundamental experience of what can only be described as the spirit. The reader, if interested, is referred to the works in the references below. Specific and detailed work expanding this foundation into a workable *science* has been done by many, most notably Steve Talbott, Henry Bortoft, Nick Thomas, and Dennis Klocek, whose long term weather predictions, which are based on a qualitative method founded in the development of living thinking, achieve success rates far beyond the best supercomputer predictions coming out of NOAA.

### **Integrations**

What does this mean for the intensive and fascinating work being pursued in the primarily materialist fields of neurophysiology, cognitive science, and evolutionary biology, which deal in their own way with human consciousness? Does the above analysis, which may seem anti-materialist to the casual reader, indicate that their results are somehow wrong, or that we should not pursue the materialist approach to consciousness? If we take this epistemological foundation seriously, what does it mean for us when we read about the ‘molecules of emotion’ and the seeming upward causative effects on consciousness of chemical and electrical stimulation of the brain in a mechanical way?

The careful reader will notice that none of the above discussion precludes or invalidates the primary conclusions of materialist science. The facts discovered in this way, for example that the chemical oxytocin plays a significant role in experiences of emotional bonding and love, the stimulation of the birthing process and lactation, and the feelings of closeness accompanying sexual orgasm, are both important and valid. What the epistemological view laid out above *does* do, however, is give a foundation that allows us to understand these facts in a way that does not *necessitate* materialism, but allows them to exist freely on their own so that *what we make of them* can become an act that is itself performed in freedom.

In fact, the experience of cognition described above leads directly to an experiential understanding of freedom founded at first in the fundamental act of epistemology. We discover that we can potentially be free in our cognition if it is raised to *living* cognition – precisely because of its fundamental nature. Although this approach may appear to be merely ‘philosophical’ in its approach to thinking, it is really an attempt to delineate how it is precisely in our thinking that our first experience of *knowing reality* can and must occur – and in this sense is quite practical and practicable when taken up and worked with.<sup>3</sup>

So the *results* of materialist science (assuming of course that the science is carried out correctly and without overstepping itself) are in fact indispensable, important, and *true* to the extent that the results consist of the establishment of correct relations between selected elements of the given formulated freely by and within the act of cognition. It is, rather, the *interpretation* of the results, specifically inasmuch as the results more and more are trying to deal with the phenomena of thinking and consciousness, that the above view calls into question.

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<sup>3</sup> Steiner and others (Kuhlewind, and Klocek for example) have given many phenomenological methods and exercises that elaborate and prepare the way for this type of experience. Speaking about it, and ‘*thoughting*’ about it are not enough, as it is an experience that is very much like a meditation and requires similar development to be successful.

It is a fact, for example, that repeated stimulation of a specific brain area leads normal patients to report a sensation of joy. More and more research is being done to illuminate these ‘neural correlates of consciousness’, and the research will in all likelihood continue to show the strong link between brain processes and qualitative (qualia-filled) states of consciousness. Based on facts such as these, scientists conclude that the brain is the reducible causative agent for states of consciousness. If we can artificially induce specific states of consciousness, including memories, sensory stimulation, and feeling states through direct influence on the brain through either electrical stimulation or chemical means, why *shouldn't* scientists conclude that consciousness is an *effect* of the physical brain and thus a word which, if *truly* understood, refers actually to the physical form and processes of the human body? Even if our science comes to realize that cognition is not solely a *brain* process but is actually a process that occurs to some extent in the *whole* body (as the field of psychoneuroimmunology is increasingly pointing out), the fact remains that in this view consciousness is still physical, and our naïve view of consciousness as something “other” than the physical body is simply an outdated (and incorrect) relic of the split inaugurated so clearly by Descartes – it is ‘folk psychology’.

Yet it is precisely here where we can recognize that such a view can only come into existence *without* the fundamental experience of the grounding of cognition through epistemology. If we lead ourselves to the *experience* of living cognition through (at first) a non-living cognition of the foundations of epistemology, we find that cognition is *more fundamental* than the physical body and brain. Yet the very same experience teaches us that cognition is also *grounded* within the physical body, and is anchored by it. In this sense, it is not that cognition *produces* the brain (solipsism). Rather, the brain is in fact understood to be the *necessary* organ for our thinking – *at first*. We come to see that we could not have our present form of non-living

thinking without the material of the brain. Here we agree entirely with all that comes to us as facts about the relationship between the brain and consciousness from materialist science.

Yet our view is not *naïve* about its foundation, and in practice allows for a more solid foundation even for materialism than what materialist science can claim for itself! At the same time, however, precisely *because* it starts at the only possible place – cognition – and develops itself out of itself without prior assumptions that could only come through knowledge (an unacceptable proposition, as we have seen), our view also provides something that the materialist paradigm cannot: namely the bringing to light the possibility for *living thinking* to exist *without the brain*. Thus, the foundation of an epistemology in this way leads *through* materialist science to the experience of a thinking which is at first dependent upon the brain and then which *frees* itself from the brain. This gives the possibility to further establish, in all clarity, the foundation of *morality* through and within the free deed of living thinking as described above.

The materialist paradigm embodied in the bulk of consciousness research will continue to provide amazing and correct insights with respect to the relationships between consciousness and the brain. Yet to the extent that this paradigm cannot raise itself *consciously* in individual humans to living thinking, it will remain a science of *thoughts* and not of thinking. Within this realm it will reign supreme as the most efficient and useful way of arriving at new details about the brain and how it *produces* consciousness, and its results will be correct! Yet we must come to understand that there is simply *more* to the phenomena of ‘consciousness’ than is presently recognizable by material science. Even if our science could give a *complete* account of the physical brain and all related processes in the human physical organism, this accounting would be able to include the phenomena of consciousness *only inasmuch* as they exist through the physical organism and are dependent upon it. Such an accounting could *not*, both by implicit

definition and in practice, lead to an understanding of a consciousness that *does not* require the physical brain for its existence, *even if* such a consciousness has effects which can be seen in the brain itself.

So, even when research is more and more able to approach an understanding of what happens in the brain when say, a meditator experiences a state of ‘oneness’ with the universe, this research will only see what it is designed to see and no more: brain states. As the saying goes, when wielding a hammer, everything becomes a nail. The only way to gain insight into states of consciousness in which thinking takes place ‘off the brain’ as it were, is to *actually produce them in oneself*. Thus, in addition to approaching consciousness as an objective phenomenon occurring *in* the brain, we must also approach it through the freely willed act of living thinking, which can only be *an act* of consciousness itself.

The first way gives us an outer, objective approach, which does well what it is designed to do: elucidate the physical basis for consciousness. It is only because the *type* of consciousness produced through the brain in this way (a non-living thinking, thinking that is as dead as the matter of the brain considered purely physically) presently constitutes the overwhelming bulk of human consciousness, that the impression arises that such a science will give, when fully carried through, a complete account of consciousness in the first place. And if it happened to be the case that such a consciousness constituted not merely the bulk of human consciousness but *all* of human consciousness, then such an explanation would in fact be complete. This is why our epistemological considerations above are so important: they demonstrate how *in addition* to our regular, day-waking consciousness that is describable in detail by materialist science, *something further* exists for consciousness, in which we can place ourselves into the very foundations of the act of cognition as a living process *in the present*. And it is just this living thinking that no



longer manifests solely according to the laws inherent in the physical brain, but rather according to laws which are only discoverable through the experience of living thinking itself.

It should be clear at this point that all that is communicated in this essay is *not* itself living thinking, even though the elaboration of living thinking is its most important aspect! Living thinking can only be experienced as an act – in any moment! – when consciousness raises itself outside of the mechanical laws of the brain – the source of thoughts – and places itself directly in the stream of becoming that lies before the production of a thought.

So we can see that when scientists speak of ‘molecules of emotion’ and the like, that this is not an incorrect picture insofar as it goes – it simply doesn’t go very far in terms of what exists for consciousness as a potential. This is why so many of the insights coming out of cognitive science, neurology, neurophysiology, psychoneuroimmunology, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary biology deal with elements of consciousness that are normally *unconscious*. This includes, for example, research that shows what happens in the brain when a ball is thrown at someone’s head that allows them to react before being able to report being conscious that a ball is even being thrown. Or research that deals with how our ‘snap’ intuitive judgments about situations occur in large part through brain processes which lie below the level of consciousness, but without which we could not properly arrive at a conscious assessment.

The present paradigm is very good at elucidating all that lies in this realm – a realm we could call the *subconscious* unconscious. This is a vast realm which includes physical brain processes which are directly tied to, and provide the under-girding as it were, of the manifestation of normal, day-waking consciousness. But what is *not* included in this realm is precisely what occurs in the experience of living thinking, which we could call the *superconscious* unconscious, as it is a consciousness which lies above that of normal, day-

waking consciousness (and thus is unconscious for it). It is in this realm that consciousness finds itself actually capable of manifestation in a way that is no longer solely dependent upon the processes which were once required for it when it was simply *conscious*.

This approach, begun with a treatment of epistemology, lays the foundation for knowledge, and leads us into a consideration of cognition which goes beyond what is normally able to be considered through a materialist approach, while at the same time upholding the best and most essential parts of the materialist paradigm: its results. At the same time, it provides a picture of how we can move beyond the results given by our materialist science into an entirely different realm which exists *simultaneously* with the facts that describe the purely material world. In this sense, the approach is truly integral in that it sees the necessity of, and provides the foundation for, an integration of the external, objective world picture given primarily through materialist science, with an internal, *also objective* picture of the potential for human consciousness to raise itself up into a truly living thinking.

## **Part II – Freedom**

### **An Experiment**

The consequences of the above discussion of living thinking extend beyond a simple recontextualization of the way in which much of modern science deals with consciousness. In fact, an understanding of Steiner's basic epistemology leads us towards a truly radical treatment of an issue lying within the drama of every individual human life today: freedom. The issue of freedom has been an implicit part of the subtext of the entire discussion about epistemology, but will now be teased out and held up to the light of thinking on its own.

The question is a pertinent one: In what way am I free? The way in which we deal with this question yields drastic consequences for our thought life and all that flows from it: our cosmology, our foreign policy, our psychology, our very sense of self worth and morality. Certainly there are many approaches to this issue, and opinions of every stripe and color abound. Yet if, with all seriousness, we take as a background the epistemological framework previously discussed, we find ourselves with a mighty sword that cuts through much potential difficulty. Perhaps the battle leaves us a bit bloodied, but our life at the end is thus worth that much more for having been through the struggle in full consciousness.

Rather than begin by stating a definition for “freedom” and providing supporting arguments for its validity, I will instead encourage the reader to perform an experiential exercise as follows:

Perform a free act. Now reflect, as well as you can, upon the sequence of events leading up to the performance of the act, all the way through to its completion. See if you can trace the complete series in full consciousness, paying attention to how each part follows in a sequence. Now try to reverse the order of events in your mind, starting with the completion of the act and moving backwards through the series until you begin to get lost. Repeat this imagination, running it like a movie in your mind forwards and then backwards until you get the feeling that it begins to flow of its own accord.

To what part of this sequence can freedom be rightfully applied? Or perhaps it is more direct to ask: how do you know that you have performed a free act? Let us take a specific example now with which to ground the following discussion.

Suppose that your free act was to clap your hands together. Reflecting on this, you may think that you have fulfilled the task set before you because there seems to be no necessity behind the action of clapping your hands; supposedly you could have just as easily performed a cartwheel, sang a tune, or thought about Michigan. Yet in focusing on this moment, perhaps you noticed a certain sticking point in your reflection, where your ability to connect one moment to the next became hazy, and your feeling for the validity of the connection dimmed.

With respect to clapping your hands, we can imagine the following inner dialogue: “I was told to perform a free action. A few possible actions occurred to me, and I selected one of them and carried it out. In reflection upon this, I can see how a certain series of physical events were required to carry out the action, involving the physiology of my muscles, changes in blood flow, etc. Yet in tracing the series backwards, I come to a spot beyond which I cannot see. A moment arises for me when, in thinking the series of events backwards, I am met with a wall of unknowing where my ability to discern the source of the initial impulse to clap my hands seemingly lies.”

Stated another way, if we seek the source of an action with the idea that the source can be made to bare itself openly to our consciousness, we are met with a certain disappointment. If we are materialists, we simply keep on tracing the chain of physical causes and effects backwards, and ignore the problem or miss it entirely. Yet if we try to maintain a certain level of awareness of *what our will is doing*, we cannot but help that at some point our will becomes dark for us.

Yet somehow, out of all the possible actions, I decided to clap my hands: how did the decision to clap my hands occur to me? This is a key point to which we will return in a moment.

### **The Nature of Freedom**

Freedom is nothing but freedom from necessity. If freedom is to truly exist for humankind, then it must require that our free actions not find their source in any external law. If we can trace our actions to sources which are not directly and immediately present to our consciousness, then we can never be sure that our action is free; it may be a natural outcome of causes that are unknown to us. We cannot rest content in taking this unknown as an excuse upon which to project our idea of freedom – the unknown cannot bear such responsibility.

Rather, the source of any free action can only be in something that *we create for ourselves in full consciousness*. No external law can bind the source of a free action – its source must lie entirely within a realm that is open to the full light of consciousness, in which no hidden elements lie. Certainly we cannot therefore find the source of any free action in the physical realm, for the physical realm is completely subject to natural laws. These laws require that initial conditions result in a limiting of possible outcomes. Freedom is precisely that which cannot be limited in this way, and therefore we cannot find the source of freedom within the external, or material world.

If we cannot turn to the external world, we must turn to the inner world, the world that is present to our consciousness when we turn away from all that comes to us through our external senses. Yet we have also seen that we cannot rely upon any part of our inner world that is not fully open to our consciousness. This begs the question: where, in our inner world, is a place that fits this description?

## The Will

In examining our inner life, we quickly come to realize that even though we commonly associate freedom with the idea of free *will*, the bulk of our will-life does not fit this description. As already indicated, when we turn our attention towards the activity of our will, we are met with a kind of darkness. In performing any action, the role of the will is very much a mystery, shrouded in layer upon layer of interconnected elements which all have the character of being “not me”. The process by which any physical action we undertake is not directly experienced in the full light of consciousness, but is immediately submerged into an ocean of unconsciousness. The effects of this process are available to various aspects of our sense life: we see our hands coming together, we feel them touching, we hear the sound they produce, etc. More subtly we may experience some of the physical movements that are taking place within our bodies, kinesthetically, or with respect to the oxygen content of our blood for example. But none of these aspects falls within the realm required of a free action – they are all effects produced by something that is itself unavailable to normal consciousness. My whole physical body, in this sense, is not experienced as being under the direct and conscious influence of my will, but is at best an instrument that my will is able to take hold of in a way that is not immediately able to be brought to consciousness.

Steiner communicates the sense of this by indicating that we are asleep in our will. This is to say that the level at which the working of our will is accessible to consciousness is similar to the level at which events taking place during dreamless sleep are available to consciousness. At best we have a vague sense, upon waking from dreamless sleep, that *something* has happened – we feel quite differently upon waking than when going to sleep, and we attribute this shift in

feeling to what took place during our sleep. Similarly, upon performing some action, we can have the vague sense that *something* has happened with respect to our will, because after all, our hands came together in a clap – yet the particular workings of this something, how it actually accomplishes the outcome, is inaccessible to consciousness. One place in which the unconsciousness of the will is made clear is in the life of the human being inasmuch as it is lived out of instincts and drives that originate in the physical body and life body. As Rudolf Steiner states, “If without my cooperation, a rational decision emerges in me with the same necessity with which hunger and thirst arise, then I must needs obey it, and my freedom is an illusion.” (Steiner, 1999, p.8) Retracting one’s hand from a painful stimulus is an action that takes place by virtue of a will that is buried, as it were, within the human physical organization. It is only at much more advanced levels of evolution that human beings can make this aspect of our will life come within the domain of conscious control. Clearly then, the will, considered in this way, cannot be the place in which our freedom is found.

### **Feeling**

What then, of our life of feeling? If we are asleep in our will, we are dreaming in our feeling life. The level of conscious penetration of the feeling life is much more available to consciousness than is the will life. But here we still lack the full capacity of conscious direction. Feelings happen to us in a way that is analogous to how dream images appear to a dreamer. The source of the dream image is closely connected to the inner life of the dreamer, and yet its creation and metamorphosis is not under the conscious direction of the dreamer. Similarly, our feelings are subject to movements and modifications that still depend up on phenomena that are not fully open to the light of consciousness. Our desires, our sympathies and antipathies, rise

and fall like an inner tide whose rhythms and temperaments are beyond the reach of our full day-waking consciousness. Yet, at the same time, their genesis within the soul is much more amenable to awareness than are the subterranean flows of will permeating the physical body. This misty awareness, however, does not give us the ability to, at the drop of a hat, suddenly reverse their tidal flow and shift from antipathy to sympathy or vice versa. If olives engender in me a feeling of repulsion, transformation of this feeling into one of delight is dependent upon a capacity that is not available to the average human being. Yet, like in the case of the will, such a capacity lies within the potential future of any human being who undertakes a particular path of development, such as that offered by anthroposophy. In the mean-time, we find ourselves subject to our feelings in the same way that as dreamers we are subject to the dream content, even though this content arises in large part from within the individual's own inner life. The result of this, for the purposes of the present discussion, leads us to recognize that human freedom cannot be found within the untransformed life of feeling.

### **Thinking**

If the human being is configured in such a way that the will and feeling life of the individual are unable to serve as the foundation for freedom, what then of the capacity for thinking? Inasmuch as a human beings live within what has been heretofore called 'day-waking consciousness', we do so by virtue of what takes place not within the sleepy life of will or the dreamy life of feeling, but of the wakefulness of thinking. We feel we are awake to the world and ourselves precisely because we are present to what takes place in our thinking life in a particular way. It is, in fact, the very lack or modification of the thinking capacity that most directly distinguishes sleep, dream, and non-ordinary states of awareness such as those induced



by physical substances or shamanic techniques (among other things) from the clarity of our day-waking consciousness. Of all these states, it is only within this day-awake consciousness that we have the ability to correctly check the truth or falsity of our thoughts. Try within a dream to check a fact or thought; the checking is of no real account and can produce in us *either* the feeling of its correctness or incorrectness. But this feeling cannot be justified within the dream state itself – its corroboration with the truth can only occur within a consciousness that is not shrouded in dreams, where unknown and unseen elements are responsible for the flow of dream images, including that encompassing the feeling just described, but rather has available to itself the full range of experiences open only to day-waking consciousness, where thinking is able to take hold of the fact and connect it to the wakefully-experienced world in the right way. Once this is done, the feeling of the correctness of the fact is accompanied by a *thought* of its correctness, and this very thought is able to be communicated and checked by other day-waking thinkers.

Of course, there is no single state that can be called day-waking consciousness. Rather, we can be awake but sleepy, awake but inattentive, and so forth. This scale extends downwards through hypnagogic states into dreaming and dreamless sleep, but also extends in the opposite direction as well. What do we find in this other direction? We find the experience explored in part one: living thinking. It is to living thinking that we will return after examining the question of freedom on the level of ‘normal’ thinking.

It is easy to see that the level of control available to us in our thinking capacity is qualitatively on an entirely different level than it is with respect to our feeling or willing life. Yet for much of our day, our thoughts are themselves less under the aegis of conscious direction than we might suppose. All that comes to us from the given – our complete sensory life, our

feelings, even the content of what we have already thought to ourselves – acts to push or pull our thought along particular avenues. That is, our normal thought life is not easily directed, but follows paths laid out in large part by elements which seem to act on thinking from the outside, to shape its contents in ways that are not necessarily under our control. This is particularly the case for sensory content, but also describes the effect of our own inner states in which both feelings and thought content act to circumscribe what occurs in our subsequent thoughts.

Even though this is the case, it is clear to a moment's reflection that compared to our willing and feeling, we are much more able to penetrate the vicissitudes of our thinking and bring them to consciousness. In effect, our thought life is open to our thinking. But inasmuch as our thought life is still determined by outer factors (expressed by 'the given' as previously discussed), it cannot be said to be a valid foundation for freedom, for freedom requires determination by no outer factor, whether this factor is a sensory experience or the content of a previous thought. If thinking as a whole is found to be completely led by such outer factors, then the thinking capacity itself cannot be free, and our efforts to decipher any potential areas in which human beings can find freedom must come to a close, with the result that humans are *not* free.

Yet, as previously mentioned, the thinking capacity is special among human capacities, in that when it turns upon itself, it discovers something unique within itself; this is what we have called living thinking. It is in the experience of living thinking that humans can find freedom. This is because, in the experience of living thinking, *nothing whatsoever occurs except by virtue of the activity of the individual*. In other words, no outer experience of any sort directs the activity that takes place in living thinking – it is precisely that which is free from all such determinants.

What then, directs this inner activity of living thinking? It can only be myself, my “I” being – my spiritual individuality<sup>4</sup>. All that occurs in living thinking only does so because *I* do it. In this experience, there is nothing hidden from me. Nothing lies within or underneath this activity that is not directly open to my consciousness, and what is more, there is nothing within the experience that is also not directly under the control of my will. If something is a part of my experience of living thinking, it is only because I will it to be there.

On this basis we can see how within the darkness of the life of our will as a whole, the tiniest sliver shows itself to have the necessary characteristics that allow it to be considered free. This part of our will stands out from the rest of our will life, and it is just this part of our will which permeates the activity of the living thinking. This thinking is precisely, therefore, a completely *willed thinking* – this is its signature. It is when our will is able to fully penetrate the process of thinking, so that what occurs there only does so through the self-directed activity of the “I” being, that we can be said to be engaged in a completely free activity.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of living thinking is one that explicitly embodies our capacity for free action. It must be stressed that this activity is not being spoken of theoretically or philosophically, but upon the basis of what each human being can potentially experience for oneself. Inasmuch as the above considerations are taken in purely as *thoughts*, the perspective offered may seem abstract; it is upon the basis of living thinking itself that its validity must rest. Just as, in order for one to justify to oneself the results of a mathematical expression one must have had a direct experience of the validity of the underlying logic at work, so too it is only from

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<sup>4</sup> It is, for this reason, that the experience of the activity of one’s own thinking leads one directly to the *fundamental experience of the spirit*.

the direct experience of living thinking that any justification of it can arise. This is the case because unlike what is contained in the content of other thoughts, which can be shared in their 'dead' form (having fallen like a precipitate out of the process of thinking), the *content* of living thinking can only be present within the *activity* of living thinking – because in the case of living thinking these are identical. Its content is therefore incommunicable in essence, because only oneself can will one's own thinking. This is precisely what makes it free. Therefore all of the previous words act only as pointers to the possibility of an experience, which, while it occurs, will make clear in a direct way what can only be indicated at above.

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