An Interview by Tim Nadelle with Dr. Max Leyf, 30 December 2021 on his book: The Redemption of Thinking
A Study in Truth, Meaning & the Evolution of Consciousness, with Special Reference to Johann von Goethe, Owen Barfield and Rudolf Steiner

If you love the Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, I heartily recommend you order (and read!) a copy of Max Leyf’s book, The Redemption of Thinking, published in 2020. I had the pleasure of interviewing Max during the Holy Nights of 2021-2022. (I provide a brief biography of Dr. Max Leyf below, at the end of the interview.)

The book, which was Max’s PhD thesis, unfolds in 4 sections, as follows:

i. The hard problem of consciousness

ii. The open secret: Goethe’s way of knowledge

iii. Barfield and the evolution of consciousness

iv. “Quid est Veritas” What is truth?

This is an important book, a book which reencounters many of the living ideas of the Philosophy of Spiritual Activity and the Riddles of Philosophy through a journey into the evolution of modern science. I feel, in a way, that Max has taken up the task of writing this telescopic book on behalf of all of us who love Anthroposophia and would see her take her rightful place of spiritual leadership among the great minds and transformative impulses of the day.

With adroit intellectual seacraft, Max navigates the scientific and philosophical writings of Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Kant, Darwin and many other stormy waters. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Goethe and Barfield provide the wind in his sails throughout; and he sweeps into port with Rudolf Steiner, which arrival, of course, signifies the commencement of a new journey.

Max goes on to provide a map for that new journey in Appendix D: Phenomenology of the Soul and the Transfiguration of Consciousness.

I was also able to watch and listen to a Zoom recording of Max’s defence of his dissertation. Here are comments on Max’s dissertation from several committee
members from the California Institute of Integral Studies, who asked questions during the recording. Bear in mind these are not anthroposophists; they are simply contemporary thinkers, all PhDs, who were tasked with evaluating Max’s achievement.

“... an extraordinary work of genuine vision; also a work of erudition, of learning...” [Richard Tarnas]

“... a work of healing as well as a theoretical, analytical work...” [Matt Segall]

“... The insight that there’s a deep connection to the recovery of participatory knowing, not just theoretically but in an active fashion, as a way of response to the meaning crisis - I think that’s brilliant.” [John Vervaeke]

Oh and, by the way, as a kind of bonus for those who purchase the book, in Appendix B, Max provides his own translation of Rudolf Steiner’s Calendar of the Soul. Here is a link you can use to order Max’s book:

The Redemption of Thinking: A Study in Truth, Knowledge, and the Evolution of Consciousness with Special Reference to Johann von Goethe, Owen Barfield, and Rudolf Steiner: Leyf PhD, Max: 9798574488805: Books - Amazon.ca

And here are the ten questions I asked Max in our interview, along with his answers.

In your book you refer to “the hard problem of consciousness”. I have 3 questions:

a. What is the problem?
It’s possible to establish correlations between physical and physiological states on one hand, and qualitative conscious experiences on the other, but not to explain how one causes the other. The first has sometimes been referred to as “the easy problem” not because it involves no effort on the part of scientists, but because it merely consists in performing measurements and making observations. By contrast, “the hard problem” refers to overcoming the qualitative heterogeneity between brain states and conscious phenomena which is self-evident to anyone who understands the meanings of these terms. Brain states are just what they are and are not about anything. Conscious states, by contrast, are intentional by their very nature and essence.

b. Why is it so hard to resolve?
There is no obvious means by which unconscious, unintentional matter could give rise to consciousness and intentionality. The lack of a forthcoming explanation is not just an accident but a function of our very definition of
“matter,” which we presume to be primordially inert and unconscious. If you stipulate inert matter as a fundamental substance while postulating secondary qualities, intentionality, and consciousness as somehow emergent or derivative from the fundamental substance, you will be tasked to explain how the latter could ever have come forth from the former, which you will never be able to do because of the categorical qualitative heterogeneity. It should really be called “the impossible problem” for the same reason that we are not really waiting around to discover how to generate a sphere from lines in a plane, or a bicycle with three wheels. To assemble a mind out of mindless elements is a kind of oxymoron.

c. Why is it so important?
The idea that there must be an answer to this question is one of the linchpins of the contemporary scientific paradigm. The notion that there is no answer—that “you can’t get there from here”—is scarcely considered. If the difficulty were confronted head on, it is unlikely that the materialism paradigm would survive intact. It’s quite funny in a way, and I have even heard this scenario referred to as “promissory materialism.” In other words, the moment of crisis for the materialist paradigm can always be delayed; the debt ceiling can always be raised. It allows materialists to avoid having to stand and face the music, as it were, because the solution, though never forthcoming, can be infinitely deferred.

2) In part 2 of your book, you confront the modern iteration of the Darwinian presupposition that mind must have emerged from mindless matter. You write:

“Among other shortcomings, such a view fails to take into account that to grant such a proposition would entail a fundamental reconception of the nature of inert matter. If the exquisite functions and phenomena of life and mind were indeed to emerge from inert matter, then the latter would have to be entirely reimagined from the manner in which it is now pictured. Inert matter would have to be conceived so as to be potentially conscious. Matter would have to everywhere conceived as already pregnant with mind.”

In your experience, how would a pure materialist object to it? And how would you respond to his objection?

Before I say anything, it should be observed that the question of how life emerges from non-life is the same question as how consciousness emerges from its lack. Fundamentally, both stem from the pure and natural striving of intelligence to understand itself. You could call it self-knowledge. It seems to me that the journey to self-knowledge and world-knowledge is sufficiently
assiduous without first turning our map upside down. This is what we do, in effect, by insisting on setting out from a standpoint that we do not, nor could ever, occupy. By this analogy, I mean to point to the fact that to explain life and consciousness, non-life and non-consciousness can never serve as a suitable starting point because any explanation of the latter already presupposes what it is meant to explain. To posit a lifeless and unconscious universe is a sheer conjecture and can never become a matter of experience. “What about a rock? That is unconscious, right?” someone might wonder. But this is precisely the point: any actual rock already implies the existence of a living universe like this one, which is the only one there is. Of course, it is possible to hypothesize abstract rocks which, by definition, we will never encounter, or multiverses, which are equally hypothetical. But this represents an exercise in fantasy and not in science, philosophy, or anthroposophy. Any actual observation, which is ostensibly the basis of the scientific method, implies life and consciousness given its concrete context in both the subjective and the objective pole of the event.

To steel-man a materialist’s argument, his explanation is seeking to give an account for something that is more complex in terms of something that is less. It is axiomatic in the materialist framework that matter is something basic. Hence it is natural that any explanation for life would have to take inert matter as its departure point. Matter is imagined as something that is neat, predictable, and quantifiable and hence lends itself to models and equations. But by definition, matter can never be an object of direct experience, since objective reality is imagined to be shut off from us by our Kantian cocoons woven of appearances, phenomenal experience, and secondary qualities.

I must admit that upon returning to this question a couple years after writing the book, the premise seems patently absurd. Why in the world would we prioritize the reality of something we can never experience over something we can? Why would we treat the mathematical models that we create as more real than the phenomena that they are abstracted from and meant to model? It’s looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Rather than starting outside of experience and trying to reason our way back to it, it can be seen that the only universe we know of is this living one; this one in which life and consciousness are manifestly present.

3) I never referenced the page but I recall you mentioning in the book that developments in scientific thought over the last centuries created the thought environment which made postmodernism possible. The picture I have is patricide. Can you expand on this?
Yes, well the moment you allow abstract models to replace actual phenomena as the objects of truth, it can be seen that a great number of different theories can be advanced without any bona fide epistemological means of adjudicating between them. Instead, the supremacy of one theory over another is decided not by its truth but by cultural forces and that already sounds a lot like postmodernism. The patricide is an interesting phenomenon in the emergence of the scientific paradigm since in a certain way, the early moderns, especially Bacon and Descartes and Galileo, specifically set about to reject Aristotle. Bacon even called his seminal text the *Novum Organum*.

Bacon is an interesting and paradoxical case. On the one hand he is hailed as the father of the scientific method and a champion of modern science over the fusty dogmas of “the Schoolmen” and “the Philosophers.” But at the same time, he is obviously advocating an attentiveness to phenomena and a campaign to exorcise the “idols of the mind” that distort our perception of them. And this endeavour was not taken up again so heartily until Goethe hundreds of years later. I actually excised a section I had written comparing Galileo and Bacon to Romulus and Remus. What the brothers were to Rome, the thinkers were the modern science. The fratricide as well as the patricide is an interesting element of founding mythology and in a certain way, it is recapitulated in modern science because the direct empiricism that Bacon advocates is betrayed through recourse abstractions and quantitative models before it can propagate itself.

4) How would you characterize the key difference between a Newtonian and Goethean approach to scientific inquiry?

Three things: calculability versus insight; models versus experience; reductionism versus metamorphosis. I am reminded of a quote by Cassirer: “The mathematical formula strives to make the phenomena calculable, that of Goethe to make them visible.”

5) You seemed to muse at one point over whether a firm choice between Newtonian and Goethean approaches is necessary. What’s your view? Could the two perspectives be harmonized.

Yes, I don’t see any reason why they should not be harmonized as long as each is regarded for what it is. Newton’s approach is to transduce phenomena into mathematical models. This allows for a technological mastery of them. Goethe’s approach is to seek to understand the phenomena on their own terms. This allows for insight and self-knowledge. Barfield once likened this to the difference between knowing how to drive a car and knowing what a car is and
how it functions. Hence, the Newtonian method fosters a sort of “dashboard knowledge” whose function is utility but not insight.

6) On pages 225 to 232 you provide three very convincing objections to Kant’s theory of the thing-in-itself. To struggle in this way is essential to the path of knowledge, because without overcoming this Kantian thinking we would always find ourselves uncertain about whether truth is accessible. It’s more than a pure philosophical dilemma: it’s a personal hurdle for each of us along the path of Knowledge. For example, is there not a risk to anthroposophers of finding ourselves in a Kantian trap? For example, we conceive of the tree as an entity which has its ego in Devachan, with its fundamental thing-in-itself out of reach for us in this lifetime if we are not clairvoyant seers?

I can’t resist quoting one of the wittiest polemics that I encountered, which comes from Ayn Rand of all people:

[Kant’s] argument, in essence, ran as follows: man is limited to a consciousness of a specific nature, which perceives by specific means and no others, therefore, his consciousness is not valid; man is blind, because he has eyes—deaf, because he has ears—deluded, because he has a mind—and the things he perceives do not exist, because he perceives them.

Obviously, it is a straw-man that fails to provide an adequate representation of the position it seeks to refute and hence the quote did not make it into the book. Still, it points as well as anything to the hidden contradiction in Kant’s epistemology and it can perhaps give the reader a laugh.

To answer your question about anthroposophers succumbing to the same Kantian trap under the rubric of theosophical terminology: yes, it is clearly a danger. Steiner also recognized the risk that his teachings would be interpreted in this way and warns against such interpretation on numerous occasions. But it shouldn’t surprise us that what is perceptible in the higher worlds evades one’s vision from the lower ones. After all, I don’t think of the fact that I don’t know you, Tim, absolutely as something that stands in contradiction to the fact that I do know you in part and sufficiently for us to share in a conversation over these questions. The stumbling block seems to be the Gnostic impulse which sees the material world as a sort of prison or a maya whose sole function is to imprison us. The Christ impulse is the reverse of this: the material world is a sacrament for the Kingdom of God; every being participates in its own transcendence.

7) What’s the way out of the trap?
The solution is to repudiate the Gnostic impulse and dissolve the arbitrary dichotomy between appearance and thing-in-itself. I’m not sure what the most expressive term for this is but what I called “the Gnostic impulse” clearly appears in the Protestant drive towards iconoclasm and the view that anything not explicitly religious is antithetical to religion. The Reformation saw itself as a fundamentalist movement that sought to return to the roots of Christianity and written right in the Ten Commandments is the proscription of idolatry: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” The Koran contains similar injunctions. But Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism but never merely an offshoot of Judaism. Instead it was a synthesis of the Hebraic monotheistic impulse with the Hellenic polytheistic one. The first offered the moral substance and the second the philosophical form. One was the father and the other the mother. People don’t often consider that the New Testament was written in Greek. Hence, what Luther and other early Protestant reformers were doing was harkening back to a one-sided vision of the past which is arguably not Christian at all. For all of their faults, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have preserved the sacramental spirit that points towards the ultimate transfiguration of all matter in Christ. Interestingly, one of the most eloquent descriptions of this divinization does not contain any theological language at all. Instead, it appears in Thoreau’s *Walden*:

“To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.”
I realize that this has been a somewhat discursive answer to your question but, in my defence, ideas like this possess a holographic quality and everything resembles everything else up to a point. In any case, nothing in a person’s direct experience of, say, a grapefruit, tells him that its appearance should be at odds with its reality. Instead the appearance-reality dichotomy is something we import into our direct experience through thought. The question of where these thoughts come from if not from direct experience points to the reality of folk spirits, archangels, principalities, etc.

9) On page 339, you write, “Truth as participation in meaning resolves the gap between knowledge and reality because it does not in the first place create it.” This is a liberating idea. How, in the context of this idea, would you respond to someone who objects that meaning, after all, is subjective? i.e. the “my truth / your truth” doctrine?

Well obviously he expects me to take the meaning of his question as more than a figment of his subjective mind or he would not pose it. To pose a question like this presupposes the very intersubjectivity or objectivity of meaning that it intends to deny.

9) It was a great pleasure to read Appendix C, which provides the foundation and also indications for a methodology for transfiguring our consciousness in a manner which cultivates new faculties of cognition. We could hold an entire interview on the indications you have provided. However, I’m going to take up just one aspect. With respect to the observation of thinking, you imply the possibility of a transition, a movement from observing the thinking one has done in the recent past to a direct, heightened awareness of the thinking one is doing in the present. Is this what you mean? If yes, can you say more about it?

Yes. Of course, it is difficult to say more about and if it were really easy, we would probably not be troubled by this riddle to begin with because we would be immediately and intuitively aware of our own free creativity in every moment. Furthermore, until a person has had the experience that Steiner is indicating in the Freedom Philosophy, anything that is said about it is liable to be interpreted according to experiences that imply the non-existence of this spiritual activity. By the same token, once a person has had the experience that Steiner is inviting us to partake in, it need only be indicated and he will know exactly what is meant. Steiner often compared the Philosophy of Freedom to something that must be performed by the reader and not merely read. Imagine the difference between reading a manual of gymnastics exercises and actually performing them. If we set about the observation of thinking, we will eventually perceive that our thoughts are “out of phase” with our thinking
(intentional or willed thinking activity). Imagine that you could only see a canvas but the room was dark and the painter was wearing black and his brush was invisible, or suppose you could only hear echoes but not incident sounds, or suppose you were a whale underwater and you could look up and see a whole fleet of hulls. To this day, Plato’s metaphor is perhaps the most precise.

10) In chapter 3 of the Philosophy of Freedom, Steiner says clearly that we can only observe a thinking we have already done. And yet, over time, the will-imbued act of observing our thinking takes us increasingly to a place where our I-Being is so alive in our thinking that thinking and its observation do indeed appear to merge. How would you reconcile what Steiner says in chapter 3 with the experience of actually following his indications?

Maybe Steiner is presenting the Philosophy of Freedom to us as a challenge. It is well-known that the Mediaeval alchemists would deliberately corrupt the instructions in their manuscripts as a sort of test that the reader would have to overcome.

I think the apparent paradox has to do with bringing our thinking into phase with our thoughts so that we recognize the causal relationship that holds between them. From there, we are made aware of our own free creative spiritual activity. My experience is that by following through with our own understanding of the thoughts that Steiner presents, we may suddenly become aware, out of the corner of our eyes, as it were, of our own noetic activity that we had been performing all along in order to think these thoughts after him. For this reason, the thoughts in both the Philosophy of Freedom, as well as in Steiner’s other manuals like Knowledge of the Higher Worlds, are somewhat exotic and “acrobatic” even. This is just what is most indicated if the purpose is to catch the spiritual eurythmy of our own I in our peripheral vision, so to speak. This is the crucial moment because for the first time, we see into the cause, energy, and agency of our thoughts as well as their transparent ideal essence and semantic content. As I see it, the latter is the first fruit of observation in the Freedom Philosophy and the former is the fruition, which is not the same thing as the ending or completion. If anything, it is the keyhole that opens into higher states of consciousness. Ordinarily consciousness is characterized by knowledge through reflection. The consummation of the Freedom Philosophy is the experience of knowledge through being and through communion since our own thinking is not something that we perceive but something we do and are. Hence, it could be likened to kinaesthetic perception and contrasted to visual or auditory perception.
Dr. Max Leyf is a Roler, philosopher, and anthroposopher from Alaska. He earned his doctoral degree from the California Institute of Integral Studies in 2019. He teaches philosophy at a local university in Anchorage where he also maintains a Rolfing practice called The Way of the Elbow. He has published several books and is currently working as a co-author on a book about the thought of Owen Barfield. He keeps a website at theoriapress.wordpress.com.