

Foreword

It is fair to warn the reader that this is not an easy book. Should he be broaching the territory, without any previous knowledge of Rudolf Steiner's work and techniques, simply as one option in his search for a convincing critique of the prevalent materialism (or, as it is more commonly called, reductionism), he might do better to begin with one or both of two other books by the same author, *The Origins of Natural Science* and *The Boundaries of Natural Science*. There is little doubt that dissatisfaction with reductionism is gradually becoming more widespread (compare the tiny minority that was touched by it in the Victorian age); and it is perhaps significant that another change in the current world-view appears to be accompanying it. I mean an increasingly wide acceptance of the notion that human consciousness itself is in process of evolution; that there has not merely been a 'progress' from one set of ideas (largely erroneous) about the nature of the world and humanity towards a more 'advanced' one, but that the very structure of consciousness, the whole relation between man and nature, has been changing through the millennia.

Nowhere is this perspective, and the revised cosmology it entails, more explicit than in the literary legacy of Rudolf Steiner, and nowhere is its importance more earnestly stressed. The title of the present work already contains the difference between evolution of consciousness and history of ideas. History is the record of a conscious process, and the term is often extended to signify the process itself. Evolution is a process occurring at a pre-conscious stage, and *up to the present* this has applied also to the evolution of con-

sciousness. Thus, the karma of materialism is not the same as the history of materialism. Karma is the name of a process operating at an unconscious level in the development of a human individuality, a process normally observable only in its effects; and the Karma of materialism is such a process operating in the development of materialism. So underneath the history of materialism (which would amount to a history of ideas, culminating in reductionism) Steiner reveals an unconscious process extending both before and after that history. Reductionism as theory manifests first in natural science, but the change of consciousness underlying it began much earlier, and it continues now irrespective of theory and affects the whole life of humanity. These lectures were delivered in the year 1917, when the catalogue of global disasters, which Steiner saw as the Karma of materialism, was still not long past its dawn; and it is with the effects of materialism in the social and political life, of humanity, both national and international, that they mainly concern themselves.

Just as in *Boundaries of Natural Science* Rudolf Steiner argues the necessity of penetrating this hitherto unconscious realm for the future health of science itself, so here he argues its necessity in order to cope with social and political problems that are growing more and more intractable as they are less and less understood. Penetrating it with what? With strengthened and energetic thinking. Notwithstanding his admiration for the achievements of natural science, disciplined as it is by its constant relation to observable fact, he accuses it of one disastrous oversight. While it has devised and continues to devise ever more elaborate and more precise tools for investigation, it has left unexamined and unimproved the first and most essential, the most ubiquitously applied, of all its tools. It has never tried to examine the nature of thinking itself; the point at which unconscious process blossoms into, or rather "sets" as, conscious

thought. In the *Boundaries* course Steiner describes a method by which scientists could embark on such an examination. Here he is more concerned with the effects that have stemmed from their failure to do so at the time of the scientific revolution and after it. This involves reverting to that period in history and to the period preceding it. It is no use just saying: yes, there has been an evolution of consciousness, and it has resulted in materialism. It is no use simply chronicling effects; the process itself must be penetrated, and penetrated in detail; and if this entails reference to the thought processes of such historical figures as Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, so be it.

The first step however is to delineate the process itself, as far as possible, and this he does in Lecture III by way of a careful treatment, both synchronic and diachronic, of the relation between *intellect*, *perception* and *breathing*. The lecture should be read carefully, for it is there that he lays the foundation for the doctrine which he will go on to inculcate. Namely, that the unconscious is not just 'spirit' (still less of course the Freudian psycho-physical jumble); nor is it simply an inferred and unknowable 'world of spirit'; it is a world of active spiritual beings, whose particular aims and influences are not wholly, and will become less and less, beyond the reach of human knowledge.

Or perhaps it would be truer to say the doctrine which he will go on to assume. That is one of the reasons why it is a difficult book, not simply because such an immaterial cosmology is repugnant to the contemporary mind-set: for repugnant it certainly is, except to a level of open-mindedness that is deplorably rare. Open-mindedness at a somewhat lower level is not so infrequent. There are many minds in our time acutely aware of the apparent impotence of the human spirit to deal with the complex and apparently insoluble problems that increasingly threaten its continued existence, and which go so far as to proclaim that a new kind

of consciousness seems to be demanded of us. What is wanted, these uneasy people say, is altogether new ideas, a new kind of thinking. But they usually forget that the new is by definition unfamiliar; so that, when they are confronted with a picture of the universe that is not just a rearrangement of the old picture, but is really new and therefore wholly unfamiliar, they are offended or contemptuous. It becomes clear, Steiner repeats with emphasis and with examples to drive it home, that what they *really* wanted was something that looks new but is in fact old enough to feel quite comfortable. Confronted by anything beyond that they refuse even to examine the evidence for it. Exclamation marks are a sufficient refutation.

For many readers there will be the added difficulty of what they will feel as its author's tendency to plunge *in medias res*. Quite early in the book they will be confronted by references to named spiritual beings to whom they have not been introduced, notably certain of the spiritual hierarchies, who have been differently named in different traditions, but for whom Steiner uses the nomenclature found with their earliest recorded appearance in the extant literature of the West, that is the work of 'pseudo-Dionysius'; and, over and above these, to the 'adversary' figures of Lucifer and Ahriman, especially the latter. If the reader is wise, he will reflect that, where knowledge of the immaterial itself is at issue, and not simply knowledge of its material effects, it is the same as with all knowledge. Neither things nor beings can be spoken of without being identified, or identified without being named: It remains true that some previous acquaintance with the literature of Steiner's anthroposophy will greatly reduce this difficulty, and will prevent the names being *merely* names. Nor is there much doubt that most of his original audience enjoyed such an acquaintance.

Some acquaintance then with the literature of anthroposophy is desirable in a reader of this book. But I would not say it is indispensable. There is another way of acquainting oneself with unfamiliar terminology besides starting with a set of definitions. Indeed definitions, though useful in forestalling error, may even hinder close acquaintance with the actuality of what is defined, inasmuch as they tend to substitute abstraction for experience. The other way of twigging the meanings of unfamiliar words is to plunge into contexts wherein they occur more than once, and sometimes perhaps by way of casual reference, and thus gradually to approach nearer and nearer to them by experiencing their use in those contexts. Incidentally if this way were not a way that is wide open to us, we should never have learned to speak or to understand anything at all.

I believe therefore that readers will not be lacking who will by-pass any initial stumbling-blocks as they enter into the substance of the book and become more and more impressed by its whole tone, by the authority born of wide learning, long reflection and exceptional insight and by the profound sense of responsibility, alike to the truth and to humanity, that breathe through its wide-ranging paragraphs.

Owen Barfield