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## **Rudolf Steiner – Moralist, Libertine or Amoralist?**

“What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Nietzsche (1886) *Beyond Good and Evil*. IV.153.

## Introduction

An essential question, especially in the field of religion and esotericism, it is the question “How should we live?” In this respect, there are three options to consider: moralism (adherence to a formalized moral code, which defines good and evil), libertinism (perform every whim and desire one has at a given moment, in search of pleasure and instant gratification) and amoralism (the idea that there is no formal moral code, good and evil are utterly subjective, if they exist at all, and at the same time seeking to nobly avoid plebeian libertinism). I will consider the following question: the well-known esotericist Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy, parent of the Waldorf (Free) Schools and initiator of artistic, theological, scientific and technological currents (including bio-dynamic agriculture), was he a moralist, a libertine or an amoralist?

In order to answer such question I intend to explain the Steinerian concept of freedom, making a parallel with the conception of Friedrich Nietzsche, who, as Rudolf Steiner affirms, they are similar<sup>2</sup>, in the good meaning of that word (“Steiner met Nietzsche’s work in 1889.”<sup>3</sup>) All chances are that Nietzsche never read Steiner’s works (Nietzsche got mad in begin of 1889<sup>4</sup>, at that time Steiner had published a few editorial works over Goethe and his book *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception*). I won’t seek to make a parallel between these two conceptions, because there already is the work *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom*, wherein Steiner himself draws this parallel. Building upon the results of this work, I will present the problem of freedom, as it follows from the ideas of the mentioned authors.

## I. Thesis: Amoralism

### *i. Aspects of Freedom in Friedrich Nietzsche*

Nietzsche affirms in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that all those who produce and manifest their own will and liberate themselves from any demand, are like his hero, Zarathustra<sup>5</sup>. According to Steiner, such an individual, “A *moral* evaluation of actions he does not grant. He is an amoralist.”<sup>6</sup> Steiner affirms that “A personality such as Nietzsche cannot bear those tyrants who appear in the form of abstract moral commandments. I determine how I am to think, how I am to act, says such a nature.”<sup>7</sup> Steiner adds: “This it is what he [Nietzsche] propounds through his *Zarathustra*. The sovereign *individuum* which knows that it can live only out of its own nature and which sees its personal goal in a life configuration which fits its own being: for Nietzsche this is the *superman*, in contrast to the human being who believes that life has been given to him as a gift to serve a purpose lying outside of himself.”<sup>8</sup> Further Steiner says, “He [Nietzsche] feels destined to create new

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<sup>2</sup> R. Steiner (1895) *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom*. “Preface” – Since I employed easily searchable internet online texts, I think it is not necessary to provide page numbers for the quotes. In fact, I read most of those books in Romania (in Romanian, English and French), and I no longer have access to them. Italicization: italics have been rendered as in the source texts.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner Archive, <http://rsarchive.org/Books/GA005/>

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, ‘Friedrich Nietzsche’.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. Nietzsche (1883-1885) *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. XLIX.3.

<sup>6</sup> R. Steiner, op. cit., 1.ii.23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 1.i.3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 1.ii.10.

values, having discovered the origin of the old, and having found that they are but human, not divine values.”<sup>9</sup>

## ***ii. The Problem of Freedom in Rudolf Steiner***

### **1. Individual Freedom**

According to Rudolf Steiner, “If man does not bear within himself the grounds for his actions, but rather must conduct himself according to commandments, then he acts under compulsion, he stands under necessity, almost like a mere nature being.”<sup>10</sup> Steiner considers that “Whatever the uniformly developed personality does, it does not allow it to be prescribed by a moral science, but only by the impulses of its own self.”<sup>11</sup> According to Steiner, “A deed done out of freedom does not at all exclude, but includes moral laws, but it will be a deed done from a higher sphere compared with those dictated solely by such laws.”<sup>12</sup>

### **2. Social Freedom**

The ethics developed by Steiner is a descriptive ethics; it is not a prescriptive ethics: “If we seek out the rules (conceptual principles) underlying the actions of individuals, peoples, and epochs, we obtain a system of ethics which is not so much a science of moral laws as a natural history of morality.”<sup>13</sup>

How are people able to live together? Steiner appeals here to the unity of the world of ideas, world wherein originate, mediated or unmediated, all human impulses: “If we both draw our intuitions really from the world of Ideas [...] then we cannot but meet one another in striving for the same aims, in having the same intentions.”<sup>14</sup> Further, statesmen “have established laws over other people, and only he is unfree who forgets this origin and either looks upon these laws as extra-human commands.”<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Freedom and Predestination**

Steiner says: “If, therefore, the world ground has goals, they are identical with the goals that the human being sets himself in living and in what he does.”<sup>16</sup> He considers thus the idea that the Creator of humans imprinted, in the act of creation, His Own intentions and maybe His Own behavior in the most intimate being of the human. “The ground of the world has poured itself completely out into the world; it has not withdrawn from the world in order to guide it from outside; it drives the world from inside; it has not withheld itself from the world.”<sup>17</sup> The Creator is participating in the actions of His human creatures, so humans are the representatives of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 1.iii.40.

<sup>10</sup> R. Steiner (1886) *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*. Ch. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom*. 1.i.3.

<sup>12</sup> Idem (1894) *Philosophy of Freedom*. Ch. IX.

<sup>13</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*. Ch. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Loc. cit.

Nietzsche said: “But so willeth it my creating Will, my fate”<sup>18</sup> — the unfolded will means destiny. We could believe that our actions are not really ours, we being under imperatives and decisions which act from outside us. But, “If we recognize these laws, then our deeds are also *our own* creations.”<sup>19</sup> God acts *through us*. By knowing the flow of actions, it becomes ours. “That which compelled us, has become our own being. The laws no longer rule *over us*; *in us* they rule over the deed issuing from our I.”<sup>20</sup>

## II. Anti-Thesis: Covert Moralism

Here is a clear example of moralism hidden under a cover of amorality: “I do not prove intellectually whether my deed is good or bad; I do it out of my *love* for it.”<sup>21</sup> By affirming this, Steiner wants to produce in the realm of reason the same event which happened two thousand years ago, when Christ replaced the demand of the Law with love. There no longer is a coercive mental authority (see below), but there is the will full of love of the free humans. From here we infer that the meaning of human life is not about fulfilling an ideal stated by some authority (other people, God’s commandment or the voice of one’s own reason or moral conscience), but that the human is called upon to make true his/her own creation. This idea is continued: “It is not man’s business to carry out the will of some being outside himself in the world, but his own.”<sup>22</sup> Steiner defines human freedom when he defines free action:

“Among the levels of characterological disposition, we have singled out as the highest the one that works as *pure thinking* or *practical reason*. Among the motives, we have just singled out *conceptual intuition* as the highest. On closer inspection it will at once be seen that at this level of morality *driving force* and *motive* coincide; that is, neither a predetermined characterological disposition nor the external authority of an accepted moral principle influences our conduct. [...] it is an action determined purely and simply by its own ideal content.”<sup>23</sup>

This viewpoint he names ethical individualism and it represents his conception on human freedom. It follows that in Steiner action is free when the mobile of the action coincides with the motive for that action. This means that action is free when its cause (the motivation which determinates such action) is the same as its purpose (the idea or the representation which justifies the action). So, human behavior is free when, not being motivated by other causes, the person behaves by practically applying the idea which justifies that action in his/her own awareness. So, when the human follows his/her own ideas, and applies them, he/she is being free. He also affirms that:

“While I am performing the action I am influenced by a moral maxim in so far as it can live in me intuitively; it is bound up with my *love* for the objective that I want to realize through my action. I ask no man and no rule, ‘Shall I perform this action?’ — but carry it out as soon as I have grasped the idea of it. [...] I have found in myself the ground for my action, namely, my love of the action. I do not work out mentally whether my action is good or bad; I carry it out because I *love* it. [...] Again, I do not ask myself, ‘How would another man act in my position?’ — but I act as I, this particular individuality, find I have occasion to do. [...]

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<sup>18</sup> Fr. Nietzsche, op. cit. XXIV.

<sup>19</sup> R. Steiner (1891) *Truth and Knowledge*. Ch. VIII.

<sup>20</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>21</sup> R. Steiner, *Philosophy of Freedom*. Ch. IX.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, Ch. X.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, Ch. IX.

I feel no compulsion, neither the compulsion of nature which guides me by my instincts, nor the compulsion of the moral commandments, but I want simply to carry out what lies within me.”<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, the conscious justification for the action is the moral maxim which determinates that action, and love for applying such a maxim (maxim that is at the same time moral and intellectual), it is the affective motivation. Steiner understands that the maxim of the action is that which motivates the action and thus the affective purpose corresponds to the moral maxim. Action is performed for the love of one’s own moral maxim, for the moral pleasure of applying such moral maxim, which the individual loves it because it is his/her own idea. Love for one’s own ideas is the affective motivation and intellectual reason; this means to recognize aware that it is legitimate to behave out of love for applying one’s own ideas, and this way of behaving is the free action.

It follows that in Steiner, applying one’s own ideas for the sake of applying them, is what defines free action. Free action is performed gratuitously, i.e. it does not expect anything in exchange for performing it, besides satisfying love for applying one’s own ideas. Free action is not anarchical, it is not random, but it is the application of one’s own ideas. Love for behaving in conformity with these ideas is the cause that pushes to their application. The human that performs his/her own moral maxims, because he/she loves the action which is determined by these ideas, he/she is considered free by Rudolf Steiner.

### III. Synthesis (Conclusion)

A possible interpretation of Steiner’s ethical philosophy is through Aleister Crowley’s Law of Thelema, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole Law!” Steiner’s answer would be that he does not call people to behave as they please<sup>25</sup> but he calls them to the strenuous work of practically making true their own faith, namely the faith they have in their own ideas, which are given unto them through their own intellectual intuitions. Steiner and Crowley are even very similar in ethics, if we compare my description of Steiner’s ethics with dr. Marco Pasi’s description of Crowley’s thelemic ethics and political ideas<sup>26</sup>. It follows that Augustine says: “First love (altruist feeling), then do what you wilt”, then Steiner says: “First love for action (i.e. for personal ideas) then do what you wilt” and Crowley and Nietzsche are all about “Do what you wilt”, with some Social Darwinism in it, plus the idea that “masters” have to rule over “slaves”<sup>27</sup> (i.e. the masses) – and that the Law of Thelema is, of course, meant for “masters”<sup>28</sup>.

Such thelemic interpretation of the *Philosophy of Freedom* could be due to the fact that in other works, Steiner did not follow the thoughts from the *Philosophy of Freedom*, but he allowed himself to be influenced by Max Stirner and by Nietzsche, who saw will as an end in itself. (Nietzsche was very influenced by the maxim which the Christian crusaders, as the

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<sup>24</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, neither does Crowley, but a discussion of Crowleian True Will would complicate too much the argument, in the first instance because Crowley was not very explicit in stating what he means by “True Will”, cf. M. Pasi (1999) *Aleister Crowley e la tentazione della politica*. Ch. 2.3 (pp. 81-85).

<sup>26</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. loc. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Crowley originally devised Thelema as a mass religion, but he was unable to make the masses buy his message, therefore he reshaped the Thelemic movement as an elitist occult order (cf. loc. cit.).

legend goes, extracted from higher ranks of the Assassins, namely “*Nothing is true, everything is permissible!*”<sup>29</sup> which is quite similar to the Law of Thelema).

Most humans believe they would behave freely when they behave according to whims. I think I have proven here that Steiner calls for applying one’s own ideas, and he does not call to *ad libitum* behavior. What we may reproach Steiner is that he was not consequent enough in affirming this viewpoint. In the *Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner does dissociate himself from every moral authority, but he considers that free action must be dedicated to applying one’s own ideas, and these ideas should not be confused with whims or momentary dispositions.

So, basically the problems with Steiner’s ethical vision are: one should make a distinction between one’s own ideas and Steiner’s ideas (it is not a very clear distinction for many anthroposophists – Steiner’s amoral ethics is about making true one’s *own* ideas, thus not about making true *Steiner’s* ideas!); one should distinguish between moral ideas and mere whims; and there is a subtle distinction which distinguishes Steinerian amoralism from libertinage, which the unsophisticated people are not able to grasp it.

In fact, Steiner’s ethics is an ethic of idealism, namely an ethic of pursuing an issue, a cause, which is an ideal to be followed. It is thus a refined version of Machiavellian thinking, wherein means serve an end and action is amoral. Only, there is no longer a stable ideal to be followed, offered by an intellectual authority, but instant moral-intellectual intuitions of the individual himself/herself, which act as momentary and situation-particularized ideals. Steiner would definitely agree with Goethe that “The man who acts never has any conscience; no one has any conscience but the man who thinks.”<sup>30</sup>

Steiner had a philosophical passion for the theories of Max Stirner and Friederich Nietzsche; he was a close friend of John Henry Mackay and Benjamin Ricketson Tucker<sup>31</sup> and defined himself (if a label has to be given) as an individualistic anarchist<sup>32</sup>. In such circumstances, his intellectual affinity with the ethical philosophy of Aleister Crowley, who had views similar to these people, it is obvious: all of them affirmed the absolute sovereignty of the individual will.

Moral choice	Nature	Inner being
Deterministic	Marx	Steiner’s free action
Random	Mainstream biology and psychology (Darwin)	Vulgar understanding of “free choice” (libertines)

<sup>29</sup> R. Steiner, *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom*. 1.i.3. – Steiner is quoting from Fr. Nietzsche (1887) *Genealogy of Morals*. 3.24.

<sup>30</sup> Giga Quotes, ‘Conscience’.

<sup>31</sup> Straume, T. (2007) ‘Anthropos Anarchos’.

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<sup>32</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Note: all quoted internet sites were consulted between November 2006 and January 2007.