

On the Philosophy of Freedom

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Let us imagine that we are wandering through a landscape, perhaps a mountain valley. A narrow path stretches out before us, climbing and turning, shadowed by pine trees and isolated larches. Sunlight glistens through the boughs of the trees. In the depths a brook is burbling, swollen with snow melt.

Steep, grey rock walls rise up on the other side of the valley, with white peaks on which the snow of the past winter lies. In the underbrush and the mossy ground through which our feet carry us, the first flowers of spring are showing themselves: coltsfoot, liverwort, and butterburs in radiant yellow, violet, and pink. The air is filled with warmth, birdsong sounds forth, and above, still unseen by us, the peaks are waiting. An ocean of sense impressions, which we bring together under the concept “mountain landscape,” a multifaceted order, meaningful within itself, an entire arrangement of things, living beings, and occurrences.

Let us imagine that we could move through the world of ideas just as we move through this mountain landscape. The concepts would not be less contoured than the rocks or the knobby firs. When we turn our spiritual eye towards an idea, its forms are revealed to us, its landscapes, its many-faceted links and connections. The idea of Being lights up here, there the idea of Justice—and for all of us, endless light streams down on all the experiences that are illuminated by these ideas. How do we know at all that something exists, if not through the idea of Being? How would we know what is just, if we did not have an idea of Justice, in the light of which the action of a human being appears as just? What moves us when we strive towards freedom, if not the idea of Freedom, which has become an ideal for us? Ideas are moving forces, they possess energy—for an idealist this is a result of experience. Through what does our experience receive meaning, through what do we recognize the relationships between things, between happenings? Through the content of ideas that we give to the world! Nature would perhaps still be ruled by laws, but they would remain hidden forever if we did not bring them into sight through our thinking. The world process would

remain incomplete if we did not grasp, through our thinking, the ground of things and what moves them.

When we understand the fundamental meaning of ideas for knowledge and for practical activity, then we might be able to comprehend why the young Rudolf Steiner could write such sentences as: “What the philosophers call the Absolute, Eternal Being, the Ground of the World, what religious people call God, that is what we call ... the Idea.” We can understand that he regarded perception as simply “a particular form of the concept.”

But as light-filled and meaningful as the ideas appear to us, can they replace the perception of, for example, a bellflower? We can understand a bellflower, its form, its structure, and the laws of its growth through ideas, but nevertheless, we still have to perceive it. And this experience of perception cannot replace the idea of a bellflower, no matter how intensely we view the idea. Perception is something that we must experience, to which we must expose our senses, to be able to grasp its [the flower’s] specific quality, its uniqueness, with our body and soul.

The idea is no substitute for the perception.

Even when our perception does not answer any question of knowledge, without our perception we would have no questions, and therefore, also, no knowledge. And we could not derive these perceptions from the ideas. They simply occur, as soon as we open our eyes, as soon as our consciousness awakens. Through our perceptions we are members of the sense world, through them this world communicates something to us that only our perceptions have to tell us. The world of perception is a world of first, original, unique, and unrepeatable events. And one such event is free activity. Can a person derive a free action out of an idea, in which everything is a well-founded interrelationship? No, because I myself must decide upon a free action, and no one can foresee if I will make this decision. A free action is something absolutely first, something, with which the world processes begin anew again and again. Free deeds are not repeated, even when the beginning repeats itself—but it is always from another new beginning, one that never was there before.

Hence there is a way from philosophy to freedom. Between his 21st and his 33rd year of life, Rudolf Steiner completed this path. It is the path from a researcher of Goethe to an Ethical Individualist. One could also say, the way from Plato to Aristotle. This is not a contradiction. Plato looked through the empirical sense world to the ideas and saw in the ideas the archetypes of all Being. Aristotle looked through the ideas to the empirical sense world and recognized that everything is permeated by ideas. And ultimately the free action is permeated by ideas, for in them the spirit experienced by thinking human beings becomes a moving force. The world of ideas, which rests within itself,

has poured itself into the stream of time and has disappeared into the world of perception. In human beings, in whose thinking the intuitions light up that cause the perceptions to be produced, the world of ideas re-emerges. The idea dies in the sense world and is resurrected in freely acting human beings. As a cosmos of moral intuitions, the “spiritual world” begins to take form in human beings.

Literature:

Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, CW 4.

