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Foreword

"Opening Secrets": Rudolf Steiner, Spiritual Science, and Technology

John Bloom

Our digital devices perform miracles at the touch of a finger, or the sound of our voice, and right before our eyes—a technology of modern wonder. We are networked and connected and at the forefront of the increasing presence of artificial intelligence with its intention to replicate and even transcend human capacities, both physical and mental. The claims for the technological future are many and the pace of advancement almost breathtaking.

We no longer really know whether we are the subject or the object of technology; what we do know is that the pervasiveness of electronic-based technology has compromised privacy. In the world of commerce, identity has been coopted as a commodity and has clouded our deeper understanding of the importance and meaning of individuality. From a spiritual perspective, what is most deeply human, the evolution of self perhaps over multiple lifetimes, can be considered antithetical to a central tenet of transhumanism, that through technology we can exceed our biological limits. These views of the human being and human destiny can frame our relationship to digital technology.

The challenge is that we have arrived at this moment so quickly, and with such powerful intentions for making life more convenient, that we have rarely taken the time to reflect on some key fundamental assumptions: the physiological effects on human senses; inherent

biases migrated into programs and system design; the moral and ethical dimensions of user interface; and even more deeply, the unconscious forces working through electronic-based media. Research has raised really important questions, though the findings tend to be muffled by those who justify the manifest destiny of technology as a primary path forward in nearly all parts of life.

In this context, and with a concern for and interest in the deeper issues at work in and through electronic-based technology, an extensive review of Rudolf Steiner's thoughts on technology as offered in this compendium is essential. Rudolf Steiner was intensely interested in the issues of the modern industrial era. He was able to see what was emerging in nascent form, and from that to intuit many of the fundamental problems, challenges, and breakthroughs that we live with today and imagine for the future.

Rudolf Steiner's thinking and influence are deep and wide. The depth of his thinking extends from the macrocosm to the microcosm of physical and spiritual experience. Its scope includes the workings of the world and the self, and the ideal relationship between them. In the last 25 years of his life he elucidated countless secrets that surround and permeate our normal sense-based perceptions. His life's task was to liberate knowledge, to expand the bounds of modern Western materialist thinking, and to limn the spiritual world of cosmic thought. He lived the radical proposition that we modern individuals can know the spiritual world as we do the physical, if we develop the necessary faculties to do so. And he devoted his life to helping others cultivate those faculties through meditative disciplines and a methodology he called spiritual science so that they could better serve humanity and the spiritual world.

Rudolf Steiner concerned himself with and researched many aspects of life including sciences, education, agriculture, arts, medicine, economics, and the organization of civil society. And he helped apply this research in the practical development of Waldorf Education, Biodynamic agriculture, Eurythmy, Anthroposophical medicine, Associative

Economics, Threefold Commonwealth, and more. Although electronic-based technologies are not generally associated with Steiner's work, he carefully considered elements of their spiritual character and consequences along with their potential social impact.

Rudolf Steiner was trained as a natural scientist at a highly regarded university in Vienna and received a doctorate in nineteenth century German phenomenology. Throughout his life he sustained a profound interest in the history of thought, the nature of human experience, the evolution of consciousness, and how they played out particularly in modern Western culture. His comprehensive study of the history of philosophy informed his insights into *how* we know. His study of science informed his insights into *what* we know. In bringing those insights into relationship with each other, Rudolf Steiner sought to develop a worldview that could integrate not only science and philosophy, but also art, social life, and spiritual reality.

Anthroposophy, a composite word that Rudolf Steiner formulated to name the spiritual scientific path he developed, means the wisdom of the human being. As articulated and practiced, Anthroposophy is an encompassing and exhaustive body of knowledge both philosophical and practical; and a disciplined contemplative path of knowledge that makes clear the integral and active working of the spiritual world in every detail of the material world.

Anthroposophy is a way to facilitate the integration of thinking with the natural world and the invisible forces infused within it. One can receive the intent of Anthroposophy as a living and metamorphic research project premised on an indication that knowledge is without limits and that resonance exists between and links the spiritual with the material.

In addition to the *what* and *how* of knowing, there are great whys. These kinds of questions the scientists typically left to the philosophers and theologians—at least until quantum physics ran into its materialist limits. In the modern West, science has been committed to physical,

evidence-based understanding, measuring, weighing, and objectifying. Materialist science presumed that the observer stood outside the system being observed and could therefore be objective about the object being observed. Quantum physics has shown that the observer participates in and affects the process, and thus even the nature of what is known. Even so, the objective observer and objectification itself persist as the basis of scientific belief.

Philosophy, on the other hand, is founded in human experience and the reflective capacity to provide perspective on that experience. Since Rudolf Steiner was interested in both science and philosophy, he naturally gravitated to the writings of J.W. von Goethe, the German scientist, artist, poet and playwright of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his twenties, Steiner served as editor of Goethe's voluminous natural scientific writings and Goethe's approach and findings became an essential and important and influence for him. Steiner understood Goethe from the inside, from the depths of Goethe's biography and artistic output to the profound insights of his scientific explorations. Goethe's work was driven by observation and cognized through his highly attuned intuition. To give one example, for Goethe, color was a bridge between science and art, between the origins of color in light and optics and its meaning as a language of soul in painting. Goethe understood science phenomenologically, as a confluence of observation, the observer and the observed—a precursor to quantum science. Goethe also understood that all "things" in nature are in constant metamorphosis, a view that is central to the theory of knowledge at the core of spiritual science.

This meditative and methodical way of knowing informs all of Rudolf Steiner's writings and lectures. Toward the end of World War I (1914—1918), Steiner recognized the tremendous need for healing and cultural renewal and was asked by practitioners to apply his anthroposophical esoteric research in service to those working in professional

fields, including education, agriculture, medicine and allied therapeutic fields, natural science, and the full range of arts.

His insights into human development, for example, were applied in the approach to education in the Waldorf school not only in the shape of the curriculum but also in how teachers were engaged in the process of self-transformation. This process of inner development would inspire each rising generation to know themselves as they came to know the world in order to be at home in it, and to be of service to humanity regardless of their chosen paths. In many ways, this profound connection between inner and outer knowledge, between the esoteric and the exoteric is central to the work of the farmer, the doctor, the artist, and in fact, to anyone. In the wisdom of the human (anthroposophy) lies a path to spiritual knowing. It is a path of insight that moves beyond the convention, even the paradigm, of materialist thinking that was so prevalent in and central to the industrial, machine-centered world of Steiner's time and remains elusively so in the current age of electronic technology.

One practical way to understand a connection between the material and the spiritual is to contemplate the following statement: Every manufactured object is materialized thought. On one hand, one could say that this is a bit absurd. On the other, how does such an object come into being? Someone has to have an idea of it. Such intelligence is spiritual; it has no physical substance. One could even ask: Where do ideas come from? We know that there are numerous chemical and physiological actions involved in the process of ideation. These can and have been measured to some degree. They are markers of process but provide no sense of what an actual thought might be. To describe and value thought as a neurological process is a conventional view, one with a bias toward physical and measurable reality—as if thought were manufactured. For the one with the thought, such a conventional bias is counter to the direct and real experience of the thought itself. Such a bias inherently relegates a path of knowledge that leads through thinking to ever-deepening and widening understanding of the spiritual

world itself to a less regarded status, though such knowledge could help us see the reality of culture and the economy anew.

What we call ideas are in many ways the lowest hanging fruit of the spiritual world. To enter into that world beyond having ideas requires commitment, preparation, discipline, time, and guidance. Without the practice that these factors support, it is difficult to discern the meaning of and make judgments about what someone might say about the spiritual world. There is ample room for misunderstanding and manipulation of such knowledge. This is one of the reasons that Rudolf Steiner made it very clear that moral development is a necessary prerequisite for any working in spiritual development. It is also one of the reasons that he insisted that Anthroposophy is not a belief system as religions typically are. It is science. Much as is conventional science, it is a process of observation, hypothesis, testing, and reflection in ever-evolving stages. Contemplative experience and what emerges from that contemplation can serve as indicator and guide, a kind of moral compass.

Most of what we know of the world comes through our senses. Knowing about our knowing, however, comes from beyond such faculties—what Rudolf Steiner called the moral realm of imagination, inspiration, and intuition. Navigating in that world requires both the letting go of ordinary knowing and a discipline of being in a world in which no preconceived notion, language, or fixed memory—in short, no earthly knowledge—will serve.

It is also really important to understand that as you move through this compendium of Rudolf Steiner's thinking about the many dimensions of technology, conventional materialist thinking, or the degree to which our thinking has been conditioned to be materialistic, will be challenged. Within that challenge, consider that the expansiveness and comprehensive assumptions living within what Rudolf Steiner put forth constitute an opportunity to let his words speak without conditioned filters. In the end, you may return to your keyboard and continue

working, but I can promise you that the world of electronic-based technology will not feel the same.

Just as we can see that a manufactured object is the materialization of thought, we can come to see that technology is further iteration of that same process. It is a gift to humanity. And, through this compendium, we will also be far more informed about how to receive the gift we have created through human genius, and to understand how it has also been developed in partnership with spiritual beings who came before us, live with us, and who have intentions for us. Some of those intentions may not coincide with our own or serve the highest purpose of human spiritual development. Some technologies will reinforce the materialist imperative from which they emerged. One result of this imperative is a kind of binding dependency that is counter to the moral-spiritual development at the heart of Anthroposophy. With an evolution in moral consciousness, some technologies may instead serve to free the human spirit in its fullness of thought, feeling, and actions. If this compendium contributes to that deepened understanding, much will have been gained in making us aware of our own beneficial agency in relation to technology, morality, and service in the liberation of consciousness for a more human future.

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