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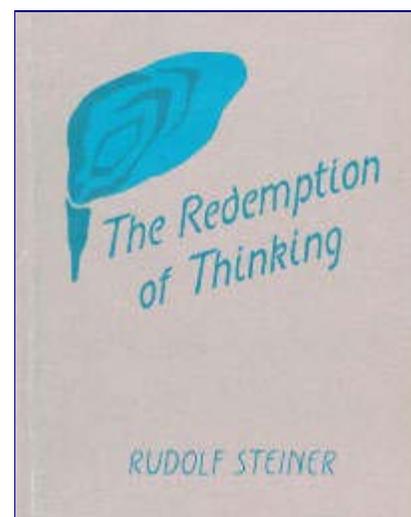


## **A READER'S JOURNAL**

### **The Redemption of Thinking** by **Rudolf Steiner**

The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, GA#74  
Three Lectures, Dornach, May, 1920  
Translated and Edited with Introduction and  
Epilogue

by  
A. P. Shepherd and Mildred Robertson Nicoll  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



There are only three lectures that comprise this book, but the subject matter makes them the most semantically dense of all the lectures that I have read of Rudolf Steiner's. The subject is the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, which in order to understand, we must become familiar with the thoughts of Augustine, Plato, Origen, Albertus Magnus, Dionysius the Aeropagite, Plotinus, and John Scotus Erigena, among others, as well as the philosophies of Manichæism, Neo-Platonism, Nominalism, Realism, and Scholasticism. This is the first Steiner book where I'm tempted to say, "Forget the review, read the book." Only in the book will you have the possibility of assimilating the background material on the modes of thought that Aquinas was born into and out of which he single-handedly extracted the whole world. That is an overstatement — better to say it thus: Aquinas provided a lever which one can use to extract oneself from the morass of confusion and error that came before Aquinas and remains with us, up until now.

We find a clue as to the content of these lectures in "The Hymn of Boethius", of which I have included only the first of its six stanzas below.

#### **[page 10] The Hymn of Boethius**

**This discord in the pact of things,  
This endless war twixt truth and truth,  
That singly hold, yet give the lie,  
To him who seeks to yoke them both —  
Do the gods know the reason why?**

The Introduction gives us the theme of the book as follows:

**[page 12] The general reader, who would find it almost impossible to grasp the intellectual and theological subtleties of the whole content of Thomist philosophy, will be able to follow, with little difficulty and with great interest, this historical and psychological treatment of the relation of Thomism to the whole development of European thought. . . . Steiner [presents] the essential task of redeeming modern thought**

**from the fetters of its own preconceived limitations.**

This may sound like a lot of gobbledygook to some who would say, "So what? I already *know* that I don't have any preconceived limitations!" Those who say that probably have bought into various aspects of Logical Positivism or Existentialism without being aware of it. Something that is easy to do in the materialistically minded world in which we live on the brink of the Third Millennium. They would be well served to read this passage from the Introduction:

**[page 12-13] In the realm of thought, two modern philosophies, Logical Positivism and Existentialism, both bear witness to the influence of materialism. Logical Positivism carries Nominalism to its extreme conclusion, while Existentialism shows the bewilderment of being aware of the inadequacy of a materialistic philosophy to explain the self-evident facts of man's being, without having the understanding of spiritual reality which would provide the true explanation of them.**

As I struggled with how to begin writing a review of this ponderous material, I entered a plea in my thoughts similar to this plea of Aquinas some eight centuries before me. I offer it here for others who may find themselves in writer's block over a difficult subject.

**[page 20] Prayer of St. Thomas**

**Ineffable Creator, Who out of the treasures of Thy wisdom hast appointed three hierarchies of Angels and set them in admirable order high above the heavens and hast disposed the divers portions of the universe in such marvellous array, Thou Who art called the True Source of Light and supereminent Principle of Wisdom, be pleased to cast a beam of Thy radiance upon the darkness of my mind and dispel from me the double darkness of sin and ignorance in which I have been born.**

**Thou Who makest eloquent the tongues of little children, fashion my words and pour upon my lips the grace of Thy benediction. Grant me penetration to understand, capacity to retain, method and facility in study, subtlety in interpretation and abundant grace of expression.**

**Order the beginning, direct the progress and perfect the achievement of my work, Thou Who art true God and true Man and livest and reignest for ever and ever. Amen.**

Augustine developed a philosophy in which everything was personal and Aquinas developed a philosophy in which everything was impersonal. As Steiner says it:

**[page 23] In Augustine we have to do with a man struggling with himself: in Thomas Aquinas with a medieval Church defining its attitude to heaven, to earth, to mankind, to history; a Church which, one might almost say, expressed itself as a Church through the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.**

One of the views that Augustine passed through was Manichæism, a philosophy that gave equal weight to the spiritual and the material sides of reality. Consider my use of the phrase: "equal *weight*" — the word *weight* only applies to material objects, but in our materialistic world, we only give *weight* to those things which are materialistic and have mass or *weight*, up until now. We would do well to give *equal weight* to the spiritual as well as material world from now on.

In this next passage Steiner single-handedly destroys the preconception modern writers possess, namely, that what happens in one century logically follows from what happened in a previous century. He says that is as foolish as saying that what happens to a man at eighteen stems from what happened to him at ten.

Something called adolescence happens during the intervening time, a precursor of which cannot be found in him at ten. His voice lowers in pitch, his facial hair appears, he becomes sexually active, and his entire appearance changes dramatically. Similar quantum leaps occur in the life of humanity, one errs seriously who disregards those leaps.

**[page 31] Now, a sudden "jump" of this kind also takes place at certain times in the life of humanity as a whole, and we must assume that Manichæism lay before such a "jump," and that after it there arose that attitude and condition of soul which developed in Augustine. He found himself unable to come to terms with his own soul-life unless he could also rise above the Manichæan idea of the material-spiritual to something purely spiritual, something fashioned entirely in the spiritual world, something far more free of the senses than the Manichæan viewpoint.**

Augustine in his Confessions X asked the sea and the heavens and all their inhabitants if they were God, and got the answer, "We are not God whom thou seekest." and came to the conclusion that God could not be found in anything that one can perceive with one's senses. Thus Augustine struggled to free himself from seeing the spiritual and material intimately joined as a Manichæan did. Steiner tells us we err today if we think that the ancient Greek philosophers thought of ideas the way we do today.

**[page 33] But this is not so, for the Greeks spoke of ideas as of something which they perceived in the outer world, just as they spoke of colours or sounds as percepts. The Greek sees the idea, just as he sees colours.**

Plotinus was a philosopher and religious man of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century who brought about a revival of Plato's philosophy that came to be known as Neoplatonism which exercised a great influence on philosophic thought until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. To understand Plotinus without accounting for the evolution of consciousness since his time is very difficult.

**[page 37] We comprehend the world through sense-perceptions, which then through abstraction we convert into concepts. . . . It was not so for Plotinus. . . [We say,] "Concepts are the relating together of what we have been able to abstract in the form of ideas from the things we have observed with our senses." Plotinus . . . said, "As human beings we live in a spiritual world, and the immediate revelation of this spiritual world — what we see as its nether boundary — is concepts."**

To a sea-creature the surface of the sea is the nether boundary between the upper world and its world. Plotinus says that concepts are the nether boundary between the physical world and spiritual world, the Idea-world to which the Soul belongs. What are the implications of this view?

**[page 39] [Plotinus would have said,] "What do you mean by concepts? Concepts surely cannot be abstract? They cannot be just floating in mid-air; obviously they must have come down from the spirit-world, they must be concrete revelations of the spiritual."**

An amazing thing happened to humanity, a quantum leap in consciousness occurred between the pre-teen time of Homer and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century time of Klopstock. Homer pleaded with his Muse to give him the words to write of Achilles and Odysseus, whereas Klopstock began his poem with "Sing, immortal soul." To Steiner, that meant to say, in effect, "Sing, thou individual being that livest in each man as his individuality." He explains that "Augustine was one of the first of those who really felt the individual nature of man, with its personal responsibility." (page 48)

To understand Dionysius the Aeropagite one must understand the two paths that he says one must follow: one a path of the rational giving of names to and the other a path of the "The Nameless."

**[page 63] If a man takes either path alone he will never find the Divine, but he takes**

**both paths, then he will find the way to the Divine from that point where the two paths meet.**

For Plotinus, everything that appeared in the physical world was an excretion of the pre-existing spiritual world. But that curious portion of the physical world known as the human being can reach a stage of development where it develops a spiritual-psychic aspect.

**[page 65] In other words, that part of the spiritual-psychic element, which in the first place functioned in a material way, now, when its material work is finished, liberates itself from its relation to the material and appears as an independent spiritual-psychic entity. These are the two aspects of the relationship between the spiritual-psychic and the physical which Plotinus presents to us.**

When a human baby is born, its brain has not reached full size. Had it reached full size, the baby's head could not pass through the birth canal. The only way for the brain to increase in size was to do so after birth, and so for three years the brain grows to double the mass it was at birth. As the brain reaches full size at three, the stage is set for the process we call cognitive memory to begin — we are able for the first time to recall events that happened to us in visual detail on a permanent basis. After two years, the brain's new memory capability is fully operational and we are able to recall events in our life in detailed memories of a kind unavailable to us before the age of five, a process to which Freud gave the name, "childhood amnesia." Steiner calls our attention to this process of a child's development of memory thus:

**[page 66] Where have his powers of memory come from? In his earliest years they were at work in his physical organism, actually forming it. What that work was complete they were liberated as pure spiritual-psychic forces. They continue to function in the body, but now in a spiritual-psychic way, as memory. They have become what Plotinus would call a soul-mirror, and finally within this soul-mirror there dwells the real kernel of the human being, the Ego.**

These two aspects of the *active* formation and the *passive* reception of the physical world are the keys to understanding Plotinus. During the active portion, the powers of the spiritual world *actively* work on the physical organism [memory powers on the brain], and as soon as the function of memory becomes fully operational, the physical organism *passively* records the information of the outside world, becoming a "soul-mirror."

**[page 66] This two fold work of the soul was derived from the feeling and world-outlook of an older level of humanity. It came to its final expression in Plotinus and from him passed on to Augustine and his followers.**

Both Albertus and Aquinas knew that when work on the physical organism was completed, that "the soul becomes a mirror to itself." Thus it should be possible by reflection to acquire an understanding of these spiritual forces that form our organisms. They spoke of three ways that this occurs: *universalia post res*, *universalia in rebus*, and *universalis ante res*.

**[page 74 — 75]**

***universalia post res* — that which lives in your soul after its experience of actual material objects. [You form concepts of humanity from the humans you have met.]**

***universalia in rebus* — the universals that as spiritual realities are actually present in the object themselves. [You experience what exists invisibly in the object as an ideal reality.]**

***universalis ante res* — the universals that were in existence before the objects. [They are the universals present in the mind of God and of his divine ministers, the Angelic beings.]**

As he begins his Third Lecture, Steiner tells us that the greatest problem confronting us today is how do we reconcile our sensory and spiritual realities. We have come through a long period during which our physical organism was worked on by spiritual-psychic forces to fine tune our ability to perceive the sensory world, and now we have reached the stage where we may become conscious of both the sensory and spiritual worlds as the realities. The sensory world perceptions comprise Dionysius's rational path with names, and the spiritual world, his Nameless path of direct experience.

Not everyone would agree with Aquinas's view that *nous poieticos* of Aristotle absorbs itself into the soul-element of the human being, works on its to transmute it, and then passes into an immortal existence.

[Paraphrased from page 86] Dunn Scotus in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century was in disagreement and his pupil William Occam returned the world to the chains of Nominalism. Occam with his famous Razor may be called the "Chief of Nothing-But" as he claimed that the human intellect was *nothing but* the result of sense observation and reflection.

**[page 88] Nominalism is really the incapacity of the human sense of individuality, in its continual struggle upwards into clear consciousness, to grasp as actual spirit-reality that which is present in the mind only in the form of ideas, the incapacity to grasp it as something which is an actual active spirit-entity in man, and also, in a sense, in things. Thus, from being realities, "ideas" become again "names," merely empty abstractions.**

Steiner asks this intriguing question, "How do ideas convey to us reality?" and says that an answer to this is not possible if ideas are merely names, "void of reality." Thus *ideas*, which for Homer, were realities given to him by the Muses, have become *nothing but* abstractions for modern consciousness, leaving us stuck in the morass of Nominalism, up until now. Rightly understood, the Nominalists attempt to find a place in their soul such that when they look out into world and into their soul, they are looking at reality. The more they treat their ideas as mere names, the less likely their success in this endeavor.

When things seemed the bleakest, along came Spinoza who arrived at this conclusion, "By the development of thought itself, thought fills itself anew with a spirit-content." Steiner comments on this thought of Spinoza:

**[page 92 to 93] It is as though the spirit-world, of which we learned in Plotinism, offers itself again to thought, if thought will go forward to meet the spirit. Spirit replenishes thought until thought becomes Intuition. . . . If we can rise to this height, then from that peak of vision we are able to comprehend the whole historic process which is involved in the evolution of mankind."**

Spinoza, a Jew, had something to say about Christ Jesus which is rather surprising.

**[page 93] "The highest revelation of divine substance is given in Christ. In Christ, Intuition becomes Theophany, the Incarnation of God. The voice of Christ is therefore the voice of God and the path to Salvation."**

We are, in Spinoza's view, on the spirit-path to God and our meditation on the Mystery of Golgotha will lead us to Intuition and from there to the manifestation of God. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, wrestled with the question of "How can man arrive at certainty?" and ended up developing a *Super-Nominalism*. We merely attach the words that are the contents of our thoughts and ideas to external reality. "We, therefore, attach causality to things." (page 99)

**[page 99] In other words — and here the paradox is manifest — we have truth because we make it for ourselves; but the truth that we have is only subjective truth, because we ourselves bring it into existence and then apply it to objects. There you have the final consequence of Nominalism.**

If we agree that "Kant brought Nominalism to its logical conclusion," then we may agree that Steiner by exposing the hollow vessel that Kant created has brought Nominalism to its "illogical" conclusion, its very *end* as a viable philosophy for the rest of time.

Perhaps all this is too abstract and you, dear Reader, would like some more concrete example of how this would lead one to completely different conclusions if one were to reject Kant's approach and accept Steiner's approach. How about this: *the heart would no longer be viewed as a pump.* (1) Here's how Steiner describes the circulation of the blood without using the popular metaphor of the heart as a pump:

**[page 102- 103] The circulating blood is a living entity — as can be proved by embryology — and the blood, moved by its own inner force, sets the heart in action. The heart is the instrument by means of which the blood-activity expresses itself and integrates itself into the whole life of the human being. The activity of the heart is a consequence of the blood-activity and not vice-versa. In the same way — as has been set out in detail in my lectures for doctors — it can be shown, in regard to each organ of the body, how the realization that man is a spiritual being explains the working of his material organism. Thus we can, in a way, make real that which appeared dimly, in more or less abstract form, in Thomism, when it said: "The spiritual-psychic permeates the whole physical body." That now becomes knowledge of real concrete fact.**

If we look at the process of knowledge as Kant and his followers state it, "How do we come to make a picture of the outer world inside ourselves?" then we go astray. We should not be answering that question, but rather bringing about the development of our own being. To follow Kant's process would be like answering the question of how the wheat plant grows from a seed by studying the food-value of wheat! (from page 112) We may come up with wonderful statistics about the food-value of wheat, but we have not learned about how the wheat plant ever grew to where it could produce such food-value in the first place. We only learn something about a product of the growth of the wheat plant.

**[page 112] In the same way there exists in us a stream of spirit-growth which is present in us as a force and is related to our being, just like the stream of growth in the plant, from the root, through the stem and the leaf, to the flower and the fruit, and then back again to the seed and the root. And just as the fact that we eat it can never afford a true explanation of the actual nature of the principle of growth in the plant, so the question of the practical knowledge-value of that which lives in us as an evolutionary impulse must not be made the basis of a philosophy of knowledge. Rather it must become clear to us that what is called knowledge in ordinary life is only a secondary effect of the working of thought on man's being. Thus we arrive at the reality that is inherent in thinking. It is an activity that is at work within us.**

To close out this review, I'd like to end with a portion of the quotation from the Epilogue from the play *A Sleep of Prisoners* by Christopher Fry:

**[page 154] Affairs are now soul size.  
The enterprise  
Is exploration into God.  
Where are you making for?**

**Where are you making for, dear Reader? You are the wheat plant, and by the action of your thinking, you can not only affect the food-value of your life, but the very growing and development of your immortal Soul, your "I" whose existence is but punctuated, like a perennial plant in your garden, by the cycles of death and rebirth.**

----- Footnotes -----

**Footnote 1.**

**October 22, 2013 Update:** I received a link to this [enlightening article](#) which says, among other things,

**In 1932, Bremer of Harvard filmed the blood in the very early embryo circulating in self-propelled mode in spiralling streams before the heart was functioning. Amazingly, he was so impressed with the spiralling nature of the blood flow pattern that he failed to realize that the phenomena before him had demolished the pressure propulsion principle. Earlier in 1920, Steiner, of the Goetheanum in Switzerland had pointed out in lectures to medical doctors that the heart was not a pump forcing inert blood to move with pressure but that the blood was propelled with its own biological momentum, as can be seen in the embryo, and boosts itself with “induced” momenta from the heart. He also stated that the pressure does not cause the blood to circulate but is caused by interrupting the circulation. Experimental corroboration of Steiner’s concepts in the embryo and adult is herein presented.**

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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