

PART ONE

Notes on Rudolf Steiner's Book
Theosophy

Introduction

The age that began with the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* may be called, with certain justification, the "age of criticism." Criticism and doubt have insinuated themselves into all the realms of our life, even to the very depths of the soul. Certainly, doubt is a familiar phenomenon in human history, but in terms of the fundamental problems of life there has scarcely been a period of time when there was so little security and certitude as there is in our own. Not only have the tremendous achievements in the knowledge and mastery of nature not improved this condition, they have actually caused the eye of the spirit to fixate on outer phenomena in expectation of a solution to the mysteries of the soul from that direction. Although it is clear that such observation of outer facts in relation to the soul life has failed entirely, today's consciousness has nonetheless become so anxious in the face of so-called subjective facts of the soul¹ that we are left with little but weary resignation. Such fearfulness over so-called mere subjective results has gripped thinking to the extent that confidence in thinking has all but disappeared.

1 As in many forms of psychoanalysis. —ED.

Nevertheless, every sentence that claims to shatter confidence in thinking expresses an unconscious recognition of thinking. Certainly, any discussion of thinking as a mere process in the brain has long been recognized to be impossible. Moreover, it is also realized that absolute skepticism speaks against itself in every sentence it speaks; but to move on from this perspective to actual confidence in thinking still requires a long journey. Yet we may say that the appearance of doubt shows that the reality of knowledge is being attested and sought in this way. In the actual process of following our doubt we activate our confidence in thinking, whereas doubt—when developed into a method—is simply a theory of knowledge.

It may seem bold in our time when, in relation to Anthroposophy, or Spiritual Science, we now speak of confidence in thinking. True, it might be supposed that we must renounce all thinking of our own if we acknowledge the teachings of Spiritual Science. Moreover, certain self-styled theosophical circles and individuals consider themselves justified in viewing all thinking and science with contempt from their perspective of supposed spiritual experience. Indeed, an exposition of true Spiritual Science is needed today because so much charlatanism and fraud parade themselves in the area of esotericism. However, even what is written by brilliant contemporaries about Spiritual Science and *Theosophy* does not induce the reader to expect from Spiritual Science very much that would contribute to the satisfaction of philosophical needs. Isn't it possible, however, that such judgments may be attributed to the fact that such writers have not considered it worth their while, with all the keenness of their reason, to enter the teachings of Spiritual Science more deeply? Could it be that

they have not done what the author of *Theosophy* declared in his preface about this task: “In some respects, its readers will have to work their way through each page and even each single sentence the hard way” (p. 8).²

Only one example will be given here to illustrate the attitude of today’s best minds in the presence of the weightiest world problems. Maurice Maeterlinck³ writes in his book *Death*:

The God who offers us the best and mightiest religion has given us our intellect so that we may use it honestly and without restriction—that is, to strive most of all and in all circumstances toward what appears as truth to our reason. Can this God demand that, contrary to our reason, we swear allegiance to a faith whose incertitude is admitted even by its most zealous and keenest champions?

And two sentences later:

Three hundred years of apologetics have been unable to add one tenable item of evidence to this terrible despairing point of view of Pascal. This, then, is all that the human intellect has discovered to compel us to belief. If the God who demands belief from us does not wish us to guide ourselves through our intellect, then how can we choose?

Here Maeterlinck demands the most unrestricted and conscientious use of the intellect. How are we to explain the fact

2 Carl Unger refers mainly to the first German edition of *Theosophy*. Page numbers in this edition refer to the English edition translated by Catherine E. Creeger from the 19th German revised edition and published in 1994 by Anthroposophic Press. Rudolf Steiner continued to revise and amend *Theosophy* through its 9th edition.

3 Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) was a Belgian playwright, poet, and essayist who wrote in French. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911. The main themes in his work are death and the meaning of life. His plays form an important part of the Symbolist movement.

that he is wholly ignorant of the most important material bearing upon *Theosophy*, to which he devotes two whole pages of his book? What he presents is twenty or thirty years out of date. In the course of his reflections, however, it is clear, too, that although he does indeed demand the use of reason, he has such little confidence in thinking that he knows scarcely any other use of reason except what corresponds more or less to everyday thinking. He fails to see that thinking must adapt to the new realm that is to be revealed, and that it is out of order to demand proofs that corroborate the suprasensory in a way that applies to sensory phenomena.

This book endeavors to present to the public what may be experienced in connection with the book *Theosophy* by a form of thinking that has trained itself to the utmost keenness of criticism. The intellectual confirmation of a spiritual doctrine has always been called an apologia. However, because the more recent apologetic literature consists mostly of refuting criticisms brought against a worldview or a religion, very little is thus achieved toward the actual corroboration of such a worldview itself. Therefore, we will undertake a more positively apologetic study to show how the teachings of Spiritual Science, as expounded by Rudolf Steiner, can stand the test of the rational consciousness.

Steiner himself emphatically declares again and again that it is possible, with a little goodwill, to grasp rationally all the teachings he has presented; but this is something that must actually be done. It will become clear in the book itself why Steiner himself only suggests the solution to this problem. However, if an audience simply appeals to his assertion, nothing is achieved. Once we set ourselves to the task of “working it over” it certainly becomes evident that, to

grasp Spiritual Science rationally, reason itself must first be educated in many things. Is it, then, entirely certain that we already know, from ordinary life, what the capacities of reason are? Hasn't reason already accomplished great achievements in newly mastered areas?

Let us convince ourselves through an area that seems very remote. The axioms of geometry, as laid down by Euclid, have remained unmodified for centuries as the basic definitions of space. Only recently has critical thinking begun to doubt whether all these axioms were needed to pursue geometry; for example, it has been possible to drop Euclid's axiom of parallel lines. Without this, we can develop a science of geometry, but we have to conceive the space to which it applies in a different way. In connection with such scientific research associated with the names of Lobachevsky, Bolyai, Riemann,⁴ and others, the question has often been raised as to which science of geometry corresponds to reality, or how actual space must be viewed. Once we grasp such research from the point of view of their significance for the use of reason, we will find that in such endeavors reason long ago passed beyond the limits Kant believed he could set for it.

In the real sense of a theory of knowledge, thinking itself has set the most rigid limits, declaring logic to be absolute in disregarding the fact that logic must actually follow the requirements of cognition. The needs of a theory of cognition and their logical evaluation first appear, even historically, only after a certain accumulation of knowledge has developed in the corresponding field. New elements of knowledge force their

4 Nikolai Lobachevsky (1792–1856), Russian mathematician and geometer; János Bolyai (1802–1860), Hungarian mathematician; Bernhard Riemann (1826–1866), German mathematician.

way through, even against dominant logical formulas of a theory of cognition.

Yet, even until a very recent period, the basic principle of contradiction as formulated by Aristotle continued to exert its determinative influence. The appearance of a contradiction in scientific thinking was not questioned as evidence of a fallacy; one tried to refute an opinion by showing that it contains contradictions or leads to contradictions. Hegel came into a conflict with this view when he proposed contradiction as an element of cognition. The fact that the time simply passed over Hegel may one day be considered proof of his extraordinary significance; perhaps, however, even today we may see evidence of possible reason in the fact that a profound thinker appeared at that time whose thinking was able to endure contradiction and thus recognize it as a solution to the mystery of knowledge. Doesn't it seem as though, with Hegel, philosophy cried out for the results of a new kind of knowledge, whose experiences, being suprasensory, must contradict ordinary sensory experience?

The fact that contradiction now appears in the presence of the basic questions of knowledge, as Kant pointed out in principle, should not lead to the absurd notion that there is no such thing as true, or "objective," knowledge. It may be acknowledged that—in the presence of the basic questions of knowledge as formulated today—every answer indicates a contradiction. Nevertheless, the reason for this may lay in a false evaluation of the basic question itself. The basic principle of contradiction—owing to which knowledge may be denied—is derived from reason itself, which is supposed to be dethroned by such a judgment.

The essential question of knowledge can be expressed briefly: Can the thing be for me as it is in itself? If nothing but an affirmative answer to this question can be considered knowledge, then every item of knowledge must appear to be a contradiction. Yet one thing that is for me “as it is in itself” answers this question immediately: the “I,” which appears here as the father of all contradictions. The formulation of the basic question of knowledge shows that the “I” sees itself as separate from the “world.” However, the “I” is not justified in itself to draw the limits of the principle of contradiction. Indeed, we may say: The “I,” by forming the basic question, expresses the fact that its whole being is an expression of the sensory perspective and shows in itself a living contradiction in the presence of the true reality, and it expresses the fact that attempting to bridge the chasm between “I” and the world is evidence of the fact that our true being must seek its reality in the suprasensory. If the perspective of the sensory is thus a contradiction against true reality, all answers to the basic question of knowledge that may appear as contradictions would really be contradictions against the contradiction. In this way, we could overcome the unconditional validity of the principle of contradiction and reveal a path to recognizing the suprasensory. Nevertheless, we will quickly discover that logical disclosure of the suprasensory does not lead to positive results, but only to generalities and, finally, to arguments opposed to arguments.

It is entirely different, however, when a suprasensory fact appears with positive experiential results. Then, based on these reflections, we have ample reason to occupy ourselves with these results, because we will then be prepared to consider them with reason that learns through these results without being sidetracked by general opposing arguments. We will

then certainly not argue against the possibility of such results for those who do not know the results of suprasensory research and do not wish to learn them. However, perhaps we will be able to learn that genuine and earnest Spiritual Science answers to the cry that philosophy sends forth from its whole past.⁵

5 Carl Unger notes at this point his concern that this book should not be a substitute for reading Rudolf Steiner's book *Theosophy*:

There is something dubious in the thought of writing a book about a book. The book has been widely read. Obviously, the book can be read only in the actual work itself. We must avoid detracting from the original through our commentary. Respect for the documents will not be diminished through our understanding of them.