

Rudolf Steiner's Thought as "Philosophic Mysticism" and the Question of the Continuity between His Early and Later Writings

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Abstract

This article joins the debate regarding the issue of continuity in the worldview of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), known as the founder of anthroposophy. It presents the early Steiner's philosophy, especially in *The Philosophy of Freedom* (written before Steiner became a theosophist/anthroposophist), as belonging to what scholars refer to as "philosophic mysticism." Herein, *mystical experience* is achieved through philosophical thought, the possibility and features of that *mystical experience* being justified on philosophical grounds, and *mystical experience* itself and its contents are linked to thought/thinking/"idea." The early Steiner drew on his idealistic interpretation of Goethe's inquiries in nature and Goethe's claim that he perceived the "idea" in nature, and Nietzsche's individualism and ideals of authenticity, and human beings as the source of ethics; both thinkers serving him as sources of inspiration for his distinctive philosophical fusion of idealism and individualism on an experimental mystical plane. Steiner's early philosophic mysticism carried through into his later thought (Steiner the occultist, theosophist, and anthroposophist), forming the conceptual foundation for all his spiritual experiences and inquiries and their objective verifiability (anthroposophical Spiritual Science).

The later (from 1902 onwards) Steiner's occult knowledge thus functions as another brick in his arguments regarding spiritual experience and its nature in his early philosophy. This article thus essentially confirms Steiner's own assertion that his early and later thought were consistent in principle, without yet being identical—while challenging the claim that he became an anti-idealist individualist during the 1890s. Based on a diachronic analysis, the latter reading focuses on the development of his thought, ignoring its synchronic elements—such as his desire to found a spiritual science as an alternative to the sciences of his day, and his altering ideas and arguments by which he sought to justify his new scientific spiritual ideal. It also takes no account of the essentially dialectical component of his philosophy (the blending of idealism and individualism)—which is revealed precisely by treating it as "philosophic mysticism."

Keywords: mysticism; philosophic mysticism; theosophy; anthroposophy; occultism; esotericism; Goethe; Nietzsche

A. The question of the continuity between Steiner's early and later writings

Herein, I wish to propose an alternative to the well-known scholarly approach of dichotomously dividing Rudolf Steiner's writings into earlier and later periods.¹ According to this approach, Steiner's thought underwent a dramatic change at the beginning of the twentieth century (at the end of 1901)—a “conversion” of sorts that led him to become a member of the theosophic movement (early in 1902) and a theosophist/occultist/mystic. This new position served as the bedrock for his subsequent philosophy, it also underpinned the history of the anthroposophic movement (from 1913 onwards). According to this distinction—which I seek to challenge—Steiner was originally a free thinker and idealistic philosopher who edited Goethe's scientific writings in this vein rather than as an academic researcher. He then became a radical individualist (under Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner's influence), anti-idealist, and even materialist. Finally, in another “conversion,” he became a theosophist/mystic immersed in the upper worlds. Despite initially expressing views considered deviant and changing his opinion, he was thus primarily aligned with the philosophical, cultural, and intellectual school prevalent during his day, then crossing over to the “occult sciences” of his day at a particular point in his life.²

1. In this article, the “early Steiner” signifies the period prior to 1901, the “later Steiner” his theosophic/mystical and anthroposophic writings.

2. Cf. Zander (*Die Biografie*, 53), who argues that Steiner experienced a *theosophische Wende* after seeking his way through diverse and conflicting channels—including his brief dabbling in theosophy and mysticism. Cf. Staudenmaier: “Between 1900 and 1902 Steiner *underwent a profound transformation* from unaffiliated free-thinker to *committed occultist*. His *conversion to theosophy*, consolidated in January 1902 with his entry into the Theosophical Society, *is not easy to explain biographically*. While Steiner had briefly flirted with theosophical notions around 1890, his published discussions of theosophy during the 1890s were scathingly critical. The philosophical position outlined in his pre-1900 works is decidedly this-worldly and makes no reference, even obliquely, to the ‘higher worlds’ that stand at the center of theosophical and anthroposophical thought” (*Between Occultism and Nazism*, 27–28); see also idem, “The Higher Worlds Meet the Lower Criticism.” French recently espoused a similar view: “Steiner's life and works defy easy categorization, shifting between many polarities, positions and fields of interest” (“Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 36). Unless otherwise noted, all italics are mine.

On this reading, the early Steiner—at least in his first steps as a philosopher (up until the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century)—fits into the idealistic philosophical framework as a representative of *objective idealism*. This philosophical stream holds that reality is predicated on the “idea” (an ontological claim), the latter being directly and objectively graspable (an epistemological argument).³ The very early (and later) Steiner thus opposed both the natural sciences of his day (to their point of viewing the concrete facts of the natural and human as the sole manifestation of reality [materialism]) and the subjective idealism of Kant and all other forms of subjectivism. The later (theosophist/mystic) Steiner, of course, belongs categorically to the alternatives to philosophy and sciences of his time—occultism and mysticism.⁴

This distinction between Steiner’s early and later thought also gives rise to a hermeneutic argument: it is a forced anachronism, which Steiner himself shared and has been adopted by many of his followers, to understand the early (philosophic) Steiner through the prism of the later (theosophic/mystical) Steiner.⁵

3. Zander, *Die Biografie*, 25–27. Quoting the early Steiner—“Just as the eyes see colours and the ears hear sounds, so thought grasps ideas” (ibid, 27)—Zander also notes that Steiner espouses an “objective idealism,” regarding thought as a “sense organ.” For the two streams of German idealism during the period preceding Steiner—that which attributes the idea to human beings (subjectivism) and that which ascribes it an autonomous existence (objectivism), see Beiser, *German Idealism* (who does not refer to Steiner).

4. Denoted by various terms—theosophy, mysticism, occultism, esotericism, spiritualism, gnosticism, and finally anthroposophy—all these require elucidation, the fields of knowledge and experience associated with them intersecting. Nor does any consensus exist regarding their definition and parameters. Until I clarify the term “mysticism” in section D, I will largely follow Zander in employing the compound “theosophy/mysticism” to characterize Steiner’s affiliation with alternative ways of gaining knowledge (vs. the discursive/analogous thought that underpins the sciences).

5. See Traub, “Reconciling Philosophy.” While primarily philosophical (Steiner in the framework of German idealism), Traub’s grounds are also developmental/historical: Steiner’s turn to theosophy/mysticism was due principally to circumstantial factors; had he accepted an academic post after completing his doctorate (1891) and publishing *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/4), the trajectory of his life might have been very different. Traub thus contends that Steiner’s early philosophy would stand in its own right even if anthroposophy had not subsequently developed. In his tome on Steiner (*Philosophie und Anthroposophie*), he further observes that he does not treat the esoteric and mystical contexts of Steiner’s philosophy. Tazer-Myers adopts a

Although Steiner scholars have drawn attention to some of his early mystical utterances, as well as his early contacts with theosophy/theosophists and mysticism (in particular in 1889), they have generally regarded these as lying on—or beyond—the seam between idealistic philosophy and mystical thought.⁶ They likewise treat his early contacts with theosophy/mysticism as a passing episode (Zander)—another example of his youthful spiritual peregrinations as he sought to shape his worldview and life path (including its practical aspects—profession and income). The early Steiner occasionally flirted with theosophy/mysticism; however, he also critiqued and opposed it (Staudenmaier).⁷

Contra this current prevalent view of Steiner, which dichotomizes his early and later thought, I would like to present an alternative. This alternative view can be traced back to a period before any of the scholars cited above (1961), being proposed by Samuel Hugo Bergman (1883–1975). In the introduction to one of the English editions of Steiner’s *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94, and under its other name, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*) Bergman argues that “In the history of recent Western philosophy, Rudolf Steiner appears as a unique personality because *his whole philosophical work* is not the result of a thinking

contrary synchronic/harmonizing approach to Steiner’s worldview, making no reference to the sharp scholarly diachronic differentiation between the early and the later Steiner, in his recent dissertation: “His [Steiner’s] mysticism was driven by lifelong clairvoyant perceptions of the dead and other spiritual beings. . . . Steiner empirically validated his perceptions and then tried to construct a philosophical proof of super-sensible cognition” (“Rudolf Steiner’s Theory of Cognition,” iii–iv). This approach is typical of most of Steiner’s adherents, scholars and laymen alike: see, for example, Steiner’s biographer Christoph Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner: A Biography*.

6. Zander (*Die Biografie*, 29) notes that, at the beginning of his philosophic journey, Steiner followed in Goethe’s metaphysical footsteps, believing, like the poet, in *Lichtfrommen* (the religiosity of light).

7. He thus participated in Marie Lang’s theosophic/mystical circle in Vienna in 1889–1890, shortly before leaving for Weimar to continue his editing of Goethe’s works. Herein, he was exposed to a “mystical element” and “occultic environment” (Zander, *Die Biografie*, 36) and thence to theosophic literature. During this period, he met Friedrich Eckstein, a theosophist and unique occult/symbolism scholar. Steiner greatly admired Eckstein, expressing his esteem for him in an 1890 letter in which he adduced their encounter as one of two events that made him who he was. For this brief interval in Steiner’s life, see also Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner*, 109–11 (first published in German in 1997).

effort, but *is based on spiritual experiences*.”⁸ Bergman further notes that “Steiner’s Anthroposophy—with which we are not dealing here—differs from the ‘mystical’ schools in the extremely high value it accords to thinking. This high evaluation of thinking originates here, in Steiner’s philosophy: man has his right place in the cosmos as a thinking being.”⁹ While contending that Steiner’s early philosophy rests *principally* upon spiritual experience (thus not forming part of philosophic discourse in the conventional sense), Bergman recognizes that it cannot be compared with anthroposophy (a scholarly developmental approach), finally commenting that anthroposophy differs from other “mystical” schools (Bergman’s own quotation marks) in extolling thought/thinking.

This characterization of the later Steiner’s (anthroposophic) doctrine as exhibiting links with mysticism and privileging thought/thinking returns us to Bergman’s assertion that Steiner’s early philosophy is primarily based on “spiritual experience” and “experiences of our consciousness.” This is predicated on Bergman’s opinion that Steiner’s early and later writings are both informed by thinking and spiritual experiences.¹⁰ The necessary inference from Bergman’s statement is that thought/thinking based on “spiritual experiences” is the axis that connects all Steiner’s doctrine. As we have noted, according to Bergman

8. Bergman, “Introduction,” 11. He then proceeds to remark: “In the world of the East it goes without saying that a great thinker is at the same time a great initiate; in the West, however, it never before occurred that a whole philosophical system was based on immediate spiritual experience. For this reason Steiner had to face the greatest mistrust from the world of the ‘official’ philosophers” (ibid). The context indicates that Bergman understands “spiritual experiences” as revelatory experiences, dependent on inner strengthening and anchored in union with the world essence. I follow this definition herein. *Contra* von Hartmann and Kant (as expressed in his autobiography [1923–1925]), Bergman argues, Steiner believed that the “experiences of our consciousness can enter the true realities by means of strengthening of our soul forces, and that the divine spiritual principle manifests itself in man if he makes this manifestation possible by his soul life” (ibid).

9. Ibid.

10. I suggest that Bergman’s distinction between Steiner’s (early) philosophy and anthroposophy should be read as follows: anthroposophy deals with subjects that Steiner did not address in his early philosophy (as per Staudenmaier), anthroposophy forming part of “mysticism” à la Bergman but remaining independent of many mystical phenomena in favoring thinking over subjective experience. Nor did Steiner himself ever define his anthroposophic teaching as “mystical.”

the early Steiner's philosophy was regarded suspiciously in his own day, its detractors discerning that it rested *primarily* on spiritual experience—a view that Steinerian scholars (Zander, Staudenmaier, and Traub) do not share.

Bergman's 1961 article preceded the above-mentioned scholars' contributions. While we cannot know how he would have responded to their statements, it appears to have left no impression on them. In my opinion, *contra* Bergman, it is difficult to confidently identify—on the basis of a philosophical literature that is speculative/theoretical by nature—the “spiritual experiences” that lie at its foundation. By the same token, however, it is also not easy to maintain the opposite with regard to a philosophical literature whose descriptions and claims can readily be interpreted as such—in particular if it wishes to lead to such “spiritual experiences.”¹¹

Here, we may also note the more cautious view of Christian Clement, a scholar with a close affinity to Steiner and Anthroposophy, responsible for the critical edition of Steiner's writings. Like Bergman, Clement took a continuous middle way in understanding the relationship between early and late Steiner; namely, he did not claim that early Steiner was the same as late Steiner, but he also did not take the dichotomous approach. In the introduction to the volume containing Steiner's philosophical works, Clement posed the relationship between Steiner's early philosophy and mysticism as a question.¹²

11. Although Bergman's specialization was modern philosophy, he was intensely interested in mystical literature, even writing on it, thus being drawn to Steiner. In contrast, the Steiner-scholars referred to above belong to other disciplines and inclinations. It is thus possible to assume that personal and academic disciplinary affiliations influenced the conclusions of both sides.

12. “True philosophy or mysticism clothed in philosophic guise...did the author, who subsequently became known as a prominent esoteric and the founder of anthroposophy, employ philosophical tools already in his early [philosophical] writings perhaps only as an external form, as a means of expressing a mystical-occult understanding of the world?” (“Einleitung,” 2: xxiv). Good reason exists to suspect that Clement's question is primarily rhetorical, the answer being similar to Bergman's. See French, “Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 74. In any case, Clement's hermeneutical approach (accepting in principle the scholarly historical/developmental perspective), an approach which I am not discussing here, produces a more integral understanding of the relation between early and later Steiner when compared with the discontinuity approach. See: Clement, “A New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Anthroposophy?” 9–10.

It is also worth noting Kaj Skagen's book *Anarchist, Individualist, Mystiker—Rudolf Steiners Frühe Berliner Jahre 1897–1902* (2020) ["Anarchist, Individualist, Mystic: Rudolf Steiner's Early Berlin Years, 1897–1902"]. A Norwegian author and essayist, Skagen focuses on the change in Steiner's views between 1897 and 1902. Directly countering Zander's arguments, he asserts that "Steiner is always a mystic" (p. 14)—the mystical element existing during these years only as an underground current, however. Like Bergman and Clement, he adopts a diachronic/developmental approach to Steiner, pointing at some shifts and altering emphases in Steiner's views during that period of time, while claiming that Steiner's entrance into the theosophical sphere was essentially natural.¹³

Herein, I seek to re-establish, elaborate, and anchor Bergman's phenomenological approach. My intention is to identify the significant role mysticism plays in early Steinerian thought. Continuing through to his later work, it thus constitutes a *foundational and continuous* component of his thought as a whole. In my opinion, a line runs through the early Steiner's writings, both in his interpretation of Goethe and in his independent philosophical contributions, especially his *The Philosophy of Freedom*.¹⁴ Although he took pains not to highlight it, it remains the pillar of his teaching *in toto*—his fundamental

13. Skagen, *Anarchist, Individualist, Mystiker*, 17–25. Following the *via media* between two views he calls fundamentalist, motivated by self-interest: a) The "correct" anthroposophical perception, according to which Steiner is a kind of saint, his thought being treated synchronically à la later Steiner; on this reading, the debate over Steiner's intellectual and spiritual biography is also one over his credibility, this thus becoming an emotional discussion; b) The claim that Steiner's self-presentation, espoused by his adherents, is not the true Steiner, who was in fact a dilettante thinker, charlatan, and opportunist ready to embrace any view at any time when pragmatic or convenient to do so.

14. Steiner's own thought and his understanding of that of others (such as Goethe, Nietzsche, Stirner, Haeckel) must, of course, be distinguished. While Steiner clearly interpreted others' work through his own prism and with the same themes and emphases with which he felt an affinity (as he himself acknowledged), his perception of their ideas cannot be totally identified with his own stance (as he also observed): see, for example, Steiner, "Forward to the First Edition," in *Goethe's World View*.

intuition, the Archimidean point of his overall oeuvre.¹⁵ I shall refer to it herein as “philosophic mysticism” (section D), regarding it as a foundation on which the later Steiner erected an additional storey—namely, occult knowledge *in toto* (“knowledge of the higher worlds”)—on top of the philosophic ground floor; an additional storey with some of its components already existent in early Steiner.¹⁶

In order to ground my assertion that a significant mystical element played a decisive role already in early Steinerian thought, I must first “unravel” Zander’s claim that Steiner’s essential book *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1993/94) already demonstrates Steiner’s shift from idealism to anti-idealistic individualism and even a materialist and nihilist worldview (section B). I shall then explore how

15. In addition to the difficulty in distinguishing the foundational *experiential* elements in philosophical writings, which may be read in two ways (hypothetical and experimental), in my view the early Steiner hoped to be recognized as a philosopher of the central cultural stream of his day, both personally and professionally (his ambition to be an influential rather than marginal figure). Mysticism having a poor reputation during this period—a fact of which Steiner was well aware—he thought it better not merely to conceal his internal spiritual world but also to join his voice with those who maintained that mysticism could not serve as a reliable source of knowledge. See the introduction to his first book on Goethe in relation to the latter’s early concept of *wholeness as unity* (written under the influence of Paracelsus’ alchemical thought): “Nevertheless, this way of looking at the world, which borders on the *mystical*, represents only a passing episode in Goethe’s development, and so on gives way to a healthier and more objective way of picturing things” (*Goethean Science*, “Introduction”). However, Steiner’s characterization of Goethe’s thought in this book (1883) is fully mystical: “We have the task, with regard to every single entity, of working upon it in such a way that it appears as flowing from the [all-inclusive one] idea, that it *completely dissolves as a single thing and merges with the idea*, into whose element we feel ourselves transferred. . . . With this we have arrived at where the Goethean way of looking at the world takes its start” (Steiner, *Goethean Science* [1883], original italics). Cf. also Steiner’s account of the mystical phenomenon in his *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901), an account very similar to the way he presented Goethe’s conception of nature: see p. 14 below.

16. In the face of alternative readings of Steiner, the assertion that the mystical element already pervades the early Steiner raises questions about Steiner’s post-*The Philosophy of Freedom* volume, which covers his early years in Berlin (1897 onwards) through to his “theosophical turn” (1901/2). Did he retreat from his early (mystical) idealism during this period? Did he frequently change his views? These questions—which are not limited to 1891–1902—relate to what I refer to as “Steiner as a hermeneutical problem.” A significant and thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, though relevant to the discussion here. For Steiner’s early years in Berlin as characterized by inner struggle and confusion, see French, “Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 92–94.

the early and later Steiner understood “mysticism,” his reservations concerning it and identification with it (section C). Further, I shall introduce the mystical current known as “philosophic mysticism” (D1), also drawing attention to phenomenological links between that current and Steiner’s philosophy, then analysing several passages from *The Philosophy of Freedom* (the early Steiner)—his *magnum opus* in his own view and that of his followers. I regard these as mystical descriptions linked to “spiritual experiences.” Depicting revelation, these experiences form, in my opinion, the bedrock of the book as a whole.

The exegesis I shall present of the Steinerian sources leads to my argument regarding Steiner’s doctrine as a whole—namely, that we can draw a line from the early Steiner (*The Goethean Science* [1883]) through *The Science of Knowing: Outline of an Epistemology Implicit in the Goethean World View* (1886) and *The Philosophy of Freedom* and his further treatment of Goethe (*Goethe’s Worldview* [1897]), to 1901’s *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (prior to his becoming a theosophist), *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (1902), and the remainder of his theosophic/anthroposophic works (the later Steiner). In this respect, the late nineteenth century may be regarded as a period during which the diverse elements of Steiner’s thought never achieved full harmony.

B. From idealism to individualism? The claim that *The Philosophy of Freedom* is a hybrid creature

Zander’s postulation that the early Steiner was capricious, even making 180° turnabouts—his abandonment of objective idealism (Goethe) and theosophy/mysticism (1889–1890) in favour of individualism, naturalism/materialism (Nietzsche and Haeckel); and, of course, his theosophic/mystical shift (“conversion”), which appears to have occurred towards the end of 1900, wherein he readopted idealism within a theosophic/anthroposophic structure—features prominently in his biography of Steiner. Following the way-posts in Steiner’s life and the developments in his conceptual system, Zander illuminates his

biographical contexts (encounters, events, and intellectual influences), interpreting them through a critical lens. To my mind, he stretches the historical-developmental approach—so prevalent in modern scholarly research—too far, however.¹⁷

His thesis rests on Steiner's 1890s writings, which he perceives as pointing to a measure of retreat from Goethe and critical (even gross) remarks about theosophy/mysticism that continue through to his critique of metaphysics in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Zander correctly links Steiner's idealism with his theosophical/mystical period, during which he joined the Viennese theosophical circle, citing the potential tie between idealism and mysticism and the influence German mysticism exerted on German idealism.

Zander's argument regarding Steiner's shift from idealism to individualism in the 1890s also rests on his view that *The Philosophy of Freedom* forms a transitional link to Nietzschean individualism (1895) and naturalist monism (Haeckel, 1900). This has direct ramifications for our present discussion. Zander presumes that Steiner began penning *The Philosophy of Freedom* as early as 1891, the same year in which he submitted his dissertation, contending that he completed it in a flurry in Vienna at the end of 1893.¹⁸ In contrast to his dissertation, he

17. It is worth noting that after Zander read Clement's introduction to the eighth volume of the critical edition of Steiner's books, he moderated his initial position regarding a complete theosophical "conversion" that occurred in Steiner at the beginning of the twentieth century, admitting in a review of the volume (from 2018), that it is "necessary to revise certain ideas that postulate a sharp rupture between the pre-esoteric Steiner and Steiner the Theosophist. His (Clement's) critique of this (Zander's) postulate, even in my own earlier interpretations is, therefore, justified" (quoted by Clement in his "A New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Anthroposophy?" 21n42; I thank Christian Clement for bringing Zander's "conversion" to my attention). To put it accurately—in Zander's eyes there is still a rupture, but not a sharp one. Yet, it seems to me quite valuable to discuss some of Zander's arguments about Steiner's departure from idealism and mysticism/theosophy in the last decade of the nineteenth century, for any further discussion on the topic.

18. Zander posits a sharp turn in Steiner's thought from idealism to an individualism he had sought to minimize /conceal in his doctorate, perhaps because his supervisor was dedicated to an idealistic approach and supported Steiner on this basis. To my mind, Steiner downplayed his *mystical idealism* primarily during this period—an idealism that (also) emerges at the end of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, which (according to Zander) he wrote in great haste on his return to Vienna, thus being less careful in his wording. In the final section of the first edition (1893/4),

posits, it presents an incoherent view of the world—a hybrid of two conflicting philosophies: (Goethean) objective idealism and (Nietzschean) individualism. He thus makes two claims: a) the occurrence of a watershed in Steiner’s thought in 1891 (developmental); and reinforcing the first, b) that the objective idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is inconsistent with the individualistic element of it (philosophical). Steiner himself being aware of this problem or contradiction, Zander thus regards the final result as forced.

Relating to these in order, Steiner adopted an explicitly individualistic approach in an open letter to the Austrian poetess Marie Eugenie Delle Grazie in 1886, in which he called for the release of human beings from nature—i.e., five years before the point at which Zander maintains that he shifted to individualism.¹⁹ The same year also saw the publication of *The Science of Knowing: Outline of an Epistemology Implicit in the Goethean World View* (objective idealism). Steiner thus clearly and unambiguously expressed individualistic views even before the watershed Zander ascribes to him, at the same time as espousing idealism.

We must thus turn to the place in which he combines the two—*The Philosophy of Freedom*; namely, he shifts from a developmental to a conceptual/philosophical perspective. The first passage we shall examine is the following:

However true it may be that we have estranged ourselves from Nature, it is none the less true that we feel we are in her and belong to her. It can be only her

he thus opines: “Die Welt ist Gott” (*Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, 239). In the subsequent editions, however, he corrected/modified this formulation: “To live in reality, filled with the content of thought, is at the same time to live in God” (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 215). This remains an idealistic description, anyone not informed by thought independent of him or herself is not only not living in God but also not living in reality.

19. “What would remain of divine freedom if nature were to treat us as children, leading us, carry for us, protecting us? She has to deny us everything so that when we find joy, it is born out of the innermost of our independent selves! Nature should destroy what we built daily, that we might each day rediscover the joy of creation! We wish to thank nature for nothing, and ourselves for everything” (quoted in Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner*, 88).

own working which postulates also in us.²⁰ We must find the way back to her again. . . . We have, it is true, torn ourselves away from Nature, but we must none the less have taken something of her with us into our own being. . . . We can find Nature outside us only if we have first learned to know her within us. What is akin to her within us must be our guide. . . . we probe into the depth of our own being, to find there those elements which we saved in our flight from nature.²¹

According to this text, human beings formed part of nature in the ancient past. Although subsequently cut off from it, as they withdrew they took in themselves the element that reconnects them (concepts/ideas).²² The present and future of humanity thus encapsulate individualism and idealism, the later Steiner holding to the connection between each individual and the spiritual worlds (as thought content) with which he or she must align, be contained by, and incorporate them within him or herself.

Thus, the later Steiner defined anthropology as “a path of knowledge, [designed] to guide the spiritual element in the human being man [= individualism] to the spiritual in the universe [= idealism],” combining both

20. Such are the elements and forces of nature, as well as ideas/thoughts—as clearly emerges from analysis of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. In distancing ourselves from nature (individualism) in a developmental-evolutionary sense, we take upon ourselves thought/ideas (idealism), thereby prompting the illusion that thoughts/ideas are our distinctive creation (subjectivism).

21. *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 19 (original italics). In my view, the passage quoted here depicts the mystical union that may (and should) occur in human consciousness, pointing to the essential and *a priori* identity between a person’s inner nature (the “idea”) and nature (“What is akin to her within us”)—awareness of whose existence has been lost and must be restored. This reclamation—reunification with nature—is achieved through the element that links human beings and nature, namely, the “idea.” Although Zander notes that Steiner recognized that his accounts of the relationship between the two separate elements (individualism and idealism) in *The Philosophy of Freedom* was problematic, in my opinion Steiner specifically refers to the ethical realm of action, as evinced by his clarification in the 1918 edition (139). He thus maintains that in the *human-nature union*, the former is sometimes to be found on its own individualistic side and sometimes on that of the “idea,” representing a “living pendulum”—i.e., the field of moral decision-making that enables ethical autonomy to manifest itself when a person falls more on his or her own side.

22. From a synchronic perspective relating to all Steiner’s doctrine, this account embodies a person’s development in relation to nature from the distant past to the present and thence to the future.

components in an inseparable manner.²³ This distinction holds true for both his early and his later writings. The fact that he adduces both schools of thought in *The Philosophy of Freedom* cannot thus indicate that he had distanced himself from (mystical) idealism at this point. Individualism and idealism co-exist quite happily together in the early and later Steiner alike. While such a blending of the personal and collective/universal is fraught with philosophic problems, in a mystical framework it is eminently possible, one of mysticism's features being the synthesis of antitheses (unio-mysticism)²⁴—a fusion that rehabilitates the primal unity. If in principle individualism and idealism are not antitheses in the realms of idea and (spiritual) experience—i.e., if the idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is not necessarily a forced, artificial creature or disguise for Steinerian individualism—we can engage in a clearer and deeper exploration of Clements' question of whether Steiner's idealism serves as a facade for mysticism.²⁵

We must also briefly address Zander's observation that Steiner's reservations regarding metaphysics in *The Philosophy of Freedom* further attest to his abandonment of idealism. Close examination of Steiner's critique of metaphysics in this volume indicates clearly that this relates to *hypothetical metaphysics*: the

23. Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*.

24. For the relationship between individualism and mystical union, cf. Walter Stace's distinction between two types of the latter: a) *undifferentiated unity*, in which the autonomy of the subject stands for a period of time within the whole (the individual as subsumed within the "idea"); and b) the subject's *identity in difference* within the whole (*Mysticism and Philosophy*, 72). In other words, the internal integration of a person, his or her separateness and sense of such, is preserved within his or her unity with the "idea" (in nature or God), he or she thus perceiving themselves experientially as part of this unity. Unity as *identity in difference* more closely fits Steiner's views not only in *The Philosophy of Freedom* but also in general—his later (anthroposophic) teaching also not regarding human beings as losing their self-awareness within the state of union. Similarly, intuition underpins human-Nature unity in both the early and later Steiner: see pp. 27–28 below. Steiner's doctrine must also be analyzed synchronically in order to properly understand each specific passage.

25. While the possibility of individualism and (mystical) idealism coexisting is one question, the question of whether or not *The Philosophy of Freedom* succeeds in persuasively demonstrating that the union of the two presents human beings with a free choice (free will) is quite another. In my opinion, the answer to the first question is affirmative and that to the second negative. I conclude that Steiner was a mystic on the grounds of the "natural" element in his thought—vs. his weaknesses as a philosopher: see Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (in Hebrew).

assumption of the existence of something unseen and inconceivable, employed to explain something observable and comprehensible—the speculative, inconceivable, hypothetical cause of something graspable.²⁶

In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner maintains that hypothetical (indirect) premises concerning *wholeness* are unnecessary, the elements of *wholeness* being identifiable through unmediated experience. In other words, “one cannot speak of limits to knowledge.”²⁷ *Contra* Goethe, who declared to Schiller that he directly perceived the “idea” in its activity in nature, metaphysics infers its existence rather than seeing it. The early and later Steiner denounces everything that expresses a mediated view of reality because it challenges his desire—even in his early writings—to establish a form of knowledge (a spiritual science) that is not hypothetical, setting no bounds to knowledge and leaving no room for doubt.

Steiner’s objections to metaphysics are epistemological in nature, forming part of his vehement criticism of monotheism (an ontological argument). The latter champions the existence of an all-encompassing, transcendent, creative Being who lies beyond human comprehension and employs nature and human beings to realize its purposes. Such an entity—which Steiner never accepted—undermines both his epistemology and his idea of freedom. In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner affords nature no role or purpose (teleology), human beings alone determining their own goals.²⁸ His laudation of Nietzsche in 1905 and Haeckel in 1900 is based on his rejection of these two pillars—(hypothetical) philosophical metaphysics and religious monotheism.

26. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 67, 96–97, 136–38, 187–88, 191.

27. *Ibid.*, 92. In my opinion, we should also understand Steiner’s later opposition to the principle of the “hypothetical ether” in the same way—i.e., he argues that unmediated experience is not only possible but also proper in the etheric realm: see Aspren, “Vorwort,” xvi.

28. *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Chapter 11.

C. Steiner's position with regard to mysticism

In this section, I shall discuss Zander's and Staudenmaier's postulations with respect to Steiner's retreat from mysticism and theosophy between 1891 and 1901, exploring his attitude towards them synchronically. Up until this point, I have treated the two terms as synonyms per Zander. Now, I shall be focusing on mysticism—the necessary discussion of this leading to the proposal that Steiner's philosophy is in fact a “philosophic mysticism” (section D).

Let me begin by addressing Steiner's statements about mysticism in his 1891 letter to Paulina Specht, just after he moved to Weimar. Herein, he speaks sarcastically of the phenomenon in relating the brief period (1889–1890) he spent in Vienna amongst the theosophist circle and his early years in Weimar:

You can imagine that I *immersed myself quite thoroughly in the mystical element* in which I swam for a while in Vienna, *almost alarmingly* . . . it is possible that mysticism will still be quite acceptable here. *Since this is probably the last stage before its extinction, one could welcome this phenomenon with joy.*²⁹

Here, Steiner makes two significant remarks: a) that his early attraction to mysticism was “almost alarming” in nature/extent—a statement I believe to be directed more towards the Viennese theosophist circle than himself personally; and b) its disappearance from the world is a happy event (sarcasm). On the other hand, he “immersed” himself “quite thoroughly in the mystical element”—a fact that should not surprise Paulina (“You can imagine”).

Even if he exaggerates somewhat, his mysticism does not appear to have been limited to salon discussions of the phenomenon (as per Zander). If we add to this passage his acknowledgement to the esoteric/theosophist Frederick Eckstein, whom he had met through the Viennese theosophist circle a year or so earlier, that without his influence he would not have become the person he had, we may perceive that he had developed a close (albeit complex) attachment to both theosophy and mysticism.³⁰ Nor should we forget the reservations he expresses in his letter to Paulina Specht.

29. Steiner, *Briefe II*, 85–86, letter 283.

30. Letter to Eckstein, cited in Zander, *Die Biografie*, 47.

Steiner's 1891 welcoming of the fortunate ephemerality of theosophy/mysticism contrasts with his lack of sarcasm, over thirty years later (1923), in the preface he added to his *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901).³¹ While in 1901 he expressed his great admiration for German mystics/mysticism (from Meister Eckhart through to Angelus Silesius), in the new passage he is much less enthusiastic. Although acknowledging their inspiration (received and transmitted), he regards what passed down through them to the new era as having already become invalid and inauthentic. Belonging primarily to the pre-modern period, it deserved to become extinct.

This reflects a fundamental Steinerian principle—namely, that the good of the past can turn into the evil of the present, exceeding its “expiry date.” I suggest that we should understand Steiner's 1891 statement (in his letter to Paulina Specht) in light of what he maintained in 1923. As observed above, such a synchronic approach to Steiner's writings (identification of consistent features) can help us better and more precisely pinpoint his ideas/intentions along a temporal trajectory.

Continuing to examine Steiner's view of mysticism from a synchronic perspective, we may now observe that in effect he never renounced mysticism either essentially or categorically, rather believing that it should take a specific form. Thus, his early reservations with regard to it represent the position of a person finding his way towards the type of spirituality he wished to embrace personally and culturally, rejecting other forms along the way that did not fit what he thought proper. These early words are thus perfectly commensurate with his later utterances regarding mysticism.

C1. Common synchronic features in Steiner's attitude towards mysticism

If we explore how Steiner perceived mysticism and his attitude towards it synchronically—i.e., if we seek to extract from all his statements, pro and con, the features that remain constant, we find them already in *The Philosophy of Freedom* and his reflections on his youth in his autobiography (first published in parts

31. Steiner, *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, 126–93.

between 1923 and 1925). In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner only denigrates mysticism to the extent that it does not reach the objective realm of ideas, not identifying himself or his doctrine with any such ideational mysticism.³² In the autobiography, he addresses the subject at greater length and on a more personal level, following his doubts with a half-hearted admission that, after all was said and done, he was a mystic in a certain sense.³³ Even this confession did not come easily: “I also could say that my view rests upon ‘mystical’ ideal experience.”³⁴ In both places, he thus denigrates a mysticism based solely on emotions rather than one that rests on thought/“ideas.” It is also important to note that late in life he referred to himself as a “mystic of the ‘I.’”³⁵ These self-characterizations from the end of his life, as an ideational mystic/mystic of the “I,” may also be read as authentic descriptions in light of the close association in Steiner’s thought between the “I” and thought/ideas.

If so, mysticism takes various shapes and forms—one of which fits his thought and philosophy. What unites them all, before they can be distinguished and accepted/rejected, is their origin—namely, *inner immersion* as the basis for

32. “The error in a mystical outlook based upon mere feeling, is that it wants to *experience directly* what it ought to gain through *knowledge*; that it wants to raise feeling, which is individual, into a universal principle” (Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 115 [original italics]).

33. “As this [mysticism] passed in review before my mind at the various epochs in the evolution of humanity—in Oriental Wisdom, in Neo-Platonism, in the Christian Middle Ages, in the endeavours of the Kabbalists—it was only with the greatest difficulty that I, with my different temper of mind, could establish any relationship to it. The mystic seemed to me to be a man who *failed to come into right relation to the world of ideas, in which for me the spiritual has its existence*. I felt that it was a deficiency in real spirituality when, in order to attain satisfaction in one’s ideas, one plunges into an inner world void of all ideas. In this I could see no road to light, but rather a way to spiritual darkness. . . . And yet something attracted me toward the mystical strivings of humanity. This was the character of the inner experience of the mystics. They desire *living contact* with the sources of human existence, not merely a view of these. . . . But if anyone enters into the interior of his own soul without taking ideas with him, he thus arrives at the inner region of mere feeling. . . . I objected with all positiveness to mere feeling as a way into the spiritual. And yet, when I thought *of the nature of the mystic’s experience*, I felt once more a **remote kinship** between this and my own attitude toward the spiritual world” (Steiner, *Story of My Life*, Chapter 11 [bold original]).

34. Ibid.

35. Kiersch, “On Rudolf Steiner’s Conception of Consciousness Soul,” 77.

understanding the fundamentals of the world and full perception of reality. Steiner hints at this internal activity in his autobiography in differentiating between hypothetical thought (e.g., metaphysics) and direct spiritual experience. It also forms the pillar of his doctrine in general: the key to comprehending the world lies in human inwardness.³⁶ The mystic’s introverted starting point is a “deposit” of sorts from which he or she must emerge into the world by means of thought/“idea” in order to acquire established, true knowledge.

This, according to Steiner, is the default that distinguishes a mere soul/feelings/inner experience, from truth, from a true and unconditional cognition. Mystics who do not find their way into the world via an “idea”-infused consciousness will remain within their own emotional/experiential inner life, steeped in cognitive darkness. While they may imagine themselves to be in contact with the foundation of creation and in possession of spiritual enlightenment, in actuality they merely gain a reflection of their soul/interiority. Such persons—to whom Steiner refers as “half or quarter mystics” in his lectures published as *The Evolution of Consciousness* (1923)—are neither mystics nor representatives of the mysticism he lauds in *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901).³⁷ Herein, he highlights the inner awakening (the key lies in interiority) that further unites a person with reality, changing the “aggregated state” of the latter as a whole. While inner unitive experience is the key, the mystical state can raise knowledge of the world as a whole—rather than merely in the psyche—to a higher level:

36. “Our Age can only accept *truth* from the depth of human soul. Of Schiller’s two well-known paths, it is the second that will mostly be chosen at the present time. . . . A truth that comes to us from outside always bears the stamp of uncertainty” (Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, xxvii [original italics]). Cf. also: “In my own world of feeling and thought the loftiest mysteries lie hidden, only I have hitherto not been aware of them” (Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, 63 [first published in parts between 1904 and 1906]).

37. Those mystics “do not penetrate to any great depth. They believe that by means of a more or less nebulous spiritual training they can come to an inward experience of a higher divinity underlying the world. And these mystics, these half or quarter mystics, are often heard to say how an inner light of the soul has dawned within them, how they have had some kind of spiritual vision” (Steiner, *The Evolution of Consciousness*, 10–12). At the same time, he defends Goethe in 1910 against the charge of being a mystic, speaking out against the view that mysticism is abstract thought (Steiner, “What is Mysticism?”).

A thing which confronts me is no longer separate from me once I know it. That part of it which I can take in is incorporated into my own nature. When I awaken my own self, when I perceive what is within me, then I also awaken to a higher existence what I have incorporated into my nature from the outside. The light which falls upon me when I awaken, also falls upon what I have appropriated to myself of the things of the world. A light flashes in me and illuminates me, and with me everything I know of the world. Everything I know would remain blind knowledge if this light did not fall upon it . . .

What I add to things by this awakening is not a new idea, is not an enrichment of the content of my knowledge; it is a raising of knowledge, of cognition, to a higher level, on which everything is endowed with a new brilliance.³⁸

While mysticism can thus create an illusion with regard to knowledge reflecting one's inner life alone, it can also serve as a significant source of the same, also adding to reality in the most elevated sense. This account—in which he adduces an example of a mystical-unitary connection with a tree (nature mysticism)—evinces that mysticism is not merely introvertive but also becomes extrovertive when the mystic turns outwards to the world, thereby joining the inner with the outer by means of knowledge.

According to Steiner, in the higher sense knowledge not only reflects reality in human cognition but can also change it. The close correspondence between his characterization of mysticism in this 1901 volume and his description of Goethe's perception of reality in other writings—when he had ostensibly retreated from idealism and mysticism—enables us to assume that, *a priori*, his idealism did not occasionally slip into the field of mysticism.³⁹ His philosophical idealism rather serves as a channel for expressing his philosophical mysticism: his statements concerning Goethe's worldview—e.g., “*In opposition to that way of looking at things which destroys life in order to know life, Goethe early on established the possibility and need of a higher way*” (original italics)—and his quotation of Goethe: “The true is Godlike; it does not appear directly; we must divine it from its manifestations.”⁴⁰

38. Steiner, *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, 109.

39. His book on Goethe from 1897 (*Goethe's World View*) contradicts the assertion that at that time Steiner abandoned his objective idealism/early mysticism.

40. Cf. also: “The greatness of this idea [= the “idea” operating in nature], which Goethe then

D. Steiner's philosophy as "philosophic mysticism"

In addition to the complexities in understanding Steiner himself—the inconsistencies in some of his arguments, and actual/imagined contradictions—I shall also briefly explore another issue that, while not related to his own figure, exacerbates them. The latter arises from several semantic fields associated with the subject of this article—mysticism, revelation, visions, prophecy, spirituality, metaphysics, occultism, esotericism, gnosis, and theosophy. Representing diverse fields of experience and knowledge, at least some of which intersect, all are amenable to divergent interpretations.⁴¹

To this we should add the closely-related or parallel terms the later Steiner preferred when outlining his thought—(spiritual) initiation, enlightenment, super-sensible perception/seeing/hearing/knowledge, consciousness (divided into imagination, inspiration, and intuition), and, of course, anthroposophy, (anthroposophic) spiritual science, and spiritual investigation/research. Steiner perpetually sought to highlight the fact that his teaching was not the same as any of the former despite the close correspondence his terminology displays

sought to extend to the animal world also, *dawns upon one only when one tries to make it alive in one's spirit*, when one undertakes to rethink it. One then becomes aware that this thought is the very nature of the plant itself translated into the *idea* and living in our spirit just as it lives in the object; one observes also that one makes an organism alive for oneself right into its smallest parts, *that one pictures it not as a dead, finished object, but rather as something evolving, becoming, as something never at rest within itself* (Steiner, *Goethean Science* (1883), chapters 2 and 6).

41. See the relevant entries in the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. In that on mysticism, Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire points to the affinities the latter exhibits with esotericism and the difficulty in distinguishing between them, both privileging *experience* over theory, pursuing unity, maintaining that the core of religion lies beyond rational discourse, and being attacked for their irrational foundation (ibid, 819). I treat mysticism herein as a spiritual experience customarily referred to as revelation and unity. I understand esotericism (and occultism) more as a corpus—i.e., I regard the two terms as cause and effect, the first (mysticism) prompting the second. Authentic esoteric/occult knowledge thus rests on unmediated mystical experience/revelation—prior to becoming a tradition. I am of the opinion that hereby I am not limiting myself to “just feel right” (Hammer, “Mysticism and Esotericism as Contested Taxonomical Categories,” 20), as the mean to clarify the terms and distinguish between them.

with these semantic fields.⁴² We have already remarked on Steiner’s ambivalent and complex attitude towards mysticism (section C), also having seen that he could identify himself with a mysticism grounded in thought/ideas.⁴³

Endless definitions of mysticism and its features have been proposed, indicating the broad range it covers—from the “moderate” pole represented by the spiritual experience of the divine presence (revelation) to the “radical” pole (in the sense of distancing from given human states of mind) of *unio-mystica*, in which the individual is subsumed within the divine fullness.⁴⁴ The first merges with revelatory, visionary, and prophetic phenomena, thereby blurring mysticism’s uniqueness to the extent of existing in and of itself. The “radical” pole of effacement/annulment, in contrast, excludes non-extreme mystical states from the phenomenon—e.g., mild mystical union of the ilk of nature mysticism, which preserves the distinction between subject and object despite their unity. Following Stace, we refer to this as “identity in difference,” positing it as the thread that runs through all Steiner’s thought, both early and late.⁴⁵

42. Steiner’s employment of the conventional vocabulary serves various purposes. The title of his *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (1902) draws attention to authentic Christianity as a direct, inner mystical experience rather than a faith or creed (such as could be expected from someone who would regard Christianity as a mystical fact even if he did not call himself a mystic). In *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds: How Is It Achieved?* (1904/6), Steiner observes that the spiritual reality he addresses is fundamentally the same as that of which the “mystics,—Gnostics, and theosophists” speak (p. 20)—without identifying himself completely with them. His *Occult Science in Outline* (1909/10) similarly evinces that the fields of knowledge discussed therein belong to an occultism that posits itself as an alternative to ordinary science even though the author does not explicitly refer to himself as an occultist.

43. See below.

44. Cf. McGinn’s series *A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, and Blumenthal’s writings on philosophic mysticism (see below). Nor does William James list unity as one of the features of mysticism in his chapter on mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to the latter, one of mysticism’s most prominent hallmarks is its noeticism—i.e., experience of another, deep form of knowledge that stamps a strong imprint on the individual even after the event itself. Stace and Underhill, in contrast, contend that mystical experience rests on *unity*—visions and the hearing of voices only being secondary phenomena: “Now we have said that the end which the mystic sets before him is *conscious union with a living Absolute*. . . . In the mystic this union is conscious, personal, and complete. ‘He enjoys’, says St. John of the Cross, ‘a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity; and it is God Himself who is then felt and tasted’” (Underhill, *Mysticism*, 73).

45. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 72. See n24 above.

In characterizing Steiner as a mystic, I follow a *via media* approach—i.e., neither moderate nor extremist. I understand mysticism in the original meaning of the knowledge of things hidden from human senses, cognition, and consciousness in their given, familiar state. This can manifest itself to human beings, whether proactively (through practice) or randomly. I also regard mysticism as focusing on mystical union—also concealed from the given human state of mind.

As we have already noted, Steiner does not speak of what Stace refers to as “undifferentiated unity.” The early and later Steiner both rather relate to the moderate type. The extreme form, in which all the distinctions and boundaries merge, is incompatible with the *spiritual science* Steiner sought to establish as an alternative to the science of his day—that which investigates details and their integration within the whole.

As we saw in the previous section, Steiner regards the mystical state as enabling supreme knowledge, the key to insight always lying in inwardness and direct experience vs. theory and inferential metaphysics. Hidden knowledge is enabled/prompted by union; in the language we adduced above, the products of the mystical state of union are the fields embodied in the terms occultism, esotericism, gnosis, theosophy, and anthroposophy as “knowledge of the higher worlds.” In relation to the cause and effect, as evinced by the citations from Steiner in the previous section, the mystical state is the cause, the contents linked to the terms being the outcome.⁴⁶

D1. What is “philosophic mysticism”?

I explored the claim regarding the existence of philosophic (or intellectual) mysticism as a branch of mysticism some years ago with the aid of two Maimonidean

46. For the early (in *The Philosophy of Freedom*) and later Steiner (in *The Stages of Higher Knowledge*, 46 [1908] and in *The Evolution of Consciousness*, 101 [1923]), *intuition* is an unmediated cognitive/thought perception of reality that creates unity on the thought/idea level, rather than an emotion or gut feeling (p. 24 below).

scholars—David Blumenthal and Gideon Freudenthal.⁴⁷ Philosophic mysticism is philosophy as a branch of mysticism rather than mysticism as a branch of philosophy or philosophy that crosses over into mysticism (as may happen with idealistic philosophy). Blumenthal in particular has devoted many years to the study of the mystical background of Maimonidean thought, including possible influences, such as Egyptian Sufism. Outlining the features of philosophic mysticism in the Jewish-Muslim context and in general, he suggests that it encompasses various types. His working premise (also espoused by several of his colleagues) is that scholars make too sharp and arbitrary a distinction between philosophy and mysticism with regard to medieval thought.⁴⁸

Blumenthal defines philosophic mysticism as “Contact with the divine, whether it be initiated by the divine or by the human.” Although it requires strict philosophical, intellectual preparation, the outcome is a “flow of intellectual energy from the divine . . . generating an experience which will be abstract in quality and mystical (or prophetic) in nature.”⁴⁹ On this reading, philosophic mysticism is a mode of intellectual study and cognitive observation of the contents of the world that originates in God, leading to trans-philosophical experience.

Maintaining that Maimonides was just as much mystic as philosopher, he characterizes Maimonides’ philosophic mysticism as an “intellectual contemplation” that is

47. I preceded this with a mystical commentary on Maimonides’ view of prophecy through the prism of Steiner’s doctrine.

48. The historian, Orientalist, and scholar of mysticism Paul Fenton identifies Georges Vajda—a philosopher and Arabic/Jewish philosophy scholar who mentored Fenton and Blumenthal—as adopting this term in the wake of Ibrahim Medacour’s discussion of Al-Farabi’s philosophy (“Forward,” in Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 14).

49. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 21; idem, “What is Philosophic Mysticism?” 26. His mystical interpretation of Maimonidean philosophy rests first and foremost on the final chapter of the *Guide for the Perplexed* (3.51), which compares the path leading to God through the Torah (Judaism) and philosophy—which culminates in reaching Him, standing before Him, seeing Him, hearing Him, speaking with Him, and cleaving to Him intellectually—to a person’s journey to the king’s palace (Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 618–20). The other passages in the book Blumenthal regards as mystical he reads through the prism of this chapter, not focusing on unity in his definition of mysticism.

the moment when thought fades into mystical experience. It is the transition from thinking-about-God to being-in-the-presence of God. It is a mystical moment or, more appropriately, a mystical-intellectual way of being in the world.⁵⁰

In his view, philosophical mysticism thus belongs to what I called the “moderate” category of mysticism—i.e., it is primarily awareness of the divine existence/presence and a flowing of intellectual energy from God.⁵¹

Both the early and later Steiner meet these definitions. At the beginning of the first German edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94), for example, which shifts from (ordinary) abstract thought to the experiential level, Steiner states:

The book leads at first into somewhat abstract regions, where thought must draw sharp outlines if it is to reach clearly defined positions. But the reader will also be led out of these *arid concepts* into concrete life. I am indeed fully convinced that one must *raise oneself into the ethereal realm of concepts* if one would *experience* every aspect of existence. Whoever appreciates only the pleasures of the senses is unacquainted with life’s sweetest savors. The oriental sages make their disciples live a life of renunciation and asceticism for years before they impart to them their own wisdom. The western world no longer demands pious exercises and ascetic habits as a preparation for science, but it does require the willingness to withdraw oneself awhile from the immediate impressions of life, and to betake oneself into the *realm of pure thought*.⁵²

50. Blumenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophic Mysticism,” 133.

51. Blumenthal does not emphasize the unifying feature of mysticism despite the fact that the final chapter of the *Guide* includes (moderate) accounts of contact/union with God: “This kind of worship ought only to be engaged in after intellectual conception has been achieved. If, however, you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting yourself to Him, endeavor to come closer to Him, and *strengthen the bond between you and Him—that is the intellect*” (ibid, 620). Maimonides later comments with respect to the forefathers of the Hebrew nation that “because of the union of their intellects through apprehension of Him, it came about that He made a lasting *covenant* with each of them” (623–24 [original italics]). I shall not discuss here the important distinction between Maimonides and Steiner, which is linked to the former’s (mono) theism and the latter’s monism, also affecting the issue of knowledge and its limits. Precisely here we should note the two elements they share: a) the value of reinforcing thought for knowledge; and b) the individual cleaves to God by means of the intellect, only this being capable of uniting them in the deepest sense.

52. Extracted from the English translation: *The Philosophy of Freedom*, xxix.

The Philosophy of Freedom's ultimate goal is thus to reach the level of direct experience in the spiritual realm—the realm of pure thought. Steiner's ontological argument for the existence of such a sphere, within which it is possible to “experience every aspect of existence” and to which one must cleave in order to draw out everything embedded in the book, seems to me inconsistent with idealistic philosophy and the philosophy of inner experience (*Erlebnis*) on their own. The volume thus appears to be a manual intended to enable the individual to reach another realm of existence rather than simply a polemic offering philosophical answers to existential questions.

Drawing on Blumenthal's definition of philosophic mysticism, we may say that Steiner refers to a trans-philosophic experience attained through philosophical discourse and study. Within this framework, *thought itself* becomes spiritual-mystical experience.⁵³

Further support for the claim that Steiner regarded *The Philosophy of Freedom* as forming a bridge from philosophy to trans-philosophical experience can be found in the fact that the later Steiner presented his theosophic/anthroposophic teaching as serving the same purpose—merely by a different route (i.e., not philosophic). In the preface to the third edition (1910) of his *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man* (1904), he observes: “Those who are attracted more to another way of searching for the [super-sensible] truths described here will find it in my book *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Both these books lead in different ways to the same destination.”⁵⁴

53. In a Hebrew article on “Maimonides as Mystic”—based on a lecture delivered at a Maimonidean conference on this subject in 2004—Blumenthal remarks that in philosophic mysticism “thought gradually shifts into standing before God in intellectual observation without completely being detached from thinking. Here, intellectualism gradually becomes spiritual experience” (p. viii). In other words, philosophical speculation is not merely a channel that leads to trans-philosophical mystical experience but (as per Steiner) thought itself becomes a spiritual experience—experiencing thought as an entity linked to the world no less than to the thinking person.

54. Steiner, *Theosophy*, 16. I see no reason here to suspect that the later Steiner misled his followers, projecting his later thought (in the sense of instructions for spiritual development) upon his earlier views.

The early *The Philosophy of Freedom* thus accompanied Steiner towards his later writings, serving as their philosophical, ontological, and epistemological foundation. Steiner expanded it in 1918, also inserting a number of clarifications some scholars consider artificial—i.e., designed to make his early and later thought consistent (see below).

D2. Union of the “knower, known, and mind”

While Freudenthal also presents Maimonides’ philosophic thought as mystical, he places greater emphasis on philosophic mysticism as mystical union. His article on Maimonides’ and Salomon Maimon’s philosophic mysticism takes us one step further in comparing Steiner and Maimonides as philosophical mystics.⁵⁵ Rather than revolving around the last chapter of the *Guide*, Freudenthal’s discussion of Maimonides as a mystic rests on his account of the “union of knower, known, and mind.”⁵⁶ Maimonides holds that God exemplifies this union perfectly and eternally (i.e., is already fully actualized) as an indistinguishable unity because He has no plurality—even within His unity. In the human realm, however, this union originally only existed potentially, human beings needing to realize it by operating their minds if they wish to grasp reality, cleave to God and to their own divine nature.⁵⁷

55. According to Freudenthal, “Philosophical mysticism should satisfy two further demands. First, the experience itself should involve philosophical content. Second, philosophy should be able to account for the experience” (“The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” 116).

56. Blumenthal: “intellecting subject, intellected object, intellect”—or without preserving the original Arabic/Hebrew root: “the knower, known, and mind” (“What is Philosophical Mysticism?” 36). According to Maimonides, the “knower” is the person who operates his intellect in practice, the “known” the intellect inherently imprinted in things (e.g., the form of a tree abstracted cognitively from its material), and the “mind” human intellect in conjunction with the known.

57. Maimonides thus maintains that God’s “mind” or God as the unity of “knower, known, and mind” differs categorically from humanity, God thus understanding reality differently—perfectly—than human beings. Steiner’s argument that human knowledge is unlimited (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 91–92) is consequently implausible from Maimonides’ monotheistic/theistic perspective. If we apply Maimonidean terminology to Steiner’s *The Philosophy of Freedom*, the “knower” is Steinerian “thinking” (person who relates in his or her thinking to the world’s content), the “known” Steiner’s “concepts” and “ideas” as the world’s content independent of human cognition (i.e., abstracted from their materiality), and the “mind” the notions that arise intuitively in an individual.

According to Freudenthal, what characterizes mysticism in general and distinguishes it from philosophy in particular is its *structure* rather than *content*:

Like all mystical experience, philosophical mysticism attempts *to overcome some form of opposition between subject and object*. And like all negations, the negation of this opposition is saturated with the content of what it negates. . . . Philosophical mysticism seeks to overcome the opposition between subject and object by philosophical means.⁵⁸

Freudenthal thus regards mysticism as a structural change in the individual's relation to God and/or the world. This by definition also requires a structural change in a person's relationship with him or herself—a self-perception as forming part of something broader rather than remaining an isolated subject. On this reading, mysticism is always linked to experience of the “ontological union of the subject and sacred object”—a union that can exist in diverse forms and various intensities.

D3. The Philosophy of Freedom as “philosophic mysticism”

In my opinion, such descriptions of experience as structural, conceptual, mental, or even physical change, associated with the individual's union with the world's essence (thought) and sustained by human thinking, form the pillars of Steiner's arguments in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Philosophically, the latter are anchored in “ontology” (concepts and ideas as objective realities independent of human beings), cognition (epistemology), ethical conduct (Steinerian moral individualism), and human freedom (transcendence of any conditions). Steiner specifically asserts that the book is essentially grounded in the “experience of intuitive thought” rather than hypothetical or inferential arguments—and thence hypothetical or inferential metaphysics.⁵⁹

First addressing the edition that does not include the 1918 additions (the later Steiner), I then turn my attention to the latter and their relationship with

58. Freudenthal, “The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” 116. Freudenthal further argues herein that this type of mysticism can exist in consistent materialism in precisely the same way as it can in consistent idealism, the object of experience being culture dependent.

59. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 212.

other later statements. Herein, I set out to demonstrate that Steiner did not arbitrarily seek to bring his later thought into line with his earlier.

Let us first analyze a passage in *The Philosophy of Freedom* that, in my view, presents the experience of union linked to structural change (à la Freudenthal) with respect to an individual's attitude towards the world (subsuming the gap between separate subjects and objects) and towards him or herself (including the corporal aspect, to which Maimonides does not refer). For the sake of clarity, we must first place the book in its literary context.

The Philosophy of Freedom is divided into two primary parts and three as a whole. The first (“Knowledge of Freedom”) discusses epistemology, Steiner herein offering both ontological and cognitive arguments. They all rest on the claim that concepts and ideas exist independently (objective idealism) as part of the totality of the world.⁶⁰ Steiner asserts (*contra* Kant) that human beings can grasp concepts and ideas as they exist in and of themselves, knowledge thus not being bounded.⁶¹ The second part of the book (“The Reality of Freedom”) explores human free will.

The two sections are linked as follows: Steiner's interest lying in transcending Spinozan “free necessity” (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, Chapter 1)—i.e., demonstration of the possibility of human free choice unbound by any constraints—he is compelled to locate human freedom in a place that encompasses objective reality (ideas) and is independent of human being. To this end, his first task (in the first part) is to evince: a) that concepts/ideas actually exist; b) that human beings

60. Concentrated in the first part, in Chapter 5 (“The Act of Knowing”). With the exception of the first chapter (the second in the first edition), in which Steiner deals with Spinozan determinism, the title (“Knowledge of Freedom”) thus has nothing to do with the content.

61. Concentrated in Chapter 7 (“Are there Limits to Knowledge?”), which concludes the first part. Herein, Steiner presents a further epistemological claim—namely, that any allegation regarding existence that lies outside percepts (phenomena perceived by human cognition), concepts and any union beyond that of percepts and concepts is mere speculation (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 90). In Steinerian terminology, percepts are related to that part of reality that can be grasped by human beings before becoming attached to concepts (which belong to another realm of reality).

can think objectively (perception of concepts/ideas in and of themselves); and in the second part; c) that the highest level of human moral decisions and deeds does not rest on any coerced impulsion, *also* being anchored in a reality that is independent of human beings (pure thought).⁶² The content of the *experience* that stands at the heart of these three arguments and unites them consists of *a priori* perception of human union with the reality outside a person—i.e., the inner human and outer, external world as phenomenon and idea that also includes the human body. All these form part of the whole as a single continuum:

We certainly are not external things, but we belong together with them to one and the same world. The section of the world which I perceive to be myself as subject is permeated by the *stream of the universal cosmic process*. To my perception I am, in the first instance, *confined within the limits bounded by my skin*. But all that is contained within this skin belongs to the cosmos as a whole. Hence, for a relation to subsist between my organism and an object external to me, it is by no means necessary that something of the object should slip into me, or make an impression on my mind, like a signet ring on wax. The question: “How do I get information about that tree ten feet away from me?” is utterly misleading. It springs from the view that the boundaries of my body are absolute barriers, through which information about things filters into me. *The forces of which are at work inside my body are the same as those which exist outside. Therefore, I really am the things*; not, however, “I” in so far as I am a percept of myself as subject, but “I” in so far as I am a *part of the universal process*. The percept of the tree belongs to the same whole as my I. *This universal world process produces equally the percept of the tree out there and the percept of the I in here. . . . In so far as these are entities that belong together, I can as world knower discover the common element in both only through thinking, which relates one to the other by means of concepts.*⁶³

62. Zander’s contention that Steiner’s idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is arbitrary and artificial, the volume serving as a bridge from idealism to Steiner’s individualism is thus untenable from a philosophic perspective as well (Steiner’s philosophical structure and logic). Without the “idea,” Steiner’s view of freedom (free choice beyond Spinozan determinism) collapses—just as it does without the element of individualism. Steiner’s idealism constitutes the necessary foundation of his theory of freedom. To this we may add the question of whether Steiner succeeded in proving (or at least reasonably demonstrating) in *The Philosophy of Freedom* that objective thinking is possible and that those who unite themselves with the objective content of *thought* free themselves from their conditionality (free choice). This issue—the answer to which I suggest is negative—lies beyond my present purview: see in detail: Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, Vol. 1, Chapter 11 (in Hebrew).

63. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 82–83.

Human beings as subjects forming part of the world (object) in a primary and essential sense, the feeling of separateness (“a Monad which receives information about the rest of the world in some way from without”⁶⁴) is an illusion (“due to perceiving”) for two reasons: a) the confines of human skin—i.e., a person’s body appears to him or her cognitively as a barrier in relation to the outside world; and b) the fact that human beings perceive the concepts they produce as deriving from (within) themselves, because they themselves are the thinkers. In the sense of cause and effect, this Steinerian experience of union—an experience to which he seeks to introduce his readers—is the cause, in line with the following philosophical tenet:

It is not due to the objects that they are given to us at first without their corresponding concepts, but to our mental organization. Our whole being functions in such a way that from every real thing the relevant elements come to us from two sides, from *perceiving* and from *thinking*.⁶⁵

Mystical experience being apprehended as real, unmediated, and absolute (à la James and Freudenthal)—i.e., lying on a higher level than discursive, hypothetical, sceptical thinking—it imparts to the one exposed to it a sense of total certainty in the verity of its contents. This, in my opinion, is the way in which we should understand the following statements—which are more a reprimand of those who hold prejudiced views contrary to those Steiner held:

*What right have you to declare the world to be complete without thinking? Does not the world produce thinking in the heads of men with the same necessity as it produces the blossom on a plant? Plant a seed in the earth. It puts forth root and stem. It unfolds into leaves and blossoms. Set the plant before yourself. It connects itself, in your mind, with a definite concept. Why should this concept belong any less to the whole plant than leaf and blossom?*⁶⁶

64. Ibid, 211–12.

65. Ibid, 67 (original italics). In other words, while human beings, including their thought/consciousness (the united-universal aspect), are part of the world, they also possess their own consciousness as part of it, thus being able to separate themselves thereby from the world or unite themselves with it through thought/consciousness, in this way restoring their primal union with the world.

66. Ibid, 65.

The Philosophy of Freedom was written with precisely such confidence, a fact that may be linked not only with its mystical-experiential basis but also with Steiner's own personality; his temperament was such that he did not readily recognize hindrances. Whatever the case may be in this respect, the book unconditionally meets Blumenthal and Freudenthal's criteria of philosophic mysticism.

In this context, we must also recall that in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steinerian *intuition* serves as the vehicle whereby a person extrapolates the concepts for his percepts, thereby linking together the elements of the world—ties that are inherent in things themselves. According to Steiner, intuition relates not only to objective knowledge of the world but also to specific events (occurrences) into which a person is absorbed on the social and interpersonal level. Ethical conduct in its highest form is thus founded upon a moral intuition that deduces from the whole independent world of ideas the right (ideal) act to perform in any given situation:

From every occurrence which I perceive, and which concern me, *there springs at the same time a moral duty*: namely, to do my little bit towards seeing that this occurrence is made to serve the development of civilization. In addition to the concept which reveals to me the connections of events or objects according to the law of nature, *there is also a moral label attached to them which for me, as a moral person, gives ethical directions as to how I have to conduct myself*.⁶⁷

This passage suggests that intuition is a person's innate ability to gain *revelation* from the outside world. Under normal circumstances, a person does not recognize the moral imprint of things/events in the world. World content (the "idea") thus manifests itself to a person in his or her inner self through intuition as a self-capacity. Occurring within the soul, it is a spiritual epiphany human beings attain by their own power. Rather than passively acquired (as per James' mystical criteria), it is gained by intense inner cognitive activity. Steiner's mysticism is thus "realistic and activist" in the terms Bergman applied to Martin Buber during his mystical phase—directly connected to events in the world and human deeds.

67. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 133–34.

This presentation of spiritual revelation alongside human activity is not necessarily strained or apologetic in nature, more likely being the closing of a circle: prophetic/mystical tradition treated as revelation from above (top down) can also be the outcome of human endeavor (bottom up). The whole includes what can derive from the divine dimension with what may come from the human sphere.

D4. Later Steinerian utterances linked to “The Philosophy of Freedom”

Excluding the additions Steiner made to the book in 1918 in order to identify the early/original formulation—the mystic “nerve” that haunts his early thought—is an interesting exercise. As noted above and is well known, Steiner allowed himself greater license in the 1918 edition, even employing more openly mystical tones.⁶⁸

Let us turn first to the 1918 additions. Some of the *revelation* that forms part of the Steinerian intuitive expanse (intuition being, as we observed, the manifestation of content/guidance the thinking person grasps and is presented as such) becomes clearer herein, for example, serving as both explication and elaboration: “Intuition is the conscious experience—in pure spirit—of a pure spiritual content. Only through an intuition can the essence of thinking be grasped.”⁶⁹ Steiner could thus immediately proceed to speak of the “*manifestation* of thinking,” so that in “its own essential nature,” thinking “certainly contains the real “I” or

68. Most of the 1918 additions occur at the end of chapters (3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13) and in the two expansions in the chapter entitled “The Consequences of Monism” in the third part of the volume (“Ultimate Questions”). Others are the appendix and the “Preface to the first edition, 1984, revised 1918.” In the first edition of the volume, this constitutes the first chapter rather than a Preface, however. To these we add the elaboration at the beginning of Chapter 9. Some of the passages are explanations and responses to questions and criticism leveled against Steiner between 1894 and 1918; others are clarifications and amplifications. The mode of the latter (the late Steiner) differs from the majority (but not all) of the descriptions in the original version, these being responsible for creating the impression that Steiner projected his late thought onto his earlier philosophy.

69. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 122. This statement suggests that experiencing the essentiality in *thought* is not accessible to ordinary speculative/inferential philosophy, no self-existence thus being attributed to thought. The essence of thinking as the unmediated experience of reality is only available through intuition.

ego.”⁷⁰ Only the consciousness of the “I” is originally dependent upon the human physical frame, which gives the “I” its sense of separateness and the capacity for self-reflection. The true “I,” in contrast, lives eternally within thought/the “idea.”

Although these notions are present in the original version of the book, they are formulated obscurely—the only exceptions being some passages the most important of which we have discussed above.⁷¹

Nor do I regard as forced the 1918 addition to the effect that,

It is to be remembered, too, that the idea of *percept* developed in this book is not to be confused with the idea of external sense percept which is but a special instance of it. . . . “percept” is here taken to be everything that approaches man through the senses *or through the spirit*, before it has been grasped by the actively elaborated concept.⁷²

The version that does not contain the additions already adduces a spiritual reality that can be experienced—i.e., not as the hypothetical metaphysics Steiner rejected on several occasions—no problem exists in attributing to the term “percept” (pre-conceptual experience) as a sensory perception a super-sensible one. Steiner was and remained a monist and naturalist. A reality in which only percepts and concepts exist can contain all the upper worlds and hierarchies of the spiritual beings about which Steiner later spoke.

In other words, what he later referred to as “this world” also covers the upper realms. The super-sensible is not supernatural; no supernaturalism exists in Steiner’s world—just as there are no miracles. The super-sensible is merely an addition to the sensory as part of the whole. In effect, Steiner thus already presents *thinking* and its products/contents as spiritual (super-sensible) perception/experience in *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

Let me conclude this section by citing statements Steiner made in 1912 and 1913 that may be read as arising from the early edition of *The Philosophy*

70. Ibid, 123–24 (original italics). In the original German, the “Erscheinen” (des Denkens) is italicized—i.e., the *appearance* (or epiphany) of thinking.

71. To these we may add pp. 40, 66–68, 115–16.

72. Ibid, 108 (original italics).

of *Freedom*. In a passage quoted above according to which, in a profound sense and from an elevated perspective, the human body does not separate a person from the world—i.e., no world exists outside a person just as none exists solely within a person and “*Therefore, I really am the things*” as part of “the stream of the universal cosmic process.” As our discussion indicates, for Steiner “the stream of cosmic process” that unifies all reality is the stream manifested in the “idea.”

Steiner’s spiritual manual, *A Way of Self-Knowledge* (1912), opens with a meditative exercise designed to change the individual’s attitude towards his or her body—i.e., lead to the inner experience that a person is not his or her body, that the corpus belongs to the external world more than to the individual, that the body will eventually disappear and dissolve into the elements of the world to which it belongs, and that the soul has no essential association with it. According to Steiner, this meditative observation regarding death/the dissolution of the body prompts an inner human experience that is independent of the body and death—foreign to both. Although people live in this world in the body, their skin separating them from the external world (as evinced by the account in *The Philosophy of Freedom* [pp. 82–83]), in a deep sense the soul and cognition—and in particular the “I”—live in an unbounded world, just as knowing is unlimited.⁷³

A similar passage for a meditative exercise occurs in *The Threshold of the Spiritual World* (1913) in light of the fact that human beings form part of the “stream of the universal cosmic process,” in which they participate through thinking:

In thinking, I experience myself united with the stream of Cosmic existence. The value of meditating the thought lies much less in the abstract understanding of it than in what is to be gained by repeatedly experiencing the strengthening effect it has on the soul if it flows powerfully through one’s inner life. It expands in the soul like a deep spiritual breath of life.⁷⁴

73. Steiner, *A Way of Self-Knowledge*, 103–13.

74. *The Threshold of the Spiritual World*, 8–9 (original italics). The “deep spiritual breath of life” to which he refers here may be related to the “ethereal realm of concepts” about which he wrote in the Preface to the first edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94).

In this sub-section, I have demonstrated the continuity between *The Philosophy of Freedom* without and with the later additions, also adducing other Steinerian sources that point in the same direction—namely, that Steiner’s doctrine as a whole (the early and late Steiner) is founded upon philosophical mysticism in the primary sense of mystical experience through thought/ideas.

E. Epilogue and conclusions

In this article, I adopt a more synchronic approach to Steiner, identifying recurring elements that shed light on what I regard as Steiner’s “central intuition”—namely, his philosophic mysticism as an alternative to modern philosophy and science. In my opinion, the “scarlet thread” that runs through Steiner’s thought, both early and late, is the founding of a science anchored in spiritual (mystical) experiences raised to a cognitive level and explained rationally. In early Steiner this primarily includes *The Philosophy of Freedom*, and his books on Goethe (before and after he wrote *The Philosophy of Freedom*), and on Mysticism (1901).⁷⁵ This perspective allows us to examine and understand all his writings—his views, intentions, polemics, the (real and imaginary) contradictions in his descriptions and claims, what he chose to obscure or reveal and intensify for diverse reasons (Steiner as a hermeneutical problem), and the developmental stages of his philosophy. On the one hand, this spiritual science is the heir of contemporaneous sciences—as his own words indicate. On the other, it conflicts with them, modern sciences not recognizing *experience* in the existence of an objective spirit as the completion of tangible reality and its source and cause. Steiner thus referred to them as materialistic—a product of

75. To this we may add the champion of individualism and authenticity, Nietzsche propounded a personal morality beyond prescribed good and evil, thereby expressing one dimension of Steiner’s “science of freedom.” And unlike Goethe, Haeckel enabled Steiner to present the “idea” from the side of the developing concrete and animated universe—as arising from within it naturally and necessarily in the framework of a monistic conception and non-transcendence. Again, because of a problem of length and scope, I have refrained in this article from discussing how Nietzsche and Haeckel (individualism / authenticity and naturalism) fit into Steiner’s grand scheme (during the years 1895–1900). I hope to expand on this elsewhere.

abstract, hypothetical thought that has no direct intercourse with reality. Covering *all areas of life and existence*, this spiritual science relates to them in an unmediated fashion, in a similar manner to the way in which Goethe perceived the “idea” in nature (the particular and the whole). It also does not subsume human beings as individuals within a cold, charmless, and meaningless mechanical universe, because it acknowledges that the person as an individual and his or her moral deeds are the most elevated elements (the “crowning feature of the edifice”) in the drama of nature and evolution.⁷⁶ Enchantment and signification are found in the merging of nature, “idea,” development, and freedom—without any need for religion or a transcendent God.

The early Steiner’s engagement with Goethe points to two aspects of this spiritual science. Goethe laid the foundation for seeing and understanding nature and evolution from the perspective of the immanent “idea” that operates in creation. This makes a transcendent “idea” obsolete. Steiner also attributed to Goethe a form of thinking/perception of reality rather than merely distinctive views and opinions regarding nature. This serves as the basis for Steiner’s categorical distinction between abstract and spiritual thinking.

These aspects of spiritual science, which subsequently became anthroposophic spiritual science, are already enshrined in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. According to Steiner, this volume was intended to serve as the “basis for a modern world conception” (as per its subtitle). In other words, it was designed to unify the all-inclusive “new spiritual sciences”—in line with the role classical philosophy played for all the sciences:

The realms of life are many. For each one, special sciences develop. But life itself is a unity, and the more deeply the sciences try to penetrate into their separate realms, the more they withdraw themselves from the vision of the world as a living whole. There must be a knowledge which seeks in the separate sciences the elements for leading back once more to the fullness of life. . . . *in this book the aim is a philosophical one—that knowledge itself become organically alive.*⁷⁷

76. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 169.

77. *Ibid.*, xxix. See also the original German edition.

The new spiritual science, whose core Steiner sets out already in *The Philosophy of Freedom* and the two-preceding works on Goethe, is a mystical, “occult” science because it rests on the claim of *spiritual experience* through revelation and unity. In other words, it embodies Steiner’s thesis that he sees the “idea.” Most people not possessing this faculty, they do not perceive themselves as united with it. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner thus already presents an occult knowledge in the field of thinking/the “idea.”

On this reading, we must distinguish between two mystical/occult dimensions in Steiner’s overall thought: a) the nature of thought and the “I” essentially linked to it; b) occult knowledge in the sense of “knowledge of the higher worlds.” The relationship between the two is such that the first constitutes the foundation of the second by reinforcing it with epistemological and ontological arguments. Steiner thus regarded *The Philosophy of Freedom* as the basis of all future sciences—up to the period when humanity advances towards super-sensible cognition.

This element of *thinking* and the “I” continues into later Steinerian thought, everything embodied in the “knowledge of the higher worlds” being added to it as an extra storey as proposed above. Steiner’s doctrine thus clearly developed, the late Steiner displaying much greater occult knowledge than the early. While Staudenmaier’s claim that the late Steiner was much more creative than his early counterpart is also plausible in principle, this does not mean that the early Steiner was unfamiliar with occult knowledge and the super-sensible faculties that lie at the heart of it on a personal experiential level—not only because seeing the “idea” is already an occult form of knowledge. It would be an interesting scholarly exercise to try and identify the intimations of super-sensible cognition in the early Steiner. In my opinion, at least something of this (in addition to seeing the “idea”) already existed.⁷⁸

78. We may adduce one example: In the preface to his 1897 volume on *Goethe’s World View*, (the early) Steiner argues that he could penetrate Goethe’s soul after the latter was already deceased and trace lines of his character of which Goethe himself had been unaware. In his

In this context, we should also note that Steiner’s manual for spiritual development (in his *knowledge of the higher worlds*), with its detailed exercises and descriptions of their consequences, was written between 1904 and 1906—i.e., around two years after he became a theosophist. While not entirely impossible, it is difficult to imagine how in such a brief period he could have found a way of establishing an orderly and detailed theosophic doctrine (also in his 1904 *Theosophie*) and become a spiritual guide of such caliber.

I originally suggested that Steiner’s early philosophy, which carries over into his later, belongs more to philosophical mysticism as presented here while his later teaching as “knowledge of the higher worlds” falls more into the category of occult knowledge (science). While this division is warranted, an important part of Steiner’s later writings deals with the stages of spiritual development and instructions for achieving states of enlightenment and spiritual initiation. Steiner’s accounts of the spiritual imagination, inspiration, and intuition exhibit close correspondences with earlier prophetic teachings that depict the psycho-spiritual mechanism of states of revelation and lead towards them.⁷⁹ In other words, Steiner’s later thought is not limited to occult knowledge as data but seeks to lead his readers to the “*ethereal realm of concepts*” of which he speaks in *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

1917 lecture on *Anthroposophy and Psychoanalysis* II, Steiner speaks of the spiritual link between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche after the former’s death (pp. 72–73). He also criticizes Jung for being ignorant of the intimate spiritual connection between human beings and the spiritual world—*inter alia* because his psychology was abstract, not transcending the archetypes or directly perceiving the specific spiritual occurrences in human life. The early Steiner’s observations about Goethe’s psyche may thus be seen as a “super-sensible introduction” to his later occult knowledge concerning Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. A further common Steinerian synchronic motif is that abstract thought does not grasp reality in its detail and depth.

79. We may adduce Maimonides’ treatment of prophecy in the *Guide*, Part 2 (chapters I have not discussed here in light of my definition of mysticism as the establishment of union as a condition for knowledge), in which he describes the cosmic intelligence that informs the prophets and philosophers and the importance of imagination within the prophetic process—both on the level of receiving divine messages and on the pedagogic-didactic level (i.e., the prophet as guide and social leader).

This article thus essentially affirms the claim—made by Steiner himself and his followers—that his early and later thought exist along a continuum. While not everything asserted naively is necessarily specious, I still reject the contention that the two periods of creativity are identical, however.

In conclusion, I suggest the following points:

- a) The young Steiner warmly welcomed Goethe’s response to Schiller, perceiving the “idea” in nature rather than simply assuming its existence—i.e., it is not merely an “idea” in the sense of a notion.⁸⁰ This can be seen as a cornerstone for the new spiritual/mystical science that he sought to establish.
- b) We should take the later Steiner seriously when he speaks about his youthful spiritual experiences, before he began writing on Goethe and natural science (the later Steiner can serve as a touchstone for understanding the early Steiner). Casting doubt on his later thought with respect to his earlier spiritual experiences is thus like questioning the authenticity of any autobiography’s mystical documentation.⁸¹
- c) His youthful preoccupation (also) with sciences and philosophy merged with the Goethean “idea,” appearing in *The Philosophy of Freedom* as a foundation for the new science. Herein, he minimizes the mystical-experimental dimension (with only partial success) in favor of philosophical writing—partly due to his wish to establish and prove the book’s arguments on the speculative/philosophical level, science not accepting of mystic-prophetic authority.
- d) Steiner’s exhibited shift to the “occult sciences” (his joining the theosophical movement and open remarks concerning occult contents) was in effect a

80. Steiner, *Goethean Science* (1883), Chapter 11.

81. See his 1881 letter to Josef Köck (mentioned in Wood, “Exoteric & Esoteric,” 117), in which Steiner comments in the wake of Schelling that “[I] believed and still believe, that I have discovered this *innermost faculty* quite clearly in myself—I had suspected it long ago—the whole idealistic philosophy now stands before me in an essentially modified form; what is a sleepless night against such a discovery!” (<https://en.anthro.wiki/I>).

search for a concrete “home” for his spiritual perceptions (including the practical aspects of life)—his recognition that he could not be a member of the dominant cultural stream of his day (including academia) but must offer an alternative from the other side.

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