

How We Make Sense of the World

A Study in Rudolf Steiner's Epistemological Work

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Editor's Note. *This document was complete, but unproofed and unpublished, at the time of Professor Brady's death. It was intended as an introduction to a collection of epistemological writings by the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner. The introduction focuses on Truth and Knowledge (Wahrheit und Wissenschaft, also published in English as Truth and Science), which was a slightly expanded version of Steiner's doctoral thesis. However, Brady also refers to Steiner's other main epistemological works: A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception (Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung), which grew out of Steiner's role in editing Goethe's scientific works; and The Philosophy of Freedom (Philosophie der Freiheit).*

Here we present Brady's introduction in the form in which he left it. Only minor copy edits have been made to the text – and then only where the author's intentions were evident. In his quotations from Truth and Knowledge, Brady often modifies the text rather freely by offering his own translation.

Readers unfamiliar with the history of European philosophy may wish to begin reading at the section entitled "Truth and Knowledge," beginning on page 3.

A Theory of Knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) was central to Rudolf Steiner's thought. By a theory of knowledge, however, Steiner meant to indicate an approach closely related to what is now termed phenomenology and thus quite distinct from the usual import of epistemology. This volume was constructed to explain these points, and their effect on the various projects of scientific methodology, ethics, and aesthetics that come out of Steiner's writings.

Historical Background

Philosophy in Germany during the second half of the nineteenth century was broadly identified with the theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*). Natural science had overwhelmed all resistance, and since science was now the repository of all firm knowledge, the study of the sciences seemed to many the only task left, whether this was carried out in the guise of scientific epistemology or experimental psychology. But if science were the mode of knowing, then epistemology could only be a justification of the natural sciences, and would implicitly maintain their naturalistic viewpoint — that is, it would

assume that all objects of knowledge are to be known according to the manner in which external nature is known, and would take the science of the day to be methodologically correct. Thus, prior to all investigation, this epistemology will rest on assumptions that prefigure the nature of the object of knowledge, and for that matter, the nature of the knowing subject. The dogmatism of such a position could only be recommended by someone already convinced of its authenticity.

The assumption that all modes of being could be reduced to something analogous to objects of external nature was challenged in German philosophy at the turn of the century by two students of Franz Brentano: Rudolf Steiner and Edmund Husserl. Husserl is the better known figure, and his 1900 *Logical Investigations (Logische Untersuchungen)* begins the critique of naturalism known as phenomenology, developing an argument that the naturalistic experience of the world is but one of the guises in which being appears. The method of phenomenology, according to Husserl, provided a means to investigate these varieties of experience. A little earlier William James had developed his notion of “radical empiricism,” which bears certain similarities to the work of Husserl and Steiner. James was actually in communication with the former, and there could have been a cross-fertilization of ideas, although James does not appear to recognize the role of intentionality.

Steiner had developed his own critique of naturalism a few years earlier in his study of Goethe’s method: *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception (Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung)*, 1886; his dissertation: *Truth and Knowledge (Wahrheit und Wissenschaft)*, 1892; and *The Philosophy of Freedom (Philosophie der Freiheit)*, 1894. These works did not produce a new name or terminology, but like Husserl’s later attack, attempted to change the meaning of *Erkenntnistheorie*.

Historically one can view both figures as part of the development of German epistemological reflection that moves from Kant through Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. They also share a more immediate background. While there is no record that Husserl and Steiner ever met during their studies with Brentano in Vienna, it seems obvious that their philosophic concerns are related to those of Brentano, who must be given credit for focusing philosophic attention upon mental phenomena, and turning toward the act of thinking rather than the results. Both Husserl and Steiner share this turn. Husserl describes phenomenology as the study of consciousness through reflection, or the “self-awareness” (*Selbst-besinnung*) of cognitive life. The goal of Steiner’s dissertation was to allow “consciousness to come to terms with itself,” and his method, as described in the later *Philosophy of Freedom*, was “introspective (*seelische*) observation.” Like Husserl, he found that such self-consciousness provided a means to investigate the dimensions of experience, extending knowledge beyond the limits of naturalism. Steiner had other sources, as a reading of his autobiography will testify, but his debt to Brentano may be estimated from his memoir on his old professor in *Riddles of the Soul (Von Seelenratseln)*, published in 1917.

The parallels that seem to exist between Husserl and Steiner, however, spring from a common starting point (their examination of mental or *intentional* activity) rather than the manner in which they develop their later thought. In that development they differ widely, although each continues toward an extensive critique of western modes of conceptualization.

Goethe’s methodology determines the shape of Steiner’s early epistemological work, but the poet never examined intentionality itself. I have chosen to begin with Steiner’s doctoral dissertation, which he credited with demonstrating that his thought “rests upon its own foundation, and need not be derived from Goethe’s world-view.”

Truth and Knowledge (Wahrheit und Wissenschaft)

The dissertation was published when Steiner was thirty-one, but accepted for his degree a few years earlier. The dissertation director noted that it was not the “expected” production, but was of such an “unusual nature” that it could still be accepted. The dissertation, a “Prolegomena to the reconciliation of philosophic consciousness with itself,” was so narrowly focused on the self-grasp of thinking in the central chapters that some readers may have difficulty finding the context of Steiner’s sentences. Of course, the editor has the advantage of hindsight created by knowledge of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, where the continuous commentary on related and opposing views aids the reader to see how Steiner would respond to the various positions of his day. In the dissertation the problem is presented against a background of neo-Kantian thought, but without the running commentary of the later work, and the middle chapters preserve a sense of discovery that is missing in the masterly treatment of the later *Philosophy*. We begin therefore with the published version of the dissertation, the subtitle of which reads, “Prelude to a Philosophy of Freedom.”

However radical a break Steiner meant to make with the thought of his day, he had to couch his argument in terms of that very thought, especially in a dissertation. The first sentence of the 1891 preface reads: “Present day philosophy suffers from an unhealthy faith in Kant.” That faith will be criticized in chapter one, the development of epistemology since Kant in chapter two. Both chapters are structured by the problematic put forth in the earlier section titled “Preliminary Remarks.” The section begins:

Epistemology is the scientific study of what all other sciences presuppose without examining it: cognition itself. It is thus a philosophical science, fundamental to all other sciences. Only through epistemology can we learn the value and significance of all insight gained through the other sciences. Thus it provides the foundation for all scientific effort. It is obvious that it can fulfill its proper function only by making no presuppositions itself, as far as this is possible, about man’s faculty of knowledge. This much is generally accepted. Nevertheless, when the better-known systems of epistemology are more closely examined it becomes apparent that a whole series of presuppositions are made at the beginning, which cast doubt on the rest of the argument. It is striking that such hidden assumptions are usually made at the outset, when the fundamental problems of epistemology are formulated. But if the essential problems of a science are misstated, the right solution is unlikely to be forthcoming. The history of science shows that whole epochs have suffered from innumerable mistakes that can be traced to the simple fact that certain problems were wrongly formulated ... (pp. 27-8)

The germ of Steiner’s approach is already implicit in his remarks on the erroneous formulations of epistemology. Obviously, the premises with which we begin an examination should not be identical with the conclusions that result from that same investigation, or the process is circular. Thus, if the question is: “how can we know the world?” or “how does the act of cognition take place?” we cannot begin with the very “knowledge” that this investigation should justify, or we investigate no more than the logical implications of our presuppositions. Epistemology, Steiner concludes, cannot begin from any positive knowledge of the world, but must suspend all such “knowing” in order to examine the act of knowing itself. The point is simple, but almost always ignored, due to the seeming impossibility of carrying out such a task. How can we begin without some knowledge of the world? How can the question be formulated without knowing the parameters that comprise the problem? But if we do begin from such “knowledge” our epistemology will necessarily validate present sciences, and deny the

possibility of any other form of science.

Most modern approaches, for example, take their starting-point from the apparent distinction between the thinking subject and the world external to that subject, and thus formulate epistemology after a Cartesian or Neo-Kantian framework. In this formulation, which we may term after Kant the “transcendental” formulation, the basic question of epistemology becomes: “what is the relation of thinking to being?” or “what is the relation of subjective consciousness to external or objective reality?” These questions arise from the assumed separation of the two — that is, thinking attempts to know the world of objective reality, which world is itself totally independent of thinking. In such a formulation, however, we already know something of that world (such as its difference from thinking), and the problem is created by what we know — that is, the distance between the thinking and its object.

Against this Steiner will propose that since we cannot take the results of previous cognition for granted when we attempt to grasp cognition itself, another formulation of the problem is necessary. If we simply propose that knowledge is immanent in human consciousness (if it is not, then we are not speaking about anything), the basic question of epistemology could be simply: How? What is the act of knowing? Thus we face toward our own act of cognition, and the investigation turns on the *self-observation of thinking* — finding a way to watch what we do — rather than a presupposed knowledge of the world. This “immanent” position (termed “monistic” in *The Philosophy of Freedom*) will be presented in chapters four and five, but before it can be advanced, current forms of “transcendental” epistemology (termed “dualistic” in the *Philosophy*) must be rejected. (“Immanent” and “transcendent” are used in Steiner’s early commentaries on Goethe’s science.)

Having announced his problem, Steiner will spend the first three chapters clearing the field — showing that those formulations accepted in his day all begin from a presumed but questionable knowledge of the world.

Chapter one is titled, “Kant’s Basic Epistemological Question,” which question Steiner identifies as: “How are synthetic judgments possible *a priori*?” Synthetic judgments, according to Kant, are those through which the predicate adds something new to the object — as opposed to analytic judgments, in which the predicate simply makes explicit something already contained in the object. (For instance, “your deafness is caused by a torn eardrum” is a reasonable diagnosis for the doctor to make, and it is synthetic, since it connects something new to the fact of deafness. On the other hand, should the doctor say that “Your deafness is due to an impairment of your hearing,” you would do well to ask for your money back, since by analytic judgment you know that deafness is an impairment of hearing, and the doctor is not telling anything more than “you are deaf because you are deaf.” If the doctor is to be worth his fee, he must make a synthetic judgment, explaining the symptom by connecting something new to it — that is, a cause.)

Because David Hume had shown that a judgment of causal relation, a prime example of synthetic judgment, cannot rest on sensible evidence alone, Kant became interested in how synthetic judgments were made. He decided that they must derive from the action of the mind rather than the evidence of the senses. If the mind must add something to the evidence of the senses in order to formulate a causal judgment, he reasoned, this addition must have the form of a presupposition assumed prior to the evidence. Thus his question, when he sets about to investigate the process of cognition, becomes “how are synthetic judgments possible *a priori*” (prior to all experience).

Steiner spends the first chapter examining Kant’s question, and argues that it is more conclusion than question. Given that a synthetic judgment differs from an analytic one through a different activity of the mind, and even allowing that here the mind appears to add something to the evidence of the senses, it still does not follow that this contribution must take the form of an *a priori* contribution. Since Kant has assumed that our categories are preformed in our faculty of judgment, he must also assume that experience can neither supply these categories nor support the same — that is, we add the categories due to our nature, not the nature of the experience we encounter. Steiner argues that at the

outset it is unclear whether the mind fits all experience into *a priori* categories, or creates them in response to the determinations of experience.

Obviously a direct investigation of mental activity is in order, but Kant does not investigate this activity directly, preferring instead to work out a schematic of the structure of the mind on the assumption that the mind contains *a priori* categories. Thus Kant did not speak to the project of epistemology proposed by Steiner.

Steiner's second chapter is given to "Epistemology Since Kant," and deals mainly with the assumption that all our experience consists of "representations" (*Vorstellungen*) of reality rather than reality itself. Given the number of references in this chapter, it seems clear that the major epistemological discussion of his day was put forward within this framework. The line of reasoning, which is derivative from Kant, takes on a somewhat crude form in those given to scientific thought. The general argument in these quarters would run: The world as we immediately experience it seems to be the world of ultimate reality to the "naïve realist" (the individual who makes no question of his perceptions), when in actuality experience is but the form in which our senses represent that reality. Thus Steiner quotes Eduard von Hartmann summing up the position:

The content of consciousness consists fundamentally of the sensations that are the soul's reflex response to processes of movement in the uppermost part of the brain, and these have not the slightest resemblance to the molecular movements that called them into being. (p. 44)

Although the term "soul" would no longer be used, forms of this argument still abound in experimental psychology and cognitive science. Steiner's complaint fits them just as well as it fit von Hartmann's version.

At stake in this account is the nature of the immediate experience. If we already know that the subject is so separated from the "real" objects that he or she does not perceive these "in themselves" but must construct "representations" of them, then it must follow that because the human perceiver has either added to or substituted for the actual objects, the representations cannot be identical to the originals. For those who begin from this "truth," as von Hartmann would have us do, the reality of the world is never apparent — we are always looking at our own creations and attempting to infer from these how the things-in-themselves were prior to our constructive activity.

Such lines of argument all begin from the established world-view of the natural sciences, and therefore from "knowledge" of perception and mind that is relatively advanced. In such accounts the nature of perception and the relation of consciousness to the external world are presumed known, for nature is already an object of scientific understanding. There are two objections to consider. The first and most important would be that such claims are already too rich for an epistemological starting point. Where is the presupposition of correct knowledge investigated? Where do we find a justification of the use of such notions as "brain," "molecular movements," and "representations"? How is it that we already know that the problem should be cast in these terms? Obviously, any account of cognition that was able to begin without dependence on these presumptions could easily bring them into question, and thus their weakness becomes apparent. Writers who begin here already know too much.

Secondly, were the origin of these presuppositions to be investigated it would seem that the line of argument is contradictory. We come by the brain and its representations of molecular movements by an investigation of the perceptual anatomy of the human being. This investigation takes some elements of immediate experience — that is, the brain and nerves — to be a correct picture of the world, yet it still calls the objects of experience "representations." One wants to object that they cannot have it both ways. Either the perceived objects are representations of reality rather than reality itself, or this is not the case, but we cannot suppose that the interactions of the brain and nerves, themselves but

representations, create all representations including — of necessity — the brain and nerves.

Again, if at any point in the chain of perception a received impression “has not the slightest resemblance” to its source, then the naïve realism which supposes something to be real because it is perceived is called into question, and we certainly cannot begin an epistemology with these references. As any examination of epistemological positions will show, however, such presuppositions almost always begin the discussion. In the argument that follows, however, Steiner will depart from the tradition of epistemology since Kant by formulating the problem of cognition without any dependence upon an assumed knowledge of the world.

Or, for that matter, an assumed knowledge of cognition. One of the immediate signs that we are departing into new ground is the following discussion on naïveté of thinking:

The subjectivism outlined above is based on *the use of thinking* for elaborating certain facts. This presupposes that, starting from certain facts, a correct conclusion can be obtained through logical thinking (logical combination of particular observations). But the *justification* for using thinking in this way is not examined by this philosophical approach. This is its weakness. While naïve realism begins by assuming that the content of perceptual experience has objective reality without examining if this is so, the standpoint just characterized sets out from the equally uncritical conviction that thinking can be used to arrive at scientifically valid conclusions. In contrast to naïve realism, this view could be called naïve rationalism. (p. 47)

Such naïveté, Steiner argues, can be overcome only by a grasp of the laws inherent in the operations of cognition, a knowledge that he obviously does not find in the epistemology of his day. The chapter concludes:

Epistemology can only be a critical science. Its object is an eminently subjective activity of man: cognition, and it seeks to demonstrate the laws inherent in cognition. Thus all naïveté must be excluded from this science. Its strength must lie in doing precisely what many thinkers, inclined more toward practical action, pride themselves that they have never done: namely, “thinking about thinking.” (pp. 48-9)

(The last phrase is a Goethe reference, since the poet once remarked that he had been clever, and avoided “thinking about thinking.” Steiner’s use of the quote here performs a double duty. Given his admiration for Goethe’s work, it assures the reader of the possible worth of naïve effort. But it also severs the present work from any dependence on Goethe, a point that Steiner mentioned in his preface.)

In the next chapter Steiner will begin an examination of the operations of cognition that attempts to avoid all forms of naïveté. Readers already familiar with Husserl may, in the following section, find the contrast between the philosophers quite surprising, for Husserl’s approach has naturally defined the problem for them and Steiner may seem to bear no resemblance at all. But of course Steiner cannot make use of the specialized terminology developed in Husserl’s later efforts. He lays down his own road, and the reader must make the same journey to understand his conclusion. Reference to a second framework — that is, Husserl — will become instructive only after each is approached independently.

The Starting Point of Epistemology

This chapter returns to the notion of a “starting point,” with the intention of providing one that does not presuppose what it cannot defend. That the premises of most contemporary *Erkenntnistheorie* cannot be defended has been his point so far, and of course, since critique can hardly fault a subtraction of premises, it would seem that Steiner’s preliminary tactic is self-justifying. But the real target of Steiner’s criticism may not be visible to the reader until his proposed “starting point” is worked through.

It would appear, for example, that we generate thought in order to apply it to the phenomena of our experience, which appearances meet us prior to thought. The assumption that thought is an element added to the phenomenal world — in an effort to create an ideal replication — is ubiquitous in most fields, and leads to a demand that epistemology provide criteria by which to judge the accuracy of the replication. Thus the *problem of knowledge* is created by the assurance that thought is *in here*, reflecting or replicating a world *out there*, and this is the “knowledge” that Steiner is actually discarding, although the candid reader will notice that it is so ingrained in our mental habits as to seem almost undiscardable.

A few notes before we read the chapter. The term most often translated by “cognition” is *erkennen*, which can be translated as knowing, recognizing, perceiving, apprehending, discerning, distinguishing. The noun *Erkenntnis* is best translated as knowledge or understanding. Thus the movement of mind toward comprehension is the basic indication, and I have used *cognition* in this general sense. By *knowledge* and *cognition* Steiner means the accurate grasp of some reality in the world, so the *problem of knowledge* deals with knowledge of the world — not with a grasp of our own thought, which grasp Steiner takes to be unproblematic. This is a fundamental point in his argument. Just because we can grasp our own acts of meaning (or our own intentions, in the language of phenomenology), Steiner contends, it is possible to reconstruct the way our knowledge of the world actually comes about — that is, the way the mind “wakes up” to the world. But this investigation of how our own mental activity creates knowledge cannot be formulated as an engineering problem, for it is not based on a relation between naturalistic objects.

Most readers are quite familiar with naturalistic formulations. For example, we ask: given a physical world, how does the physical human being come to understand it? — or given the impulses of the senses, how do we come to understand their source? — or given our representations, how can we infer the reality behind them? ... etc. We might call this the “problem solving” formulation since that mode of thought begins from known and therefore determinate entities, and investigates what follows from these determinations.

Upon reflection, this is the sort of description a third party might make of our cognition, as long as this being was not describing its own form of cognition. After all, the problem-solving approach takes its own knowledge of the parameters of the problem for granted. When one cannot do this however, when by the *problem of knowledge* we mean to address the problem of our own knowing, we cannot do this from outside.

Thus the investigation of our own cognition, *for us*, cannot begin with what is already known about the world, for that begs the question. Instead of beginning with what we “know” of the world, a theory of cognition must discover what *knowing* is: how our cognitive activity comes to know anything in the first place. We already appear to understand something of the world, but we can comprehend this understanding only by thinking back along the paths by which it came to be. Obviously, if we do not know how our cognition was formed, we do not know its value.

Can the problem be investigated in this manner? As Steiner suggested in his “Preliminary

Remarks” quoted above, an inquiry is useful only to the degree that its question is properly formulated. But since his own formulation will discard presuppositions normally taken as integral to the problem, one of the first questions that will occur to his readers is whether, after subtracting so much, he can still define a problem. This is a useful response. Let me explain.

Consider how there can be a problem of knowledge at all, and what elements must be retained to retain the problem. At this junction we should notice that implicit within all forms of epistemology is the assurance that (1) we have a grasp of our own thinking — that is, we know what we mean, and (2) when our thinking activity begins, it does not do so in a vacuum, but responds to something other than itself, to something *given* that our thinking attempts to grasp. (Recall that in Steiner’s text *knowledge* and *cognition* always refer to a grasp of the *other-than-thinking*.) There is a *problem* of knowledge just because we are unclear about how thinking can comprehend the *other*, and this recognition of the *other-than-thinking* is fundamental, although often in a confused form.

I say “confused” because we are usually very unclear about how this recognition came about, and due to this many unjustified assumptions are usually attached to the basic insight. We rarely comprehend, for example, that only our own cognitive activity and something *other* than that activity are necessary to structure the problem. Instead, usual habits of thought suppose that if we know *that* something other than thinking is given to thinking we must possess some grasp of *what* this other may be. But the two relations are different, and the second is not contained in the first.

After all, there could be no problem for cognition if an other was not given to it, but there would still be nothing for cognition to do if the *what* of the other were also given rather than left for cognition to determine. Thus the naïve insistence that there must be something “out there” confuses our assurance that we must be dealing with an other with an assumption of what the other must be — the “out there,” representing the mode of understanding applied to external objects in the world characterized by “common sense.” But as we see, this naturalism is not basic to the problem any more than the mere impression that there is an *other-than-thinking* can specify what kind of *other* it may be. (Once we come to see clearly how this impression of an *other-than-thinking* is actually given to us, we could discard any tendency to suppose that the *what* must be given with it, but that step can only be taken later, when our orientation permits us to do so.)

Steiner’s epistemological argument will occupy two chapters. Chapter four, which seeks the “departure point” for a theory of knowledge, advances by reconstructing intelligible recognition, or in the ordinary meaning of the term, *perception*. The chapter is divided in two “steps.”

The first seeks for determining factors that we may take as original — that is, factors that will create and structure the problem. Steiner does this by reconstructing the act of knowing, beginning with those conditions actually *given* to the cognitive act *as it begins*. Obviously these conditions are crucial, for our activity will respond to them. But this simple question immediately puts the investigation on unusual ground. The first act of cognition appears to be recognition, even if this were only a recognition that *something was given*, but the conditions that meet our cognitive activity as it begins must lie prior to any recognition — or understanding — of the same. We can describe such conditions only by negation: by identifying and subtracting all those relations supplied by a recognition of the given. The result will be merely formal; the given just before thinking becomes active is utterly beyond any positive predication. It is everything that can be directly given without any relations yet established, thus for us everything is as yet unrecognized, and therefore unknown.

This firmly negative conclusion forces a new formulation of epistemology: as cognition begins, its first task is how to establish relations within a field (the given) where they are completely absent. Thus no reference to our subsequent “knowledge” of the world can be of any service here. These references would not be available, for us, when we face the virgin field of the given untouched by our activity.

If the given field is without enough determination to define what cognition shall do with it, we are forced to turn in a new direction. After all, our sense that the task above was the “first task” could not follow from the nature of the *other-than-thinking*, which is indeterminate, but *by the teleology of*

thinking itself. By direct examination of our own intentions in thinking we see that our effort to think demands an intelligible object of thinking: when we intend to think, we mean to take hold of something that is transparent to our activity. Actually, it is only this demand, made by our own cognitive activity, which now remains to define a problem. From it, we may determine that we must find a point in the given which is transparent to thinking if we are to recognize it at all.

Thus, due to the impossibility of deriving a determination from anything else, Steiner turns to the discovery of “intentional activity” as it will be called in phenomenology, and then allows this activity to postulate a starting point within the collective reference of “the given.” This starting point, however, cannot be further outlined in these notes but must be worked through.

The examination begins:

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, an epistemological investigation must begin by rejecting existing knowledge. Knowledge is something brought into existence by the human being — something that has arisen through human activity. If a theory of knowledge is really to explain the whole sphere of knowledge then it must start from something still quite untouched by the activity of thinking, and moreover, something that lends to this activity its first impulse. This starting point must lie outside the act of cognition, it must not itself be knowledge. But it must be sought immediately prior to cognition, so that the very next step the knower takes beyond it is the act of cognition. This absolute starting point must be determined in such a way that it admits nothing already derived from the act of knowing.

Notice that this starting point — outside cognition and therefore not knowledge — removes any resemblance between Steiner’s effort and the usual formulations of the problem of knowledge, based, as they are, on an assumed knowledge of the world. Even so, the fundamental outline of all epistemological formulations is already present; that is, given an “*other than thinking*,” how do we come to grasp it by thinking. But where the usual formulations depend upon reference to some sort of determinate structure in the given, Steiner takes another turn.

Only our immediately given world-image (*Weltbild*) can offer such a starting point, that is, that which lies before us prior to subjecting it to the process of cognition in any way, before we have asserted or decided anything about it by means of thinking. This “directly given” is what passes us by, and what we pass by, disconnected but still not divided into individual entities, in which nothing appears distinguished from, related to, or determined by anything else ... Before our conceptual activity begins, the world-picture contains neither substance, quality, nor cause and effect; distinction between matter and spirit, body and soul, do not yet exist. Furthermore any other predicates must be excluded at this stage. The picture can be considered neither as reality nor as appearance, neither subjective nor objective, neither as chance nor as necessity; whether it is a “thing-in-itself” or mere representation cannot be decided at this stage. As we have seen, a knowledge of physics or physiology which leads to a classification of the “given” under one or the other of the above headings cannot be the basis for a theory of knowledge. (pp. 51-52)

The rhetorical difficulty of the passage turns on the problem created by negations. The “not known” must be that which is not grasped by the marks of what is knowable — that is, intelligible. It is neither “here,” nor “not here,” but “passes by,” which characterization cannot be taken as a positive state. It is not connected, but contrary to the apparent implication, it is not divided. While it is called a world-image or picture, it would seem to picture nothing if nothing within it is distinguished from

anything else. The resulting referent lies beyond all positive assertions — all predicates.

Why describe by negation? Since we are speaking of our own cognition — of how the situation must be *for us* as we begin to think rather than for a third person who already knows — the strategy is a necessary one. Prior to any recognition on our part, the world cannot already possess, *for us*, what it will gain through that recognition. The description by negation is a way of identifying and subtracting all that belongs to cognition. This process removes all characterizations from the precognitive given except that it is *given* prior to cognition, and this is present to our first activity.

Of course, despite this very plain denial that any positive characterization can be advanced toward the given, a reader's search for an experiential example may produce an attempt to read the antecedent *given* as something recognizable. After all, we appear to experience the objects of our phenomenal world first and think about them second. If we accept this, then the given appearances are not without the listed qualities — that is, they are divided into individual entities, interrelated (spatially), mutually determined, constituting a clear image, etc. — all the qualities that we will recognize in the appearances after we have begun to think. But if this reading is an understandable mistake, it is still mistaken.

If the phenomenal world, with all its immediate intelligibility, appears to us without our cognitive effort, what need is there for such effort at all? What will recognition add? Presumably understanding — but the individual who clearly sees multiple objects in the room already understands that there are multiple objects in the room. Again we run foul of the logical necessity that the conditions that meet us before we recognize must be distinguishable from those that result from our recognition. What is the room like, *for us*, before we have grasped anything at all? Here we can find no relation to experience. The room exists, *for us*, only when we have *noticed* that it does.

Thus we may approach from another angle. Although we cannot speak of what the world is like before we have understood anything, we can speak of what a scene is like before we have had any recognition of a particular object in the scene. When a friend points out the object we are startled by a sudden recognition and exclaim, "Oh, but I never noticed it!" Of course, to "notice" in this example is to recognize, and implies a mental act by which we become conscious of an object. Thus we find again that any solution which models mental activity as an addition that simply replicates what is already apparent is not satisfactory as an analysis.

Nor is it a possible reading of the text. Returning to the above description, we see that the claim was not that nothing was thought about as distinguished from anything else, but nothing "appears distinguished." In a footnote to the last sentence above Steiner adds: "Differentiation of the undifferentiated given into individual entities is already a result of cognitive activity." The grammar is clear — it is the *given* that is said to be undifferentiated, and which must await cognitive activity in order to gain differentiation. Thus reference is not to thoughts about appearances but to the condition of appearances. The "immediately given *Weltbild*" cannot yet contain the relations by which we pick out individual entities or differentiate them (remember that unity is also a relation), and thus cannot be identical with the phenomenal world.

Since his original "given" is not the phenomenal world, Steiner immediately cautions the reader that he or she will not find it in experience.

If a being with a fully developed human intelligence were suddenly created out of nothing and then confronted with the world, the first impression on his senses and his thinking would be something like what I have just characterized as the unmediated given. In practice, we never encounter the given in this form — that is, there is never an experienced division between a pure, passive turning toward the given and the cognitive grasp of the given. (pp. 52-53)

We cannot experience such a state, nor could anyone else, for Steiner's thought experiment of sudden creation is advanced only to emphasize the point that "in practice ... there is never an experienced division" between the *given* and the cognitive grasp of the same. Because this is the case, Steiner recognizes that objections are bound to be raised, such as Eduard von Hartmann's argument that since we are not beings who perceive the world *de novo* but have a history, we must start from the world apparent to the consciousness of the investigator (in this case, a philosopher). But as we saw above, von Hartmann uses this argument to defend an acceptance of much of modern science. The argument confounds the obvious truth that we must start where we are with the obvious fallacy that the past conclusions embedded in "where we are" must be true. What von Hartmann offers is a sophisticated attempt to defend the "in here" versus "out there" structure of a problem-solving approach.

But since the whole point of his approach is to avoid this fallacy, Steiner will demand a method by which we may eliminate any "predicates mediated through cognition." Such predicates, he writes, "cannot be accepted uncritically but must be carefully removed from the unmediated given so that it can be considered free of anything produced through the process of cognition."

The division between the "given" and the "known" will not in fact coincide with any stage of human development; the boundary must be drawn artificially. But this can be done at every level of development so long as we draw the dividing line correctly between what confronts us free of all cognitive determinations, and what cognition subsequently makes of it. (p. 53)

Mindful of the objection that he has already used "a number of conceptual definitions," Steiner adds:

what we have extracted by means of thought does not characterize the directly given, nor define or express anything about it; what it does is to guide our attention to the dividing line where the starting point of cognition is to be found ... To remove ... all that has been contributed by cognition, and to establish a precognitive starting point, can only be done conceptually. But such concepts are not of value as knowledge; they have the purely negative function of removing from sight all that belongs to knowledge and of leading us to the point where knowledge begins. These considerations act as signposts pointing to where cognition first appears, but at this stage do not themselves form part of the act of cognition. (p. 54)

But notice that to negate "all that belongs to knowledge" we must have a notion of what knowledge is, and the investigation is obviously guided by our grasp of our own knowing. This is even more obviously the case in the next passage, where Steiner reformulates the Aristotelian argument that all error is cognitive in nature, and concludes that error can begin only as the cognitive process begins. The precognitive given does not contain errors (there are no errors of sense).

All error is also excluded from this starting point, for error can begin only with cognition, and therefore cannot arise before cognition sets in.

Only a theory of knowledge that starts from considerations of this kind can claim to observe this last principle. If the starting point is some object (or subject) to which a conceptual determination is attached, then the possibility of error is already present in the starting point, namely the determination itself. Justification of the determination will depend upon the laws inherent in the act of cognition but these laws can be discovered only in the course of the investigation. Error is only excluded when one says: I remove from my

world-picture all determinations arrived at through cognition and retain only what enters the horizon of my observation without activity on my part. When on principle I make no claim I also make no mistake.

Error, in relation to knowledge, can occur only within the act of cognition. Sense deceptions are not errors. That the moon upon rising appears larger than it does at its zenith is not an error but a fact governed by the laws of nature. A mistake in knowledge would occur only if, in using thinking to combine the given perceptions, we interpret this “larger” and “smaller” in an incorrect manner. This interpretation, however, lies within the act of cognition. (pp. 54-5)

(We should note, before commenting on the substance of this last argument, that it is a reply to a specific complaint — that is, that illusions are due to the senses — and therefore is cast on the conceptual level assumed by the complaint. Of course, to see the moon at all, and differentiate it from other objects so that it may seem, in terms of its contrast with those objects, “larger” than usual, is, in terms of Steiner’s analysis, already a complex cognitive act. But he points only at the appellation of error.)

The correction to the usual notion of “optical illusions” reveals a cognitive act where the popular notion of a “deception of the senses” misses it. Sense appearances are often said to be deceptive, but since they merely present and do not interpret, they cannot in themselves be erroneous. The case in point is that the moon looks larger on the horizon. This observation could only be mistaken if the moon did not in fact look larger on the horizon. I am mistaken, however, if I suppose that measurements, let us say in degrees of arc, of the width of the two appearances of the moon (on the horizon and at zenith) will show a discrepancy. Under certain conditions an optical distance or width will accurately foretell the measurements of the same. Under the conditions met in what is termed “optical illusion” this coordination between optical impression and measurement is lost. But such a situation represents an “illusion” — a mistake — only for the individual judge’s measurement by optical impression. His unrealistic expectations arise from the judgment he has made. They are no more an error of sense than the apparent bending of a stick that extends through the surface of water. I must add a false cognitive judgment — such as, the stick will be bent when I take it out of the water — to constitute an error. The *look* of something cannot be mistaken because it makes no judgment, but the judgment by which we connect further expectations to that appearance can easily err.

Moving on, Steiner now takes a final argumentative step in his rejection of the naturalistic formulation of epistemology, showing that the very categories that structure it — subject and object, consciousness and external world — are the products of thinking and cannot constitute a prior framework. The argument runs as follows.

Since before cognition begins the given field is *given* but not yet *understood*, the field contains only that which may be directly given — directly presented in some sense of the term. The relations inherent in the field are not apparent, for they wait upon the cognitive act to become so. (Of course, if all relations are missing, even “larger” and “smaller,” or difference in general, will not be present, and the field will not possess a “look.”) To gain a sense of what might be present in this field we may compile a list of what might be identified after the fact of cognition. With a nod to von Hartmann’s objection that the philosopher must begin where he or she is, Steiner suggests that everything we normally suppose to be found in consciousness can be included in the list, as long as we understand that as yet we have no judgments — no predications and thus no errors — attached to the list or to consciousness. (Such a list could only be compiled after the fact of cognition, but Steiner is demonstrating that even if we were correct in assuming that all these things were present, the usual structure of the problem would still not apply.)

This directly given content includes everything that enters our experience in the widest sense: sensations, perceptions, opinions, feelings, deeds, pictures of dreams and imaginations, representations, concepts and ideas.

Illusions and hallucinations too, at this stage are equal to the rest of the given, for their relation to other perceptions can be revealed only through observation based on cognition. (p. 56)

Illusions and hallucinations cannot yet be known to be such — “are equal to the rest of the given” — because their relation to other contents of the given can only be known “through observation based on thinking.” But once such a list is advanced, something less obvious emerges.

When epistemology starts from the assumption that all the elements just mentioned constitute the content of our consciousness, the following question immediately arises: How is it possible for us to go beyond our consciousness and recognize actual existence; where can the leap be made from subjectivity to the transsubjective?

When such an assumption is not made, the situation is different. Both consciousness and the representation of the “I” are, to begin with only parts of the directly given and the relationship of the latter to the two former must be discovered by means of cognition. Cognition is not to be defined in terms of consciousness, but vice versa: *both consciousness and the relation between subject and object in terms of cognition*. Since the “given” is originally without predicates, the question becomes how can it be determined at all: how can any start be made with cognition? (pp. 56-57 — italics mine)

In the second of these last two paragraphs Steiner reformulates the problem of knowledge from a “transcendental” frame to an “immanent” one. The first paragraph proceeds from the assumption that all such elements are to be found only within subjective consciousness, which assumption generates the problem of how we will pass beyond this consciousness and all its contents to that externality (the transsubjective): a problem which we all recognize. But *subjective* is “a predicate mediated by cognition,” and the *in here* and *out there* of consciousness and externality is not simply given: it is a relation, and as such, must be discovered by cognition. The inner-outer relation of subject and object is just not there before cognition, and thus it cannot be used to frame the situation when we begin to think, being itself a product of that thinking.

If no relations have been determined, and we have only the contents of the given field to work with, the first question for us cannot be “how can we move from the subjective to the transsubjective?” (we have not yet recognized these two categories) but how can we reach *any* determinations, including “subjective” and “transsubjective”? Stating this conclusion in a more direct manner, our problem becomes how to identify and relate the contents of the given field. (The “given field” may be identified as the “field of consciousness”, but since at this point consciousness cannot be supposed subjective, it is just the field in which the given is presented for thinking.)

Readers of William James will notice a similarity to his “methodological postulate” of a “pure experience,” which experience would be prior to any conceptual relations, including internal-external or subject-object. Unfortunately James’s inattention to the intentional function left him without a means to investigate the activity of cognition. Thus he never fully eliminates the popular prejudice that what is given before cognition is somehow more “concrete” than what cognition makes of it, a task which Steiner will complete in the next chapter.

Evidently any and all grounds for understanding the structure of the world can arise only from our operations with regard to this given field. Thus cognition can do nothing else but make its start from the field *as it is given*. Cognition must respond to a content that is, *for cognition*, totally indeterminate.

With this argument the first step draws to a close, and we should pause for reflection. At this junction the reader may feel that the above conclusion makes the problem impossible — if the *given* is indeterminate it may as well not be given; all we can do now is invent a world out of our own thinking. But that was the Kantian reaction, and it reveals hidden premises that must now be made to surface.

Let us examine our reaction more carefully. The impression that this task is impossible arises through the comparison of an undetermined given with our sense that thinking takes hold of the other through its intelligible determinations. Daily experience seems to illustrate this — after all, we grasp the world through determinations that are plainly “there” for our grasp. As I remarked above, when we think, we intend an object of thought that is transparent (intelligible) to our thinking. But if no such object is presented to us prior to our own act, how will that act find anything to grasp? How can cognition make any start without an intelligible object with which to begin? It is this response that sets up the question of step two: can cognition make a start without determinate phenomena? That it must and can do so is the demonstration of the second step.

We must find the bridge from the world as given to the world-picture that we build up through cognition. Here however, we meet with the following difficulty: As long as we merely stare passively at the given we will never find a point of attack where we can gain a foothold, and from where we can proceed with cognition. Somewhere in the given we must find a place where we can set to work ... (p. 57)

Our thinking, as noted above, usually proceeds by its grasp of determinations, and this would suggest that something determinate must be given to it if it is to respond. Such an expectation, however, arises from a grasp of the nature of thinking rather than any knowledge of the *other-than-thinking*, and here Steiner completes his turn from the usual starting point — the assumed nature of the world — to the *self-grasp of thinking*, and thus to what I have termed the discovery of intentionality.

Somewhere in the given we must find a place where we can set to work, where something exists which is akin to cognition ... real cognition depends on finding a sphere somewhere in the given where our cognizing activity does not merely presuppose something given, but finds itself active in the very essence of the given. In other words, precisely through strict adherence to the given as merely given it must become apparent that not everything in the given fits this description. The prerequisite we set up must be such that through strict adherence it cancels itself. We set it up not to pose an arbitrary starting point but to find the actual one. The given, in our sense of the term, can include that which in its most inward nature is not-given. The latter would appear, to begin with, as *formally* part of the given, but on closer scrutiny would reveal its own nature out of itself. (pp. 57-8)

[*Editor's Note: The following text, up to the section entitled “First Interruption: The Concept of Intentionality,” makes for difficult reading, because crucial elements for understanding are not yet provided. The difficulty is partly what necessitates the “First Interruption” and the “Memory” sections below. After those two sections, Brady recapitulates (in “Return: Chapter Five”) much of the same material by Steiner that he covers here, but in a more accessible manner. The reader may wish to jump now directly to those two later sections — and perhaps even read the recapitulation — then return to pick up the journey here.]*

The qualification above that “real cognition depends on finding a sphere somewhere in the given where our cognizing activity ... finds itself active in the very essence of the given” is now quite recognizable. It was the basis of the expectation of intelligible objects mentioned above. That the given

lacks determinations is not problematic in itself, but this situation represents a difficulty when we attempt to *know* the given. When we assume this purpose (knowing) we have an idea of our goal, namely an object of thought which is transparent to thought; something “akin to cognition,” or directly intelligible. But consider what makes thought directly intelligible to our gaze.

The whole difficulty in understanding cognition comes from the fact that we ourselves do not create the content of the world. If we did this, cognition would not exist at all. I can only ask questions about something which is given to me. Something that I create myself I also determine myself, so that I need not ask for an explanation of it. (p. 58)

In the language of phenomenology what we “intend” (in the specific sense to be explained in the next chapter) is transparently clear to us, which is very close to *knowing what we mean*. It is just the clear understanding that ideas arise out of our own activity that makes us worry about whether they are just our own conventions or carry “transsubjective” applicability. In the present context, however, we do not have that particular problem, and the fact that our ideas are clear to us because we determine or *mean* them can now be used to define the felt problem.

Real cognition depends on finding a sphere somewhere in the given where our cognizing activity does not merely presuppose something given, but finds itself active in the very essence of the given ... This is the second step in our theory of knowledge. It consists in the postulate: In the sphere of the given there must be something in relation to which our activity does not hover in emptiness, but where the content of the world itself enters this activity. (p. 58)

The discussion that follows introduces a new consideration:

Just as we specified that the starting point of a theory of knowledge must precede all cognition so that preconceptions could not cloud our cognitive activity, so now we specify the next step so that there can be no question of error or incorrect judgment. For this step prejudices nothing, but simply specifies what conditions must obtain if knowledge is to arise at all. It is essential that through critical reflection we become fully conscious of the fact that it is we who postulate what characteristic feature must be possessed by that part of the world-content with which our cognitive activity can make a start.

This, in fact, is the only thing we can do. The world-content as given is completely undetermined. No part of it of its own accord can provide the occasion for setting it up as the starting point to bring order out of chaos. The activity of thinking must therefore issue a decree and declare what characteristics such a part must manifest. Such a decree in no way infringes upon the qualities of the given. It does not introduce any arbitrary assumptions into epistemology. In fact, it asserts nothing about the given at all, but states only that if knowledge is to be explained, then we must look for some point in the given that has the characteristics described above. If such a region can be found, cognition can be explained, but not otherwise. Thus, while the given provides a general starting point for our account, our focus must now be narrowed to this particular point. (p. 59)

Of course, since the “postulate” follows from the nature of thinking and not that of the given, this demand is one that we give to ourselves. The activity of thinking can grasp only that which is like itself — that is, determined or meant by our own activity. But in this phrasing the notion that thinking “finds itself active in the very essence of the given” becomes “where the content of the world itself enters this

activity” — where the world is intelligible because it is *meant by us*. (See the discussion of intentionality in the next section.)

Following this intuited teleology we can sort out the list of possible given contents above.

Where, within the given, do we find something that is not merely given, but only given insofar as it is brought forth in the actual act of cognition?

It is essential to realize that this bringing-forth must also be immediately given. Deduction must not be necessary in order to recognize it. This at once indicates that sense impressions do not meet our requirements, for we cannot know directly but only indirectly that sense impressions do not occur without activity on our part; this we discover only by considering physical and physiological factors. But we know quite immediately that concepts and ideas arise only through cognitive activity and through this enter the sphere of the directly given. In this respect concepts and ideas do not deceive anyone. A hallucination may appear as something externally given but we would never take our concepts to be something given without our thinking activity. (pp. 59-60)

The conceptual framework by which we grasp an object of consciousness is our way of understanding that object — “the way it seems to me” — and we are never in the dark about this. We have direct intuition due to the fact that understanding entails our own activity: we feel ourselves actively *meaning* our understanding, and what we call “I” is always the identity actively meaning. This is why Steiner remarks, “this bringing-forth must also be immediately given.” Thus while we may not know whether our understanding is correct, we always know what it is because we know what we *mean*.

But of course our list of possible contents of the given field included concepts and ideas, elements that fit the postulate. In fact, sorted by the distinction of what we do and what we suffer, the given will present two forms of content: a content given passively, which is not intelligible in itself, and a content which, while formally part of the given, is only *given* through our own intending activity. This latter element, in which our activity “finds itself active in the very essence of the given,” Steiner names “concepts and ideas.”

It is a characteristic feature of the rest of the world-content that it must be *given* if we are to experience it; the only case in which the opposite occurs is that of concepts and ideas: *these we must bring forth if we are to experience them*. (p. 60)

The postulation that some part of the given must be immediately intelligible narrowed the examination to the part of the given produced by our own activity, namely, “concepts and ideas.” These are produced by our own activity, but, once produced, meet us as part of the given — that is, they are directly presented in some sense to our mental gaze — even if their relation to the rest of the given (which is given passively) is not yet clear. The point is immediately followed by an argument that ideas are in fact *present* to the mind:

Concepts and ideas alone are given to us in a form that is called *intellectual intuition* (*intellektuelle Anschauung*). Kant and the later philosophers who follow in his steps completely deny this ability to humans, because it is said that all thinking refers only to objects and does not itself produce anything. In intellectual intuition the content must be contained within the thought-form itself. But is this not precisely the case with pure concepts and ideas? (pp. 60-1)

“By concept,” begins the following parenthetical qualification that now interrupts the passage, “I mean a principle according to which the unconnected elements of perception are bound into a unity.” If we compare this to the earlier footnote, which reads: “Differentiation of the undifferentiated given into individual entities is already a result of cognitive activity,” Steiner’s remarks make the concept both something that may be experienced in itself, and the means by which we take notice of anything else. The latter point is illustrated with a brief reinterpretation of the Humean problem of causality, which was the occasion of an earlier disagreement with Kant.

One need only look at them [concepts and ideas] in the form which they possess while they are still free of all empirical content. If one wants to grasp the pure concept of causality, then one must not hold to a particular instance, nor even to the sum of instances, but only the concept itself. Causes and effects we must seek in the world, but we must produce *causality* as a thought-form before we can look for the relation in the world. If one wanted to cling to the Kantian dictum that concepts without perceptions are empty, one could not think of determining the “given” world through concepts. Let us imagine that two elements of the world, *a* and *b* are “given.” If I am to seek a relation between them I must do so with the help of a principle of definite content. I can only produce this through the act of cognition — I cannot take it from the objects as “given,” for their relation is to be determined with the aid of this same principle. Such a principle, by which we determine reality, belongs only to a purely conceptual sphere. (p. 61)

It has been obvious, since the work of David Hume, that apparent causal relations are the result of our way of seeing. But that does not prevent us from “seeing” them — from having the sense that we plainly saw the thrown rock break the glass. But of course the rock’s relation to the glass is not itself sensible, but conceptual. As Steiner remarks in his later *Philosophie der Freiheit*, however, the concept is present *before* we grasp the phenomenal result. Thus when we hear a noise in the forest we must conceive the noise to be an *effect* before we can find it incomplete without a *cause*, and only this conceptualization allows us to go in search of the latter (the cause). The activity of *looking for* portrayed here is the first stage of a description that will expand into the following chapter.

At the end of step two we have fastened on the concepts and ideas produced by our own activity as the starting point. But this necessitates that we advance conceptual intentions before the event of recognition, while the usual understanding of everyday thought is to suppose that the concept is somehow derived from the recognition. The results of the investigation, however, are as yet too condensed. We must now ask how these conceptual intentions relate to the other type of content in the given field — that is, the *other than thinking* that is passively given. It will be left to chapter five to show that from such a starting point the remaining activity of cognition can be successfully described.

Cognition and Reality

The first paragraphs of the new chapter appear even more condensed than the preceding arguments. “Concepts and ideas,” Steiner begins,

comprise part of the given, but at the same time lead beyond it. This makes it possible to determine the nature of the remaining activity of cognition. (p. 63)

They “lead beyond” because our activity of thinking can take hold at just this point. But the

required neutral description has left us with a field populated by two species of given: the “other than thinking,” which we cannot comprehend, and the products of thinking, which we can. A determination of the “remaining activity of cognition” will consist in establishing the proper relations within the given field, explaining how the other than thinking is to be grasped.

It may seem strange to refer to “concepts and ideas” in a given but unrelated condition, when we usually think of them in an applied situation — that is, a concept is a concept *of* something, and thus at least related to that thing. But since “things” are not recognized until they are conceptualized, the concept is treated in another manner here: “By concept I mean a principle by which the unconnected elements of perception are bound into a unity.” Obviously the phrase “unconnected elements” does not refer to individual pieces, for each of these would already possess a unity, but it refers to that content of the given field that shall become unified as the concept is applied. Thus, the concept must be produced before it can be applied. (This argument is expanded in the “Interruption” on intentionality below.)

Although Steiner has removed the distinction between objective and subjective from his starting point, the current prejudice that thinking must be merely subjective requires a specific argument to avoid this impression. Thus in the second paragraph Steiner warns that we must realize that the distinction just made between the two types of given content is “artificial” with respect to the given:

Through a postulate we have separated a particular part from the rest of the given content; this was done because it lies in the nature of cognition to start with just this part. Thus it was separated only to allow us to understand the act of cognition. In so doing we must be clear that we have artificially torn apart the unity of the world-content. We must realize that what we have separated has a necessary connection to that content irrespective of our postulate. (p. 63)

This is a new argument and one that can be particularly difficult for the unprepared reader to absorb. The point is that there must be a determinate relation between the *passively given* “other than thinking” and the *intentionally given*, which relation our investigation must discover. In order to do this Steiner must complete his description of intentional activity. The paragraph continues:

This provides the next step in the theory of knowledge; it must consist of restoring that unity which we tore apart in order to make knowledge possible. This restoration takes place in thinking of the world as given. Our thinking contemplation of the world brings about the actual union of the two parts of the world content: the part we survey as given on the horizon of our experience, and the part that has to be produced in the act of cognition before it also can be given. The act of cognition is the synthesis of these two elements. Indeed, in every single act of cognition, one part appears as something produced in this act itself, and it is brought by the same act to the merely given. (pp. 63-64)

Thus the “*idea of cognition*” makes its first appearance, and we enter step three. The activity of cognition now appears to be the mediation of one content by another — that is, when presented with a passively given content, cognition cannot proceed unless it produces a contribution of its own in order to mediate (or recognize) the former. Knowledge — or consciousness, which always implies some form of knowledge — must arise from this mediation, Steiner concludes, if it is to arise at all. But as the previous chapter established, the demand for this mediation comes from the particular nature of thinking:

To permeate the “given” world with concepts and ideas is a *thinking* contemplation of things. Thus thinking is actually the act through which knowledge is mediated. Only when

thinking, out of itself, orders the content of the world picture, can knowledge come about. Thinking itself is an activity that brings forth a content of its own in the moment of knowing. Insofar as the content that is cognized issues from thinking, it contains no problems for cognition. We have only to observe it: the very nature of what we observe is given to us directly. A description of thinking is also at the same time the science of thinking. Logic too has always been a description of thought forms, never a science that demonstrates anything. Demonstrative evidence is only called for when the content of thought is synthesized with some other content of the world ... with thinking, all demonstration [that is, providing evidence] ceases, for demonstration presupposes thinking. One may be able to demonstrate a particular fact, but no one is able to demonstrate the validity of demonstration. We can only describe what demonstration is. In logic all theory is empiricism — in this science there is only observation. (pp. 64-5)

In the preceding chapter Steiner had remarked that we are given the concept (by our own act) in such a manner that “the content is contained within the thought form itself.” This is why he had to insist that the content given (intended) by thinking was the content with which thinking could make a start, where, that is, thinking “finds itself active in the very essence of the given.” The term “observation” in the passage above appears to refer to this grasp of thought by thinking, the former being transparent to the latter.

But this “start” was a beginning of a knowledge of the other-than-thinking, and so now Steiner must extend his description to that part, completing the idea of cognition:

But when we want to know something other than thinking, we can do so only with the help of thinking — that is, thinking has to approach something given and transform its chaotic relationship with the world picture into a systematic one. Thinking therefore approaches the given content as an organizing principle. The process takes place as follows: Thinking first lifts out certain entities from the totality of the world-whole. In the given there is actually no singularity, for all is continuously blended. Then thinking relates these separate entities to each other in accordance with the thought-forms it produces, and lastly determines the outcome of this relationship. When thinking restores a relationship between two separate sections of the world-content, it does not do so arbitrarily. Thinking waits for what comes to light of its own accord as a result of restoring the relationship. It is this result alone which is knowledge of that particular section of the world content. If the latter were unable to express anything about itself through that relationship, then this attempt made by thinking would fail, and one would have to try again. All knowledge depends on establishing a correct relationship between two or more elements of reality, and comprehending the result of this. (p. 65)

Most readers will have noticed the unusual nature of this account. This is the direct investigation of mental activity that Kant failed to make, and it has, as Steiner’s first chapter intimated, radically changed the problem of knowledge.

First Interruption: The Concept of Intentionality

At this point there are so many potential difficulties with Steiner's mode of expression that certain aspects of the argument probably need historical expansion. Steiner is working within a tradition of German thought which allows him to assume some familiarity with the work of Kant and his successors, in particular, that of Fichte, which he will review in chapter six. It was Fichte who called attention to the element of will in "the action of intelligence." He pointed out that in order to perceive a relation the mind had to entertain willfully that same relation — to "set it forth" (*setzen*) or, as it is usually translated, to "posit" it. Steiner speaks of the "bringing-forth" or "productive" (*hervorbringen*) activity of thinking in chapters four and five, but in chapter six he passes over into Fichte's language, and instead of *hervorbringen* he will utilize *setzen*, translating his argument into Fichte's terminology.

Such "positing" is not a statement in words, but an activity that precedes and prepares for all recognitions, and which may only be detected by inward inspection of perception. The long introspective descriptions of our willful activity within ordinary perceptual life of Johannes Müller's *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen* (1830) follow on his studies of Fichte's work, although von Müller changed the term "posit" to "intend" in order to avoid confusing the activity with verbal claims. (In an independent development Edmund Husserl would also use "intention" to name this activity. I will also adopt it, for in the present intellectual climate Steiner's "thinking" will be mistaken for "thinking in propositions.")

The description in the *Handbuch* is still one of the most accessible introductions to the subject. Reminding his reader of the nature of everyday experience, Müller points out that

if the attention is withdrawn from the senses but immersed in intellectual exercise, in speculation or deep passion, the soul completely disregards sensations. They are not noticed at all, they do not reach the consciousness of the ego ...

If this is so, then it follows that in order for sensation to reach consciousness, the attention that Müller has just described as "withdrawn" must be restored. Substituting "intention" for "attention" from time to time, Müller continues with examples of the manner in which we organize the reports of our senses according to how we approach them with our intentional activity:

When we are looking at a geometric figure we can successively focus on individual elements and ignore the rest without changing the visual axis ... The effect of intention is different with our hearing, which does not differentiate between spatial extensions like vision and tactile senses, but has the strongest perception of the sequence of impressions. It is amazing how we can pick out the weakest sounds. Usually we ignore the weak second accents of the strings and other instruments. With attention, we accentuate their perception ... Stranger yet is the capacity to hear each sound out of simultaneously-heard sounds of an orchestra by intention and to be able to follow the weakest sounds of an instrument attentively while the impression of others diminishes.

Another recognizable experience is the "double-take" alluded to above, in which the observer, through the failure of ordinary perception, becomes aware of his or her activity in making a correction. Of course, normal seeing is so successful that our activity is totally transparent to what we are looking

at and we do not notice it. But when our attempt to see fails, we are forced to look a second time to make sense of the situation. Now, after the fact, we become aware that we have been active in producing an experience: the first “take” becomes our “mis-take,” and if we were somehow responsible for it, we must also be responsible for the second, and correct, “take.” Such examples are part of everyday experience, but in themselves they only show that mental activity must contribute something if perception is to arise. Due to the short duration of the first “take,” however, it is difficult to examine how a “mediation” by the observer can unify the passively given. Thus we need better examples.

Let us examine, for our example, the effort needed to see the image or images hidden in the very grainy photograph in Figure 1, if one has never seen it before.



Figure 1

As we examine the photograph, we may see a rock (or a tortoise) in the lower right foreground, perhaps a bird or small animal sitting on it, some sort of dark object in the upper left which seems to extend toward us as it extends toward the middle of the field, some tree branches in the upper right — etc. But these images are seen only “suggestively,” like the cloud that Hamlet asks Polonius to see as a

camel, a weasel, and a whale, successively. They are not really recognizable objects, but only proposals that cannot be completely realized. This is, in fact, the result I was expecting, for I have not placed the photograph right side up. I would suggest that the reader try rotating the piece, looking for a good image. Oddly enough, although at first everything looks like mere possibility and suggestion, once the image is found the viewer will have no doubts. We can recognize a good image even in a bad photograph.

Once the reader is ready to receive directives, I can add that the plate should be turned so that the Figure 1 caption is on the left side reading downward, and the picture is a photograph of a common animal.

If these directives do not produce an image (I remember that they did not work for me when I met the photograph for the first time), let me add that the animal is a cow, looking right at the reader, the head almost filling the left half of the plate. This final and most effective directive consists mainly of the name, but the name often produces quick results because one is already familiar with the animal — looking for the familiar form enables one to look for the named object, which activity evidently prepares for actual recognition.

The activity of the perceiver is similar to that mentioned in the experience of the orchestra above, in which one could focus upon one type of instrument and allow the others to become background. When we look for the sound of the flutes, they stand out for us. But this step of recognition now appears somewhat mysterious since prior to recognition of a possible object (of consciousness), we cannot consciously move our attention to it. After all, *the cow is not even a locatable unity* — a dark or light blur for instance — until we see it. But when seen it appears as a whole — we can even “see” the edge of the cow’s face where there is no variation of brightness to allow us to do so. We do not see an object and recognize it as a cow, we look for a cow and therefore see a recognizable object. The unity has been provided by the concept proposed for our search. This is why Steiner calls the concept the element that provides a unity *to appearances*.

Thus it now seems that conceptual action is required of us *before* we can fasten on an image. We cannot, after all, move our attention to the head of the cow while it is not even an object — that is, has no unity even as a blur. Without our recognition as a cow, it is impossible to pick out the object. Between the time when the cow is not visible and the time when it is, our mental act has to provide the unity that makes it visible.

This requirement can be investigated in diagrams with far fewer elements. Take, for instance, the figure designed by Gaetano Kanisza, (1976) which produces a perception of a central white triangle by simply arranging the black circles with sections missing and three bent lines on a white background. The observer sees, apparently immediately, a white triangle in the center of the configuration, due to the manner in which the forms have been understood. Here is a case where the understanding that produces a consciousness of the white triangle can be reconstructed.

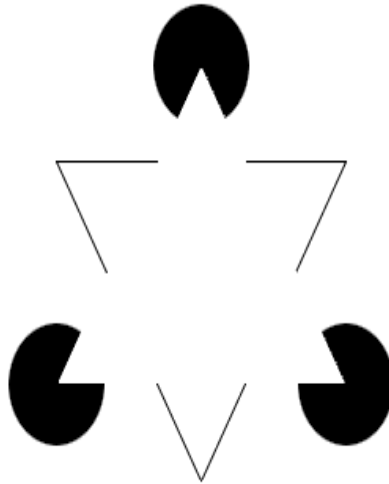


Figure 2

As the reader can verify, if the white triangle is seen, the underlying forms are grasped as closed, that is, the three black circles are complete and the bent lines are part of a continuous triangle. The foreground triangle lies over these forms and thus interrupts them. This triangle will appear somewhat brighter than the rest of the background, but the reader can mask off all but two elements — a circle and a bent line — and see these elements as nothing more than a black circle with a piece missing and a bent line. When they appear as nothing more, there is no hint of a brighter triangle. Thus the conceptual *closure* of the black form is a necessary condition for the appearance of the white one.

Another Kanisza effect is the transparent surface. In Figure 3 below, the white rectangle in front of the black forms is produced in the same manner as the white triangle of Figure 2. But if the dark forms are closed with a gray rather than black continuation, the white rectangle becomes transparent or translucent, as in Figure 4. In this case, as in the former, the rectangle can appear to be brighter than the surround, but here the rectangle has the quality of a very different substance — such as translucent white plastic or tissue paper.

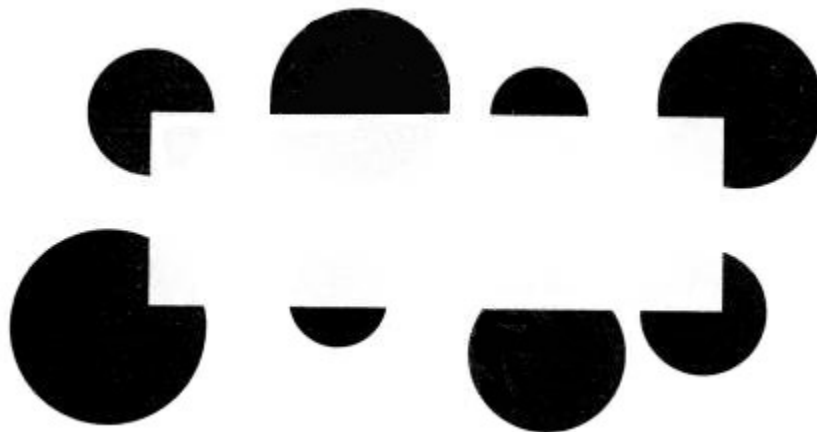


Figure 3

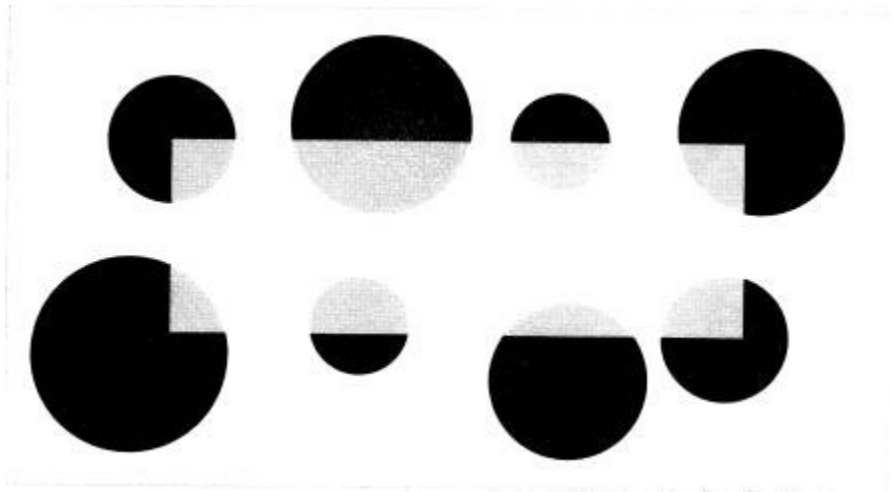


Figure 4

The translucent figure, of course, arises in much the same manner as the original white rectangle — that is, seeing a rectangle provides a parsimonious understanding of the gray areas — an understanding must be *seen* if it is to apply.

The temptation to suppose that we see the rectangle first and understand it later — that is, to suppose it appears without any participation from thinking, and our mental activity takes hold after the fact, can be dissipated with a simple experiment. Let the viewer attempt to grasp the black areas as holes — in something like a slice of Swiss cheese — and see, through the holes, a gray rectangle. Once the gray rectangle is seen as a background figure, the apparent brightness of the foreground rectangle has vanished. The new conceptualization of Figure 4 produces a new figure, which, of course, can be converted back into the old figure by a return to the old understanding.

For a further examination the reader may simply relax and stare at any of these configurations without concern for a geometric understanding. In this “vegetating” mood, the design elements seem to “swim” slightly and appear as nothing more than separate elements on paper — for instance, three bent lines and three black circles with slices missing, or eight circles divided into gray and black areas. But the slightest attempt to make sense of the whole — that is, to put everything into understandable spatial relation — will return the viewer to the missing figure.

Let me review the ground carefully. As argued above, the viewer must grasp the black elements as closed in order to obtain the figure-ground separation that allows the white triangle to be the foreground. But obviously this conception must be in place by the time we become consciousness of the white triangle or white rectangle. It is a condition *by which* we become conscious of the form, and not something added to the resulting phenomenon. Yet in the viewer’s experience the white form is usually “there” from the beginning. The understanding is usually advanced before we are conscious of advancing it, since, until a unified target is perceived, we would not be aware of any necessity to advance it. (Only in the case of our deliberate reconstruction of Figure 4 are we aware of making a proposal before we see the result.)

Counter-intuitively, the act of recognition lies in our activity immediately *anterior* to the fact of recognition. (By “anterior” I always mean “causally prior,” and sometimes chronologically as well.) The objects mentioned are already closed at first notice. The understanding of them as closed,

therefore, must already be in place when our first experience of them is obtained. The same is true, of course, of the closure of the three-dimensional objects of our usual surroundings. They appear closed in immediate perception, even though their shape is often interrupted by that of other objects and, most strikingly, they extend invisibly *away* from the viewer to achieve the three-dimensional volume that we immediately feel in their concrete presence. Our intention has obviously preceded that experience.

It is easy to mistake this point. We are so determined to believe that we see the world first and understand it second that most observers — including scientific observers — simply do not notice that *there cannot be a distinction* between perceiving a relation and understanding the relation. This prejudice is very widespread and very strong. We all know, for example, that we can generate a mistaken perception of the world through our experience of double-takes, and that any examination of such a perceptual shift will reveal an underlying shift in relations, yet the notion that a double-take is cognitively driven (intentionally produced) rather than an “error of sense” will often be missed. One must make a concerted effort to notice his or her activity of “taking notice” if intentional activity is to be raised to consciousness.

The usual assumption that “attending to” something is only a matter of the focus of the eyes is obviously an error, absurdly transparent when we try the same reasoning on the ears. Taking Müller’s example, although we can focus on different sounds in the general background of sound, can anyone suggest that this ability to pick out the flutes from the orchestra rests on the physical orientation of the ears? A cursory examination of how we pass from one sound to another easily reveals the point: we attend by specifying — conceiving — the type of sound we want to hear. As soon as we succeed, the individual sound leaps out. Or fails to leap out, for we can also verify the absence of a particular instrument through the same intentional specification. When someone remarks, while listening to recorded music, that the timpani seem to be absent, we verify the claim by *listening for* the timpani. Had we not listened specifically, we could not have heard that it was absent. By implication, if we did not know how to listen specifically to an instrument, we might never detect its presence within the combined orchestral sound.

Memory

Of course, it must seem to some readers that they specify an instrument, or a shape, by calling up a *memory* of the same. Thus it seems that I remember what trumpets sound like and then listen for that sound, or I remember what a certain shape looks like and then look for that shape. But the thesis that recognition is just remembering is possible to accept only by forgetting everything we have already examined. The view of remembering put forward in the memory account is based on a naïve view of perception — the familiar notion that we see the world without cognitive activity and think about it later. Thus we suppose that memory re-presents the seen object unencumbered by conceptual activity. But as the argument above demonstrates, this is not possible.

Since we cannot see without recognition, we do not remember what has been seen (or heard) without the same activity. Simple observation of memory experience shows the difference between the original and the memory. Consider Figure 5.

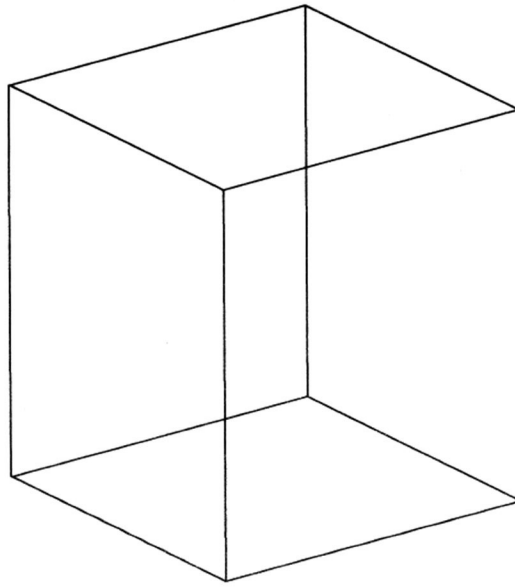


Figure 5

If we ask an average audience, “what do you see?”, some will reply that they see a cube slanting down and to the right, others a cube slanting up and to the left, others will say both. Eventually, of course, everyone will see both cubes. They will also be able to see a flat pattern, a truncated crystal from above (convex), or the same shape from below (concave), etc. They are able to do this by proposing differing depth relations to the elements in the diagram.

Of course, these differing configurations are not added by thought after the object is perceived, but are intended by the perceiver in the act of perception — that is, we must take the elements of the perceptual field to be at specific depths in order to see this or that figure. Even the flat pattern follows this rule, for we cannot reach it without seeing all elements on the same plane. But now close your eyes and refer to memory.

At once the experience of a given situation which can be seen in more than one way disappears. What we remember are the various ways that we saw it — the results of previous conceptual unifications. The condition of an original given — that is, allowing multiple appearances — cannot be re-experienced through memory. Memory is not equivalent to a confrontation with the “other than thinking.” As Hume noted, it lacks the “vividness” of direct sensation, and this same “vividness” enables the intentional act to produce a result. But only this result can be remembered.

Our awareness of this limitation is derived from the fact that we understand — even as we know that intentional activity is produced by us — that in sensible perception we are meeting something that is not so produced, and we cannot objectify our intentions without it. Our intentional activity cannot create such a reality — no amount of mere intending will produce the sensible content of perception. Thus we suffer the limitations that sensible content enforces on our ways of viewing. After all, if we do not produce a way of looking that “fits” (in some sense) this *other-than-thinking*, no intelligible picture will result. This limitation is not derived from thinking, but imposed upon thinking by the directly given.

It is this element, of course, which provides our sense *that* something is there to look at, although the *what* is entirely derived from the intentional proposal through which we look. The *other-than-*

thinking does not guide our intention by providing relations on its own, but by failing to appear unless we view it — or intend it — through adequate intentions. Thus if we were to ask “what does this figure look like prior to all intentional contribution?” it should now be clear that it has no *look* at all. And having no look, it also possesses no “outness” — it is not an object “out there,” for no relations like “in” and “out” are yet established. Its otherness is completely exhausted by its independence of intentional activity — by the fact that we must suffer rather than produce it. We can bring the given to appearance only through our own intentional activity, but without the element that is only suffered there is nothing to appear.

By reflection on the above observations one may hypothesize that in order to “perceive” anything the perceiver must (1) mediate the sensible situation with an intentional contribution, and (2) observe the result, which now becomes a new given. There are two important conclusions here.

The first is the rejection of the supposed simplicity of the perceptual moment. This impression derives from the fact that our intentional activity is a necessary preparation not only for perception but also, by implication, for consciousness itself. We can become aware only of intelligible objects (in the grammatical sense), which objects can only be the result of intentional mediation. Since our productive activity is prior to consciousness — *which will be the result* — when this result is unproblematic we have no sense of a preparatory moment. From the unconscious character of our own activity we derive the impression of simplicity. Yet when a proposed mediation fails (the double-take), it becomes obvious after the fact that our own tacit activity was at work, and we recognize that we are called upon to make a change in that activity.

The second conclusion, which follows from the preceding one, is that proposing an intention is not the same as seeing a satisfactory result. We do not create the world, but only its intelligible appearance, which is our knowledge of it. Thus we discover that an unsatisfactory proposal will not result in fully intelligible phenomena, and we are obliged to try again. Obviously the success of our activity is not measured subjectively, but by how intelligibly it can reveal a given.

The “two moment” hypothesis begins to show its truth as soon as we begin to look at our perceptive act in these terms. As we investigate Figure 1 and perceive the suggestive figures, the bird, the rock, etc., we do so by looking for them — that is, by conceiving this or that blot as a bird or a rock.

When, as in Figure 5, we see distinct alternative images, we dismiss the possibility that the printed figure is changing, as we dismiss this same possibility in the double-take and locate the change in the observer. With practice we can confirm that, as different images succeed each other, we have been active in preparing each change, for each new image now appears as our “taking” rather than something independent of us. Yet we do not suppose, for that reason, that we are creating our perceptions. After all, *a proposal may fail*. One may look for (intend) rounded forms, for example, or triangular ones, but nothing comes of this. It is therefore obvious that our activity produces only intentional proposals, which are clearly distinguished from perceptual results — that is, actual perceptions. (Memory, of course, can now be seen to be limited to the re-presentation of actual perceptions.)

Now if the activity of intentionality must precede any phenomenal result, then it also follows that *all phenomena are cognitions* — are a unity of intention and sensation. The spatial relations in which we contextualize the sensible situation of Figure 4 are the very geometrical concepts by which we grasp the resulting configuration. Phenomena can appear only to a mode of understanding by which we think, or mean, them, and we must mean them before they become apparent. Phenomenal appearance emerges as a kind “mirroring” of the intended relations, which must reflect back to the thinker his or her own intention, but now individualized and concrete. *At the moment of actuality the phenomenon and the understanding by which it is recognized are not separable.*

I have spent a good deal of time on intentionality due to my impression that Steiner’s epistemological arguments cannot be understood without a sense of *thinking* that is intentional rather

than propositional. In doing so, however, I have run slightly ahead of the textual argument. The relations I have covered above will take on greater significance in Steiner's treatment.

Return: Chapter Five

Now let us return to the beginning of chapter five, and the warning that we have "torn apart" the world content. The argument is condensed in Steiner's terse comments. Reflection will show that as we examine our own cognition we become aware of two components. To perceive we must receive the object of perception according to our own nature, that is, through two distinct modes of acquisition, and thus the "tearing apart" of the content into two contents. Thus we can only approach the object of perception by joining the contents of these two receptions, mediating the passive given with the intentionally given.

But (and here is the point), though this distinction between what is given to us passively and what is given intentionally is important for our understanding of our act of cognition, it may be termed "artificial" with regard to the resulting content of perception. By the time we observe the outcome of successful intentional activity, the two given contents have become one, revealing the "necessary relation" they bear to each other according to their own nature. After all, in normal experience we become aware of a difference between them only when our proposal does not illumine the given — that is, our proposed organization fails.

The fact that the two parts of the given are only distinct "parts" when we speak of a failed cognitive act, or when we distinguish content according to the mode of reception, should give us pause with regard to the usual assumptions concerning cognition. After all, *thinking* (intentional activity) has not as yet been revealed by this investigation as either subjective or transsubjective, although we are now in a position to address that question.

Faced with the necessity of combining two contents in order to come by a phenomenal appearance, the investigator can take this structure in one of two ways: either the separation of the two forms of given is original and their unity a derived condition arising through our activity, or the union of the two is original, and their separation a derived condition produced by our modes of reception. The usual epistemological assumption would prescribe the former answer; we suppose that we have added our mental contribution to something which is already complete without it. This conclusion then necessitates some further justification for the addition of the intentional element.

But if we attempt to solve this question by evidence rather than assumption, only a direct observation of the given contents themselves can reveal their relation. This is possible only when both are given — that is, when we have a phenomenal result. In the phenomena, the relation between the intentionally given and the passively given — a relation that belongs to the phenomena rather than to the conditions of cognition — is *unity*. The phenomena are indifferent to the manner in which they have been obtained and give no sign of being partitioned according to our modes of reception.

This is one of the junctions at which Steiner's transition from a *transcendental* to an *immanent* formulation of the problem of epistemology pays rich dividends. Obviously, if we were asking how our thinking applied to the reality independent of our senses, we would have no way of arguing that it applied at all. But now the whole problem of cognition is set by our passive reception of something other than thinking, which does not possess organizing relations and therefore is not intelligible in itself. We can only be asking, therefore, about whether our proposal has produced intelligible appearances.

We all know about the situations in which we find our grasp less than satisfactory. Ambiguous pictures lack stability and can be seen in several different ways equally well. Certain problematic art

works, including the interesting designs of Escher, refuse intelligibility in that we cannot complete them — something is always wrong. And the original take of the double-take also had something wrong with it or we would never have moved to a second take. What we cannot unify remains unintelligible to just the degree that it is not unified. Upon reflection, however, this unity to which I refer must be the unity between the intentional given and the passive given.

When we turn away from these questionable circumstances and consider the “normal” case of intelligible perception, our experience is quite different. Here the impression of unity is so strong we are not usually aware of any hint of observer contribution in immediate appearances. For the observer who considers no other cases than those of immediate intelligibility, the partition between what we produce and what is given passively appears to fall between the perception and what follows — that is, between the phenomenon and our thought about it. Thus we find, in a 1964 text by H. H. Price entitled *Perception*: “The perceptual act ... is not an activity. There is in it no element of fussiness, no wondering nor questioning. One does not have to take trouble over it — it is a blessed relief from the labor of discursive thought.” Although Price is the author of a text on the subject, his own position with regard to perception is naïve. His remarks are directed entirely toward the result of successful perception, and he has missed the moment that prepares for perception. By failing to distinguish the proposal from result, he has ignored the possibility of failure, and as we shall see below, the omission precludes an account of success. The naïve approach makes epistemology impossible by occluding the moment that a form of judgment is applied to our perceptual activity.

Those who penetrate these moments — as we have done with the exercise above, or as anyone does when examining their own experience of the double-take — become aware of an activity that works within them. By contrast, the Price text describes the phenomenal result as if it had no ancestry. He emphasizes only the nature of this outcome — the fact *that the unity of the phenomenon is seamless*.

Not so the cognitive act, to which we must now return. We can easily see that in the act of perception our own activity meets something other than itself. In fact, we understand that if it did not, there would be no reality to encounter. But the popular notion that our concepts must add something to reality arises from the assumption that the concept is applied to actual phenomena — entities complete and specific in themselves. Yet when we pass from phenomena to the precognitive given, we come to a content that does require a conceptual addition, for it never appears as something complete in itself and cannot become specified in itself. In fact we become aware of it only through our inability to objectify our concepts — to gain evidence that something is present — without it.

If the element “already present” cannot self-specify, it may be said to be alienated from its own unity; how else could the unity that belongs to it be given through our activity? Such a condition can be brought about only through our mode of receptivity, and thus it could occur only in the act of cognition. The distinction between two types of given which is found in the first stage of cognition, therefore, has no bearing on the resulting knowledge, which is identical with the phenomena.

If we now reread Steiner’s description of the act of cognition we may be able to find more in it than we could on first reading. For one thing, there is a strong emphasis upon the notion of observation in this account, and an expansion of its usual meaning. Steiner begins the long descriptive paragraph with a generalization:

To permeate the “given” world with concepts and ideas is a *thinking* contemplation of things. Thus thinking is the act through which knowledge is mediated. Only when thinking, out of itself, orders the content of the world picture, can knowledge come about. (p. 64)

Since we can now see that without intentional mediation — the work of thinking — the world would not come to phenomenal appearance, the point of his claim is well taken. If thinking does not

order the world, it cannot come to consciousness at all. But before explaining the process by which thinking can be brought to “permeate” the given, Steiner gives an account of observing, not the world, but thinking:

Thinking itself is an activity that brings forth a content of its own in the moment of cognition. Insofar as the content that is cognized issues from thinking, it contains no problems for cognition. We have only to observe it: the essence is given to us directly. A description of thinking is also at the same time the science of thinking. Logic too has always been a description of thought forms, never a science that demonstrates anything ... In logic all theory is empiricism — in this science there is only observation. (p. 64)

The sense of “observation” here is of course quite distinct from that of ordinary empiricism. Here the “essence of what we observe is given to us directly” because “thinking finds itself active in the very essence of the given.” As I suggested, “observation” here denotes the grasp of thought by thinking, the former being transparent to the latter. But we should realize that the argument occupies this position in the paragraph because it is a necessary background for the description that follows.

The next sentence turns toward the problem of cognizing that which is other than thinking, basically repeating the point that introduced the paragraph:

But when we want to know something other than thinking, we can do so only with the help of thinking — that is, thinking has to approach something given and transform the chaotic relationship with the world picture into a systematic one. Thinking therefore approaches the given content as an organizing principle. (p. 65)

But now Steiner adds a description of how this is done:

The process takes place as follows: Thinking first lifts out certain entities from the totality of the world-whole. In the given there is actually no singularity for all is continuously blended. Then thinking relates these separate entities to each other in accordance with the thought-forms it produces, and lastly determines what results from this relation. (p. 65)

Notice that having “lifted out” singular entities, presumably by conceptualizing their unity (“By concept I mean the principle by which the disconnected elements of perception are bound into a unity”), we have created another form of a lack of unity — that is, multiplicity. But again the conceptual principle is advanced in order to bind into relation — like that of cause and effect — or unify (by placing in relation). But we cannot legislate the relation we propose, but must rather wait upon a result: “thinking ... lastly determines what results from this relation.” Our attention is here directed to the separate moment in which the result of our proposal of relation is examined, and this moment is crucial to the cognitive act. It is on this basis that Steiner denies the Kantian formulation.

By establishing a relation between two distinct parts of the world content, thinking of itself has determined absolutely nothing about them. Thinking waits for what comes to light of *its own accord* as a result of restoring the relationship. *It is this result alone* that is knowledge of that particular section of the world content. (p. 65, emphasis mine)

The possibility of an arbitrary assignment of relation is a reference to skepticism in general and Kant in particular, who had supposed that because concepts were given by our own activity they were also determined purely by our own subjectivity (actually a worry central to western thought since the

nominalism of William of Ockham). Yet since the object of our knowledge is something other than thinking, it would seem obvious that we could not decide which concepts would properly apply until we knew the role played by the passively given content in this determination. Kant could never assign any clear role to the “sensible manifold” as he termed it, but Steiner’s account adds that very element.

The process of cognition is not arbitrary because it is not the proposal of relation that decides whether a relation is correct or no, but the observation of “what comes to light of its own accord as a result of restoring the relationship.” Remember that the passive given has been produced by stripping away the relations that belong to it, and our attempt to understand is an attempt to *restore* those same relations. The productive aspect of thinking is the proposal of relations; this moment *can* be subjective, and if we saw nothing else we would harbor suspicions that our concepts were arbitrary. Only in the subsequent moment that I termed “observation” is the suitability or unsuitability of the intentional proposal revealed, and “it is this result alone” — that is, “what comes to light of its own accord” — that is knowledge.

“Thinking waits for” something that is transparent to it, something that it can therefore *observe*. We have already been given the model of thinking “observing” thought, and a successful intentional mediation has a phenomenal result that is also like unto thought — has the form of thought and is immediately intelligible to us — with this difference, however, that it is what Kant called “the sensible manifold” that shows that something has been perceived, or that it has not. After all, what now “comes to light of its own accord” is not our intentional proposal, but what became evident as a result of that activity.

This is why Steiner now speaks of an enabling of the object of knowledge rather than our cognitive activity:

If this particular section of the world content *were unable* to express anything about itself through that relationship, then this attempt made by thinking would fail, and one would have to try again. (p. 65, emphasis mine)

We have nothing more to do but observe. If we have chosen suitable relations, an object of observation will now express something about itself through the relations we propose. Our thinking activity was only a precondition for a self-expression that was not our own: it proposes, but another element disposes. No other element meets our proposals but the passive given, but we must remember that this element cannot be observed in its original form. What we now observe is not the original form of the given, but the transformation of the same brought about by our intentional mediation which, by this account, restores the relations originally stripped away by our mode of reception. If what now comes to light is intelligible, its intelligibility is similar to the intelligibility of thought to thinking. But it is now *the object of knowledge*, rather than either of the two types of given, which here becomes manifest, and decides the matter.

The basic description of cognition’s dual movement — receiving the world in a fragmentary condition and then reunifying it — has been put forward in such general terms that it is easily extended to the entirety of science. The problem of acquiring an object of cognition was brought about by our reception of the object without its concept, which we must restore through our own activity. The problems of science — the relations of phenomena — can be understood as an expression of the same difficulty. By perceiving “separate” entities we have actually reformulated the “artificial” condition on a new level. The separate things are discrete because we have called them into phenomenal appearance without the network of relations of which they are an expression. On every level of science it is the incomplete nature of our own perceptual process that we strive to overcome:

All knowledge depends on establishing a correct relationship between two or more

elements of reality and grasping the result of this. (p. 65)

“Grasping” (*erfassen*), that is, observing, for the “result” is a new given.

From this general statement of the activity of cognition Steiner brings his argument back to the original experience of intentionality as it is embedded in everyday recognition:

There is no doubt that many of our attempts to grasp things by means of thinking fail; this is apparent not only in the history of science, but also in ordinary life; it is just that in the simple cases we usually encounter, the right concept replaces the wrong one so quickly that the latter does not come to consciousness at all or does so only seldom. (pp. 65-6)

Of course the passage depends, for its persuasiveness, on our memory of the time that we did notice the replacement of one concept by another — that is, the “double-take.” In the light of the entire discussion above, the “double-take” is a privileged moment. Within it an appearance almost becomes but falls short — fails in its unity. Because our activity is no longer transparent to its object, we become aware of that activity, aware that we have made a mis-take, and aware that the new and more successful appearance that follows was the result of a new “take” on our part. The whole episode suggests that our activity achieves its end only in our detection of intelligible appearances. The phenomenon is the goal of our search, which search can only be quenched in perceiving — that is, knowing — even if the achievement, in the long run, is only temporary, since it will give rise to new problems.

Because the problem of knowledge is the same whatever the level of comprehension we take for its inception, Steiner sometimes begins his argument — as he does in *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception* — from what seem to be perceived but unrelated entities, and traces the manner in which thinking advances from that start. In the dissertation, however, the double-take is the paradigm case, for the argument postulates that discrete entities must first be lifted out of the given by thinking in order for the problem of their discreteness to exist.

Since his own account is now visible, Steiner turns to the work of Kant for contrast. The next paragraph reads:

When Kant speaks of “the synthetic unity of apperception” it is evident that he had some inkling of what we have shown here to be the activity of thinking, the purpose of which is to organize the world-content systematically. But that he thought to derive *a priori* laws of pure science from the rules according to which this synthesis takes place shows how little this inkling brought to his consciousness the essential task of thinking. He did not realize that this synthetic activity of thinking is only a *preparation* for discovering actual natural laws. Suppose, for example, that we detach a content, *a*, and another content, *b*, from the given. If we are to gain knowledge of the law connecting *a* and *b*, then thinking must first relate *a* and *b* so that through this relationship the connection between them presents itself as given. The actual content of a law of nature is derived from the given, and the task of thinking is merely to provide an occasion for the natural law to become evident by placing the elements of the given in that relationship. No objective laws follow from the synthetic activity of thinking alone. (p. 66)

Kant did not, of course, attempt to investigate intentionality directly; that step was left to Fichte. But he had enough awareness of the situation to know that the mind needed concepts in order to see. Being unable to distinguish the moment of proposal from the moment of observation, he supposed that our concepts legislate the phenomenal reality they discern. That there was another role for thinking did

not occur to him:

The activity of thinking is only a formal one in bringing about our scientific world-picture, and it follows that no cognition can have content which is a priori — which is established prior to observation (and therefore divorced from the given). Content must rather be derived wholly from observation. In this sense all our knowledge is empirical. Nor is it possible to see how it could be otherwise. Kant's judgments a priori are not cognition, but only postulates. In the Kantian sense one can always say: If a thing is to be the object of any kind of experience, then it must conform to certain laws. Laws in this sense are prescriptions that the subject prescribes for the objects. Yet one would expect that if we are to attain knowledge of the given it must be derived, not from the subject, but from the object.

Thinking says nothing a priori about the given; it produces the thought-forms on the basis of which the conformity to law of the phenomena becomes apparent a posteriori. (pp. 67-8)

In the last pages of the chapter Steiner summarizes the argument he has made:

The act of cognition is possible only because something is hidden in the given which does not appear in its immediate aspect, but reveals itself only through the order that thinking brings to the given. What lies within the given before it has been elaborated by thought is not its full totality.

This becomes clearer when we consider more closely the factors pertinent to the act of cognition. The first of these is the given. That it is given is not a feature of the given, but an expression denoting its relation to the second factor in cognition. Thus what this given may be is completely undecided by this designation. In the act of cognition thinking finds the second factor: the conceptual content of the given, to be necessarily united with the given. We must ask ourselves: (1) Where does the separation between given and concept lie? (2) Where are they united? Both these questions have been answered in the preceding investigation. The separation exists solely in the act of cognition, the union lies in the given. It follows from this that the conceptual content is only a part of the given, and that the act of cognition consists in uniting the parts of the world picture that are given to it separately. (pp. 69-70)

The chapter concludes:

Knowledge rests on the fact that the world-content is originally given to us in an incomplete form; it possesses an essential aspect beyond what is immediately offered. This second aspect of the world-content, which is not originally given, is revealed through thinking. That which appears to us as something separate in thinking, is therefore not empty form, but comprises the sum of those determinations (categories) that are the form of the rest of the world content. The world-content can be called reality only in the form it attains when the two aspects described above have been united through knowledge. (p. 71)

The arguments *contra* Kant and the final summation are justified by the preceding discussion, which was framed, as we now see, by its opposition to neo-Kantian assumptions. The next chapter, however, invokes another framework.

Second Interruption: Cross-reference to Other Works

Now that the “idea of cognition” of the dissertation has been worked through and can stand on its own, the cross-referencing that I avoided earlier no longer threatens to raise problems. In fact, some reference to other works may provide a useful expansion of concepts central to the argument.

In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner argues that the activity of thinking — the entertainment of concepts — is not merely conventional or subjective, but receptive: our intentional activity is actually an acquiescence to the possible forms of activity — “The mind is to ideas,” Steiner remarks, “as the eye is to light.” And in chapter five:

Thinking offers ... content to the percept, from the human world of concepts and ideas. In contrast to the content of the percept, which is given to us from without, the content of thinking appears inwardly. The form in which this first makes its appearance we will call intuition. Intuition is for thinking what observation is for the percept. Intuition and observation are the sources of our knowledge. An observed object of the world remains unintelligible to us until we have within ourselves the corresponding intuition that adds the part of reality lacking in the percept. To anyone who is incapable of finding intuitions corresponding to the things, the full reality remains inaccessible. Just as the color-blind person sees only the differences in brightness without any color qualities, so can the person without intuition observe only unconnected perceptual fragments.

To explain a thing, to make it intelligible, means nothing else than to place it in the context from which it has been torn by the peculiar character of our organization as already described. A thing cut off from the world-whole does not exist. All isolating has only subjective validity for our organization ...

The enigmatic character of an object consists in its separateness. But this separation is of our own making and can, within the world of concepts, be overcome again. (pp. 73-74)

The nature of this “separation” follows from the steps taken to eliminate it. We bring the given into conceptual elaboration. The concept, *qua* concept, is always relatively general in its content. Careful introspection will show the reader that the intentional activity advanced toward a specific object produces only a context of relations within which the particular may be known (perceived). The contribution that the concept lacks, and the passively given content supplies, is particularity — not the evidence of what has been perceived, but that it has been perceived. Thus we find, in Steiner’s commentaries on Goethe’s scientific works (*Goethean Science*, 1988):

In order to gain some clarity here, one must go back to the reason for contrasting the perception (*Anschauung*), as something particular, with the concept, as something general.

One must ask the question: Wherein do the characteristic features of the particular actually lie? Can these be defined conceptually? Can we say: *This* conceptual unity must break up into this or that particular perceptible manifold? “No” is the very definite answer. The concept in itself does not grasp particularity at all. The latter must lie in elements that are altogether inaccessible to the concept as such. But since we do not know any intervening member between perception and concept — unless one wishes to introduce something like Kant’s fantastic-mystical schemata, which could not be taken seriously today — these elements must belong to perception itself. The basis for particularizing cannot be derived from the concept but must be sought within perception itself. What constitutes the particularity of an object cannot be *grasped conceptually*, but only

perceived. (p. 114)

In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, the term “percept” (*Wahrnehmung*) is used for “the object of observation” presented to cognition prior to conceptual elaboration. When the discussion of chapter five arrives at the direct question “what is the percept?”, Steiner answers as if the question were identical to “what is particularity?”

What then is the percept? The question, asked in this general way, is absurd. A percept emerges always as something perfectly definite, as a concrete content. This content is directly given and is completely contained within the given. The only question one can ask concerning the given content is what is it beyond the percept — that is, what is it for thinking. The question concerning the “what” of a percept can, therefore, only refer to the conceptual intuition that corresponds to this percept. (p. 76)

Particularity and generality are not phenomena, but aspects of the same. “To exist”, as a reality, is to possess both. Obviously the particularity of an object cannot be separated from the whatness of the object, so the privation of concept from percept happens only in cognition. The percept, in its first condition, is a product of the receptive faculty of the subject. In chapter six of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner remarks:

Percepts are determined through the subject. But at the same time the subject has in thinking the means for canceling this self-produced determination. (p. 102)

Although Steiner will occasionally call this operation a “synthesis” of concept and percept, his shorthand should not lead one to suppose that two entities are here being combined. The cancellation of separation cannot be a combination of two unities when that separation represents a distortion — a loss of unity. Let us say rather that the emancipation from the conditions of reception represents a transformation of the percept from its first form to that which, through conceptual elaboration, begins to reveal its true nature. It is really our own condition of ignorance that is being eliminated.

Upon reflection it would appear that our ingrained sense of the partitions of experience always refers back to our experience of the cognitive process — as we have seen in the case of the double-take — rather than the reality cognized. In our effort to cognize we become aware of the distinction between percept and concept, between particularity and generality. It may readily appear that all we can know through such elements must also consist of the same dichotomies. To make this inference, however, is to forget that the individual reality we discover in perception consists of a unity between percept and concept, between particularity and generality. As we actually know in the moment of perception, and must remember during later reflection, this is a unity that defies analysis. (Although we cannot here work out the extent to which this account is related to the Aristotelian distinctions between “form” and “matter”, or “actual” and “potential,” Steiner’s other writings show that he was quite aware of such a relation.)

Finally, in order to avoid interruption of the next chapter, it will be instructive to look at Steiner’s remarks about the “observation of thinking,” at this point. The argument found in the *Philosophy* can be seen to follow from the description of cognition just reviewed, but the central insight makes its appearance in chapter 6 in a very different manner.

In chapter three of *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner remarks that “thinking as an object of observation differs essentially from all other objects” and continues to argue that an observation of thinking would be “an exceptional state,” since thinking is normally the activity by which we contemplate everything other than our act of contemplation.

The first observation that we make about thinking is therefore this: that it is the unobserved element in our ordinary mental life and spiritual life.

The reason why we do not observe the thinking that goes on in our ordinary life is none other than this, that it is due to our own activity. Whatever I do not myself produce appears in my field of observation as an object; I find myself confronted by it as something that has come about independently of me. It comes to meet me. I must accept it as something that precedes my thinking process, as a premise. When I am thinking about the object I am occupied with it and my attention is focused upon it. To be thus occupied is precisely to *contemplate by thinking*. I attend, not to my own activity, but to the object of this activity. I pay no heed to my thinking, which is of my own making, but only to the *object* of my thinking, which is not of my making. (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, pp. 26-7)

So far the argument seems concerned with habits of attention, and although such habits are involved here, the difficulty involved in the observation of thinking is more than simply breaking with our habits. The next paragraphs read:

I am, moreover, in the same position when I enter into the exceptional state and reflect on my own thinking. I can never observe my present thinking; I can only subsequently take my experiences of my thinking process as an object for fresh thinking. If I wanted to watch my present thinking, I should have to split myself into two persons, one to think, the other to observe this thinking. But this I cannot do. I can only accomplish it in two separate acts. The thinking to be observed is never that in which I am actually engaged, but another one. Whether, for this purpose, I make observations of my former thinking, or follow the thinking process of another person, or ... assume an imaginary thinking process, is immaterial.

There are two things that are incompatible with one another: productive activity and the simultaneous contemplation of it. This is recognized even in Genesis (I, 31). Here God creates the world in the first six days, and only when it is there is any contemplation of it possible: "And God saw everything that he had made and, behold, it was very good." The same applies to our thinking. It must be there first, if we would observe it. (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, p. 27)

The passage is potentially more difficult for the reader of the *Philosophy*, who hits it early on, than it should be for us. If by "thinking" we mean intentional activity, then the conclusion of the above passage is inevitable.

The argument can be presented in three steps. (1) Consciousness is directional — that is, it is never without an object for consciousness. We are aware of something, something appears for us or to us, whether inward or outward, but we are never simply conscious with an object yet to come. We must be clear about this. Consciousness cannot exist merely in itself, like a thing, but always attends to what is *for* it. There must be a given before we can become conscious, whether it is (a) given passively or (b) given by intentional activity.

(2) Due to the requirement that thinking (intending) can only recognize something akin to itself, a passive given must be intentionally mediated before it gains a form in which it can be observed, while a content given purely by thinking already has a form in which it can be submitted to observation. But to "observe" here means *to observe by thinking* — that is, the object becomes an object of observation by becoming an object of active attention (intention).

(3) In order to observe *this* intention, it must become the object of a second act of intending. The

notion that we can passively observe — that is, observe without directed intentional activity, is a misreading and a misunderstanding of mental life. Consciousness is always a moment in which the result of prior intentional activity is submitted to examination by later intentional activity. (Steiner wrote of the moment of observation, above, that once it has made a proposal, “*Thinking* waits for what comes to light of its own accord as a result of restoring the relationship.” When reading this we must remember that “thinking” is an activity — its “waiting” advances no further proposal, but it is not *inactive* for that reason. It can observe only by actively attending to what it observes.) We cannot watch the earlier productive activity any more than we could watch ourselves wake up in the morning, and for the same reasons.

As the reader can verify by looking back to the earlier exercises, our own intentional activity was always discovered after the fact, as something we have done, but never as a present object. But we were not for that reason in any doubt of the matter. Our own intentional activity is directly given to us, not because we can watch it happen — who can watch him or herself produce a new idea? — but because when an idea becomes conscious it is clearly meant by us.

Thinking’s mode of being — that is, being *meant* or intended — possesses an intelligibility that makes it immediately open to inspection. Steiner continues:

The reason why it is impossible for us to observe thinking in the actual moment of occurrence, is the very one which makes it possible to know it more immediately and more intimately than any other process in the world. Just because it is our own creation do we know the characteristic features of its course, the manner in which the process takes place. What in all other spheres of observation can be found only indirectly, namely, the relevant context and the relationship between individual objects, is, in the case of thinking, known to us in an absolutely direct way. I do not on the face of it know why, for my observations, thunder follows lightning; but I know directly, from the very content of the two concepts, why my thinking connects the *concept* of thunder with the *concept* of lightning. It does not matter in the least whether I have the right concepts of lightning and thunder. The connection between those concepts is clear to me, and this through the very concepts themselves. (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, pp. 27-8, emphasis mine)

The point is, of course, that he can understand his explanation of events. In his observation lightning is followed by thunder. In his explanation he has identified lightning as cause and thunder as effect, which would certainly explain their connection if true. Whether true to the phenomena or not, however, in the explanation they have been intended as *cause* and *effect* and the relation of these two concepts is transparently clear (through an inspection of their meaning).

The examination of the concepts above, however, can only be performed upon content that is already *given* to our observation, and thus the act of giving is causally prior to that of observing, and both are *actions*. But, adds Steiner, this distinction is not a limitation. Because we give it to ourselves, what has been done in the act is transparently clear through our observation of the results. That the observation takes place after the fact of production does not alter its *content*. So the note in chapter twelve of the *Philosophy* reads:

That we speak of thoughts (ethical ideas) as objects of observation is fully justified. For although during the activity of thinking the products of thinking do not appear at the same time in the field of observation, they can nevertheless become objects of observation afterwards. And it is in this way that we have arrived at our characterization of action. (p. 170fn)

Present thinking may observe past thinking through its products, which is exactly what we have been doing in this long argument. But in the next chapter of the dissertation Steiner will consider the full ramifications of a thought he expresses in the *Philosophy* as follows:

What is impossible with nature — creation before cognition — we achieve with thinking. If we waited, with thinking, until we already understood it, we should never get to that point. We must think resolutely ahead, in order later to arrive by observation at knowledge of what we have done. We ourselves create the object for the observation of thinking. The presence of all other objects has been taken care of without our participation. (p. 32)

Chapter 6: Theory of Knowledge Free of Assumptions, and Fichte's Science of Knowledge

As the title of the chapter indicates, the argument here is structured as a critique of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, perhaps the first attempt to use an awareness of intentionality in a systematic way in philosophic literature. Since Fichte's excesses were almost universally condemned, Steiner does not want any confusion between his own position and that of Fichte. He constructs the argument in such a manner that he can highlight both Fichte's strength and the basis for his error, and pass beyond to his own account of "das Ich" (the I), which he has omitted up to this point.

In the preceding analysis the "object of cognition" was assumed to be something other than cognition, but through the same examination cognition itself (and therefore consciousness) became an object of cognition, and was known through its corresponding idea. It is with this idea — *qua* idea — that Steiner begins the new chapter.

We have now identified the idea of knowledge. This idea is immediately given to human consciousness in so far as it cognizes. Both outer and inner percepts, as well as its own presence are immediately given to the "I", which is the center of consciousness. (It is hardly necessary to say that here "center" is not meant to denote any particular theory of consciousness, but is used merely for the sake of brevity in order to denote the collective physiognomy of consciousness.) The "I" feels a need to discover more in the given than is *immediately* contained in it. In contrast to the given world, a second world — the world of thinking — rises up to meet the I and the I unites the two through its own free decision, realizing what we have identified as the idea of knowledge. (p. 73)

The immediate problem is Steiner's claim that the idea of cognition "is immediately given to human consciousness in so far as it cognizes." The rest of the passage, however, serves as a clarification. We have already seen that when the "I" is faced with a passively received given it becomes active in the production of concepts, mediating the former with the latter and producing by this a result that is both given and meant by the "I", and therefore open to observation.

But since cognition itself is something new in the world, and does not exist before a human being produces it, when the "I" proposes cognition it must advance an intentional proposal that does not belong to any reality already in the world, but to a reality that it will produce through this idea. Arguing that there is a "fundamental difference between the way the concept and the directly given are united within human consciousness to form full reality and the way they are found united in the rest of the world content," Steiner develops the contrast:

In the rest of the world-picture we must conceive of an original union that is an inherent

necessity; an artificial separation occurs only in relation to *knowledge* at the point where cognition begins; cognition then cancels out this separation once more, in accordance with the original nature of the objective world. But in human consciousness the situation is different. Here the union of the two factors of reality depends on the activity of consciousness. In all other objects the separation has no significance for the objects themselves, but only for knowledge. Their union is original and their separation is derived. Cognition separates them only because its nature is such that it cannot grasp their union without having first separated them. (pp. 73-4)

With his characteristic terseness he then reverses this rule with regard to consciousness itself:

But the separation of concept and the given reality of consciousness [cognition] is original, and their union is derived; which is why cognition has the nature described here. Just because, for consciousness, idea and given are necessarily separated, for consciousness the whole of reality divides into these two factors; and again, just because consciousness can effect their union only by its own activity, it can arrive at full reality only by performing the act of cognition. All other categories (ideas), prior to being taken up by cognition, are necessarily united with their corresponding forms of the given. But the idea of knowing can be united with its corresponding given only by the activity of consciousness. Actual consciousness exists only if it actualizes itself. (p. 74)

The first sentence speaks of an original separation between the idea of cognition and cognition itself. The explanatory movement of the rest of the passage develops from the clause “which is why cognition has the nature described here.” For the process of cognition, concept and given are received separately, and therefore the “whole of reality” is presented through a union of these two factors. Since this is the case, however, cognition arrives at reality by joining the two contents. Two senses of “reality” are contained here: cognition arrives (1) at a consciousness of reality, and (2) at the reality of consciousness. But the latter is not part of the world until the process of cognition makes it so. Thus, while all other categories are already “united with their corresponding forms of the given” prior to reception into the cognitive process, the idea of cognition is united with the reality of cognition only as a result of the cognitive act. Since this act of cognition creates consciousness, “Actual (*wirkliches*) consciousness exists only if it actualizes/realizes (*verwirklicht*) itself.” (Notice that consciousness must produce itself through an activity which the resulting conscious “I” will identify as its own, after the fact of consciousness. Thus here, as in the later *Philosophy of Freedom*, intentional activity is prior to contemplation, for it is prior to consciousness. Yet this consciousness is, or can be, aware of its self-production, recognizing its own deeds in their products. After all, I find nothing in my consciousness but that which I have grasped by my own activity of understanding.)

The account has now reproduced the “postulate” of chapter four in another form. (You will remember that the postulate was, in Steiner’s words: “in the sphere of the given there must be something in relation to which our activity does not hover in emptiness, but where the content of the world itself enters this activity.”) When consciousness is actual, the passive given has been contexted by the intentionally given, and we observe the result. That the percept should be mediated with a corresponding concept was not a relation discoverable by cognition, however, for nothing can be cognized before this is decided. When the “I” intends this unity (of percept and concept), it cannot be guided by the demands of a previous given, but is actually *originating* the demand that the given be so mediated.

In Steiner’s description, the I “feels a need to discover more in the given than is immediately contained in it.” Prior to “the given reality of cognition,” the “I” responds to its own need, therefore, by

designing a mode of action that will satisfy the need: prior to the existence of cognition the “I” must create cognition (and therefore consciousness). Of course, the thinking self is not conscious when it does this. As we heard Steiner remark above, “If we waited, with thinking, until we already understood it, we should never get to that point. We must think resolutely ahead, in order later to arrive by observation at a knowledge of what we have done” (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, p. 32). The self must act in such a manner that cognition will result, and thus must intend the idea of cognition as the form of the action. Since this idea corresponds to no reality other than the one it will create, the idea is a “decree” of the “I” rather than something demanded by another source.

Now that the new subject, the relation of intentional activity to consciousness itself, is visible, Steiner will turn to Fichte. The chapter was obviously written to an audience familiar with Fichte and the problems of his text. Although Fichte is little read today, Steiner’s quotations and commentary make the relation to his own work quite clear. The sentence following the indented quotation above reads: “I believe that I have now cleared the ground sufficiently to enable us to understand Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge* through recognition of the fundamental mistake contained in it.” Focusing on this “mistake” Steiner expands:

He felt that what I have called the second step in the theory of knowledge, and which I formulated as a postulate, must be actively performed by the I. This can be seen, for example, from these words: “The science of knowledge ... is built up ... through a determination of freedom; which freedom, in the science of knowledge, is particularly determined: to become conscious of the general manner of acting of the intelligence ...” What does Fichte mean by the “acting of intelligence” if we express in clear concepts what he dimly felt? Nothing other than the realization of the idea of cognition in consciousness. Had Fichte been clear about this he would have formulated the above principle as follows: A science of knowledge has the task of bringing to consciousness the act of cognition, in so far as it is still an unconscious activity of the I: it must show that to objectify the idea of cognition is a necessary deed of the I. (p. 75)

Again, the “postulate” of chapter four was that cognitive activity must begin with something akin to itself — where it “finds itself active in the very essence of the given.” Even so the activity of cognition begins by intending conceptual content to mediate the directly given. Since this activity is done for the sake of an observable result, the “postulate” was the first expression of the idea of cognition. This is what Fichte “dimly” intuites as the “acting of intelligence.” But he never grasps the idea itself, and thus cannot show that “the objectification of the idea of cognition is a necessary deed of the I.” Since in this same chapter Steiner speaks of the unification of ideas with their corresponding given as an “objectification” (*Objectivierung*) of the ideas, the objectification of the idea of cognition can only be the production of the actuality of cognition. After all, the idea has no necessary connection to anything before cognition becomes actual, and its actualization is that of consciousness.

Fichte did not study cognition itself, focusing entirely on the free self-determination of the I. The I, he insists, “posits its own existence.” Steiner accepts the notion of self-determination but then points out that Fichte has not thought this claim through. Fichte begins from the intuited truth that “the I can begin to be active only through an absolute original decision.”

But for Fichte it is impossible to find the actual content of the original activity posited by the I. He had nothing toward which this activity could be directed or by which it could be determined. The I is to do something, but *what* is it to do? Fichte did not formulate the concept of knowledge that the I is to realize, and in consequence he strove in vain to identify any further activity of the I beyond the original deed. (p. 76)

If the freedom of the originating deed of the idea is to mean something, it must possess specific content.

Even if the I is free insofar as its own activity is concerned, nevertheless the I cannot but posit something. It cannot posit “activity, as such, by itself,” but only a definite activity ... Unless the I sets to work on something given which it posits, it can do “nothing,” and therefore cannot posit either. Fichte’s own principle actually shows this: the I posits its existence. Existence is a category. This means we have arrived at our principle: the activity of the I is to posit, by a free decision, the concepts and ideas of the given. Fichte arrives at this conclusion only because he unconsciously set out to prove that the I “exists.” Had he worked out the concept of cognition, he would have arrived at the true starting point for a theory of knowledge, namely: the I posits cognition. (p. 80)

Steiner’s criticisms actually reveal how close Fichte came to important discoveries. Fichte argues, for example, that one must

Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and toward your inner life; this is the demand that philosophy makes on its disciple. Our concern is not with anything that lies outside, but only with yourself. (p. 81)

because

This science presupposes a completely new inner sense organ, through which a new world is revealed which does not exist for the ordinary man at all. (p. 82)

Fichte’s “action of intelligence” is that of “positing” (*setzen*) existence, and only that which has been posited by “*das Ich*” can exist for the self. His term has since been replaced by “intending,” but the meaning is very much the same. The “new inner sense organ” is the awareness through which we can observe this positing activity, and every writer who has struggled to communicate something of the nature of intentional activity has had to find the equivalent of this passage.

(Of course, the warning that this work requires the development of such a sense organ serves to prepare his audience for a shift in focus that will alter the meanings of language. As we have seen, Steiner had the same problem. His epistemological account is not an argument in the ordinary sense of the word, but actually a description of intentional activity. The difficulty encountered in his presentation is brought about by the dependence of his language, for its meaning, on the inner experience of intentionality. Without this experience the intelligibility of the text fails. For those who have taken possession of the experience, or have developed the new sense, language has a new content because we become aware of what would otherwise be invisible to us.)

But Fichte was trained, as it were, by reading Kant, and although he has discovered his own intentional activity, he misses the role of the percept and assumes that the self’s positing is always unconditioned — that is, free. Unfortunately that would mean that the only ground of reality was the activity of the I, which must then appear to create the world out of itself. So Steiner comments:

In self-observation the activity of the I is actually seen, not one-sidedly turned in a particular direction, not as merely positing existence, but revealing many aspects of itself as it strives to grasp directly the world-content in thinking. Self-observation reveals the I engaged in the activity of building up the world picture by combining the given with concepts. For someone who has not elaborated the above considerations for himself,

however, and who therefore does not know that the I only arrives at the full content of reality when it approaches the given with its thought-forms — for him the process of knowledge appears to consist of spinning the world out of the I itself. This is why Fichte sees the world-picture more and more as a construction of the I. He emphasizes ever more strongly that it is essential for the science of knowledge to awaken the faculty for watching the I while it constructs the world. He who is able to do this appears to Fichte to be at a higher stage of knowledge than someone who can see only the construction, only the finished product ... Ordinary consciousness sees only what is posited [*was gesetzt ist*], what is in some way or other determined. It lacks insight into the antecedent, into the ground — that is, why something is posited in just the way it is, and not otherwise. To secure knowledge of these antecedents is, for Fichte, the task of a completely new sense organ. (pp. 81-2)

In a reversal of the usual criticisms, Fichte's error arises not from his radical turn toward the activity of the "I" but because the turn was not radical enough. Fichte's critics fault him for deriving the world from his own subjectivity — Steiner, for supposing, along with his critics, that the content of intentional activity is determined only by the subjective self. The same remarks could be leveled at many of the modern critics of phenomenology and some of its practitioners. One needs, as Fichte argues, a "completely new sense organ" to approach the problem, but it was not Fichte who measured the ground:

No matter from what aspect Fichte is considered, we shall find that his line of thought gains power and life when we think of the activity of the I, which he presents as gray and empty of content, as filled and organized by what we have called the process of cognition. (p. 84)

In the next paragraph Steiner summarizes the import of the chapter, showing the actual advance in presentation his examination of Fichte has allowed:

The fact that the I is freely able to become active in itself makes it possible for it to produce the category of cognition through self-determination; in the rest of the world, by objective necessity the categories are connected with the given corresponding to them. It must be the task of ethics and metaphysics to investigate the nature of this free self-determination on the basis of this theory of knowledge. These sciences will also have to investigate whether the I can objectify ideas other than those of cognition. The present discussion shows that the I is free when it cognizes, when it objectifies the ideas of cognition. For when the directly given and the thought-form belonging to it are united by the I in the process of cognition, then the union of these two elements of reality — which otherwise would remain forever separated in consciousness — can only take place through a free act. (p. 85)

In the "rest of the world" things are already determined by the relations that make them what they are, but to become what it is — a cognizer — the I must first produce the idea of cognition through an activity that is also a self-determination. And now for the first time Steiner can allow the argument to pass on to the goals that Fichte had in mind, but which were impossible for Fichte due to his failure to grasp cognition. "It must be the task of ethics and metaphysics to investigate the nature of this free self-determination," which sciences "will also have to discuss whether the I is able to objectify ideas other than those of cognition." Are there ideas "other than those of cognition" through which the I may also be said to self-determine? By asking that metaphysics and ethics investigate the question, Steiner has proposed that there are, and will take up the investigation himself in the "Practical Conclusion"

(chapter 8).

The concluding paragraphs, beginning with the remark, “Our discussion sheds a completely new light on critical idealism” (p. 85), summarize the results of the chapter in two points. First, “no idealism can derive from the I that form of the world-content which is here described as the directly given.” (In order to emphasize the closure of this question Steiner reminds the reader of Hume’s discussion of the missing hue in a graded series of colors and shows that his treatment has provided a definitive answer: “One need only consider that if all colors were given us with the exception of one single shade, even then we could not begin to provide that shade from the I alone.”) The second point is the complement to this discussion of given particularity: “The essential What of the given is posited by the I only through the I itself” (p. 86).

Expanding on the last point, Steiner remarks:

The I would have no occasion to posit within itself the nature of something given did it not first find itself confronted by a completely undetermined given. Therefore what is posited by the I as the essence (*Wesen*) of the world is not posited without the I but through it.

The true shape is not the first in which reality comes before the I, but the shape that the I gives it ... It is the shape in which the world is first given, rather than the shape it attains through theorizing activity, that is subjective.

The argument is a rather daring completion of Fichte’s thrust — his notion that somehow everything came from the I. But the I does not create reality because it does not create particularity. It does, however, create the intelligibility of the phenomenal world, which intelligibility it posits “in itself.” One cannot escape the suggestion that in looking at an intelligible world we are also viewing a transformed “I-ness” — or the given in the form of the I.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion in Terms of the Theory of Knowledge

This chapter reviews the above conclusions and makes the additional argument that the development of a proper idea of cognition is a crucially important step toward transcending “one-sided world-views.” The examples given of the latter include dogmatism, subjective idealism, skepticism, empiricism, and rationalism, a list that foreshadows the longer discussions of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Each outlook is presented as the result of the same error:

One-sidedness, as a rule, results from the fact that an inquiry approaches this or that object of cognition rather than the process of cognition itself. (p. 89)

The rest of the paragraph will give such an account of the views mentioned:

Our discussion has shown that neither the “thing-in-itself” of dogmatism, nor the “I” of subjective idealism, can be fundamental, for the mutual relationship of these must first be determined by thinking. One cannot derive either of these from the other — thinking must determine both according to their character and relation. Skepticism must relinquish its doubt of the possibility of knowledge, for there is no sense in doubting the “given” since it is untouched by all predicates. But should the skeptic doubt that cognitive activity could approach things, this can only be done through a thinking consideration, which contradicts

the position. The attempt to ground doubt through thinking implies that thinking has the power to support conviction. Finally our theory of knowledge transcends both one-sided empiricism and one-sided rationalism by uniting them on a higher level. In this manner justice is done to both. Empiricism is justified by showing that as far as content is concerned, knowledge of the given is attained only by direct contact with the given. Rationalism also finds justification in this approach in that thinking is shown to be the necessary and only mediator of knowledge. (pp. 89-90)

After a brief review of the related work of A. E. Biedermann, Steiner concludes:

We believe that we have shown that all conflicts between world views result from the attempt to gain knowledge of something objective (thing, I, consciousness, etc.) without having first gained sufficient understanding of that which alone can elucidate all knowledge: *the nature of knowledge itself*. (p. 91)

The entire argument of this chapter arises as a reflection on the most penetrating insight of Steiner's account: that intentional activity must precede the acquisition of an object of consciousness. Once this is understood, it becomes obvious that a theory of knowledge that begins from such an object must distort the resulting picture; thus the list of "corrections" above.

Of course, the correction to methodology arising from this grasp of cognition is still to be worked out, and the text offers no account of the type of scientific investigation that would follow from a grasp of thinking that is primarily intentional rather than propositional. As one sees from his work on Goethe's science and his own lectures on scientific subjects, however, Steiner was quite aware that his epistemology would alter the nature of scientific investigation.

Chapter Eight: Practical Conclusion

This chapter is necessarily the most condensed for it recognizes possibilities nascent in the preceding discussion. Thus the first sentence restates the task of the work:

The aim of the preceding discussion has been to throw light on the relationship between our cognizing personality and the objective world. (p. 93)

The next two paragraphs restate the conclusion:

Our discussion has shown that the most inward essence of the world lives in our knowledge. The lawful harmony that governs the cosmos comes to manifestation in human cognition.

It is part of the human task to bring into the sphere of appearance those fundamental laws that govern all manifest being, but would otherwise not come into manifestation themselves. It is the essence of our knowing that the world-ground, which is never to be found as such in objective reality, is presented in it. Our cognition — to speak pictorially — is a continuous growing into the world-ground. (p. 93)

The equation of cognition with the production of appearance allows the statement to generalize

upon three distinct revelations: the experience of the concept within human subjectivity, the original production and subsequent metamorphosis of phenomena toward increasing intelligibility, and finally, art — the production of aesthetically enhanced phenomena. All these are now seen in terms of bringing fundamental laws to manifestation, an interpretation that stands in direct opposition to Kantian and neo-Kantian accounts. The implied resolution of aesthetics is particularly surprising, since it is based on cognition, an activity excluded from aesthetic experience by Hume, Kant, and Croce. Steiner does not turn toward these rich implications however, for he has another concern in mind.

The chapter is the “practical” conclusion and, since Kant’s second critique, “practical reason” has meant moral reason. Steiner will now make good on his subtitle — “Introduction for a Philosophy of Freedom” — arguing that even as this account of cognition must redefine epistemology and aesthetics, so it must also be definitive for ethics. The discussion here is equally surprising, since it suggests that our cognitive powers can also be the basis of ethics.

Most ethical arguments attempt to discover the content of ethical law; they argue in order to justify a claim of what we ought to do. Steiner pays no attention to this project, turning instead to the ground of ethical responsibility — that is, to what authority do we owe this responsibility?

The argument begins with a generalization that follows from the previous chapters.

The human being is therefore called upon to bring into a realm of manifest reality those fundamental laws of the world which do indeed govern all existence, but which otherwise never come to existence. That is the nature of knowing: that in it the world-ground, which is never to be found in objective reality, presents itself. Our knowing activity — expressed pictorially — is a continuous living into the ground of the world. (p. 93)

But the next sentence reads:

Such a conviction must also shed light on the way we take up practical life.

If human beings are governed by moral laws, then these laws will be part of the general lawfulness of the world, and will have to be brought to manifestation in the same manner as other laws. But the result of the knowledge so produced is quite different from the result of a knowledge of outer nature.

Whenever something takes place in the universe we can distinguish a twofold character: the outer course the event follows in space and time, and the inner lawfulness. (p. 94)

To comprehend such a law in the sphere of human conduct is simply a special instance of cognition. Thus the insight we have gained concerning the nature of cognition must be useful here as well. To know oneself as a behaving personality means to know the law corresponding to one’s behavior — that is, to possess the moral concepts and ideals as knowledge. If we recognize these laws, then our actions are our doing.

What is being known in the passage is not only oneself, but oneself “as a behaving personality,” the sort of knowledge that would tell us what is characteristic of a personality, but this time focused upon ourselves. The argument is merely sketched, and since the text offers no help in this task of knowing, it may not immediately appeal to the understanding. In particular, the sense of a doing that is our own needs clarification. The section continues:

In such instances the law is not something given, lying outside the object in which the event appears, but is the content of the object itself engaged in living activity. The object in this case is our own I. If the I has really penetrated its deed with full insight, in conformity

with its nature, then it also feels itself to be master. As long as this is not the case, the laws ruling the deed confront us as something foreign, they rule us; what we do is done under the compulsion they exert over us. If they are transformed from being a foreign entity into a deed originating completely within our own I, all compulsion ceases. That which compelled us has become our own being ... To recognize the laws of one's deeds means to become conscious of one's own freedom. Thus the process of cognition is the process of development toward freedom. (pp. 94-5)

That the *Erkenntnisprozess* (process of cognition) can be identified with the *Entwicklungsprozess zur Freiheit* (process of development toward freedom) is a somewhat surprising point, and that very sense of surprise can be a guide to the insight. Upon reflection, the conclusion can only surprise due to its contrast with the effect of cognition directed at something other than the thinker. Cognitive activity, in the case of the not-self, does not alter the nature of the object of cognition but produces only the conditions under which that nature can become evident to consciousness. But the effect of cognition is different with regard to the self. Here something that would not otherwise exist — consciousness itself — is created.

If consciousness must create itself through the invention of cognition, then the laws of this cognition actually proceed from the nature of the conscious self, and this creation is a free act. But while this is not yet known, the conscious self cannot experience any freedom in these laws, for they appear to be the result of external necessity. An observation of the nature of thinking, however, can reveal that these laws are our own. It is to this example that Steiner points in chapter six when speaking of the further tasks implied by his epistemology:

The fact that the I is freely able to become active in itself makes it possible for it to produce the category of cognition through self-determination; in the rest of the world, by objective necessity the categories are connected with the given corresponding to them. It must be the task of ethics and metaphysics to investigate the nature of this free self-determination on the basis of this theory of knowledge. These sciences will also have to investigate whether the I can objectify ideas other than those of cognition. That the objectification of the idea of cognition occurs through freedom, however, is already clear from the above discussion. For when the directly given and the thought-form belonging to it are united by the I in the process of cognition, the union of these two elements of reality — which otherwise would remain forever separated in consciousness — can only take place through a free act. (p. 85)

The act of cognition makes the not-self intelligible and the self conscious. It is a free act, for to be active in this manner the I must create the category of cognition through self-determination. Yet consciousness must still grasp itself, and unless the I also grasps its own self-determination, its role as creator of the idea of cognition remains hidden from it. A conscious self who does not know his or her own freedom is no more free than a dreamer who dreams of confinement in prison. External objects are what they are whether or not we grasp them, and the unconscious self is obviously beyond our grasp, but the self-conscious self can only *be* what it can *know* of itself. The I must realize the idea of its own cognitive activity in order to realize its freedom — to grasp that the “laws of logic” are its own intentions, and knowledge its own creation.

But the passage above adds that ethics and metaphysics will have to investigate whether the I can objectify ideas other than those of cognition. Now we must reflect that the I was not free because it cognized — because it knew — but because it brought this about through self-determination. If the I can objectify ideas other than those of cognition, this will also take place through self-determination, for nothing in the world could demand it.

Those who are able to work through the idea of cognition to an observation of cognition discover — if at first only fleetingly — that the task of thinking is not thrust upon us by an enigmatic universe, but is our own free creation, and the manifest intelligibility of the world is a human product. Since this is the case, all problems for cognition have been invented by cognition itself, and contain only those determinations that arise out of our own world of ideas. Consider how well Steiner’s remarks about moral freedom also fit cognition:

In such instances the law is not something given, lying outside the object in which the event appears, but is the content of the object itself engaged in living activity. The object in this case is our own I. If the I has really penetrated its deed with full insight, in conformity with its nature, then it also feels itself to be master. (p.94)

Cognition is a task we give ourselves; in it we are free. It is this sense of freedom that, when gained, must be our guide to ethical freedom. Here, the ideas we objectify determine the nature of the personality, and therefore govern the actions of the personality in the world. “To know oneself as a behaving personality” is to grasp what else, besides thinking, follows from the nature of this individual “I”.

* *Ronald H. Brady taught in the school of American Studies at Ramapo College in Mahwah, New Jersey. This document was near publication at the time of Brady’s death in 2003. See the Editor’s Note prefatory to the main text above.*

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