

Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy

Lecture 2 — Dornach, April 3, 1921

Before I begin, let me emphasize that this lecture does not form part of the sequence of lectures presented in the context of the courses, [Note 1] but in a certain respect is intended to relate to what I have outlined yesterday evening. There, we dealt with studying that particular form of development within humanity's historical evolution that occurred in the middle and also in the second half of the nineteenth century; the evolutionary impulse of materialism. I said that in these considerations our attention should not be turned so much to materialism in general, which calls for other viewpoints, but rather to theoretical materialism, to materialism as a world view. I drew attention to the fact that this materialism must be confronted with a sufficiently critical mind, but that, on the other hand, materialism has been a necessary phase of evolution in the history of mankind.

We cannot simply speak of rejecting it and say that it is an aberration; materialism needs to be understood. For the one does not exclude the other. Particularly in these reflections it is important to extend the sphere of thoughts relating to truth and error further than is ordinarily the case. It is generally said that in the logical life of thoughts it is possible either to err or to find the truth. What is not mentioned is that under certain circumstances the glance we cast upon the external world may discover errors in outer reality. Difficult though it may be for modern thought to admit to errors in the events of nature — something that spiritual science has to do — it is obvious for people today to admit that there are actual errors in the results that arise in the course of the historical development and manifest themselves, so to speak, in the communal, social sphere. These errors cannot be corrected by mere logic, but demand comprehension based on the conditions that gave rise to them.

In thinking, all we have to do is reject error. We have to extricate ourselves from error and, overcoming it, reach truth. But in the case of errors rooted in the factual realm we must always say that they also have a positive aspect and are of value in a certain sense for the development of mankind. Theoretical materialism of the nineteenth century should therefore not merely be condemned in a narrow, one-sided manner; instead, we should grasp its significance in human evolution.

Theoretical materialism consisted in the fact — and what remained of it still consists in this — that man devotes himself to a conscientious and exact investigation of the external material facts, that in a certain sense he loses himself in this world of facts. Then, proceeding from this investigation of facts, he attains to a view of life that tends to the conclusion that there is no other reality except the world of facts, and that everything pertaining to soul and spirit is, after all, merely a product of the material course of events. Even a conception of life such as this was necessary during a certain epoch of time, and the only danger would be a rigid adherence to it so that it could influence the further development of humanity in an age when other contents have to enter human consciousness.

Let us try today and investigate the actual basis of this evolutionary impulse leading to theoretical materialism. We come to it when, from a certain standpoint, we picture once more the threefold nature of the human organism. [Note 2] I have characterized it on many occasions. I have said: We must distinguish within the whole organization of the human being the part that, in regard to his physical being, may be designated as the organization of the senses and nerves. This is chiefly concentrated in the human head, but in a certain sense it extends over the whole human organism, also penetrating the other parts of it. As a second member we have the rhythmical organization. We encounter it chiefly in the rhythm of breathing and in the circulation of the blood. The third part in a wider sense is the metabolic organization of the human being, including the whole system of the human limbs. The human limb system is a system of movement, and every form of movement is basically an expression of our metabolic processes. One day, when people will investigate more closely what really takes place in the metabolic processes whenever the human being moves, they will discover the intimate connection between the limb system and the metabolic system.

In considering these three systems in the human being, we have, first of all, pointed out the fundamental difference between them. I have already drawn your attention yesterday to the fact that, by means of the same drawing, two men with entirely different world views wanted to clarify matters relating to the human head organization as well as to the processes of human thinking. I pointed out that it so happened that I was once present at a lecture given by an extreme materialist. He wished to describe the life of the soul, but he actually described the human brain, the individual sections of the brain, the connecting fibers, and so on. He arrived at a certain picture, but this picture he drew on the blackboard was, for him, only the expression of what goes on materially and physically in the human brain. At the same time, he saw in it the expression of soul life, particularly the conceptual life. Another man, a philosopher of the school of Herbart, spoke of thoughts, of associations of thoughts, of the effect one thought has upon another, etc., and he said he could make use of the same picture on the blackboard. Here, quite empirically, I should say, we encounter something most interesting. It is this that somebody for whom the observation of the soul life is something quite real, at least in his thoughts — this must always be added in case of Herbartianism — clarifies to himself the activity of the soul life by using the same picture employed by the other lecturer, who depicts the soul life by trying to set forth only the processes in the human brain.

Now, what lies at the foundation of this? The fact is that in its plastic configuration the human brain is indeed an extraordinarily faithful replica of what we know as the life of thought. In the plastic configuration of the human brain, the life of thought really does express itself, we might almost say, in an adequate manner. In order to follow this thought to its conclusion, however, something else is needed. What ordinary psychology and also Herbart's psychology designate as chains of thoughts, as thought associations in the form of judgments, logical conclusions and so on, should not remain a mere idea. At least in our imagination — even if we cannot rise to clairvoyant Imaginations — we should allow it to culminate in a picture; the tapestry of logic, the tapestry presented to us by psychology of the life of thought, the teaching of the soul life, should be allowed to culminate in a picture. If we are in fact able to transform logic and psychology in a picture-like, plastic way into an image, then the human configuration of the brain will emerge. Then we shall have traced a picture, the realization of which is the human brain.

On what is this based? It is based on the fact that the human brain, indeed the whole system of nerves and senses, is a replica of an Imaginative element. [Note 3] We completely grasp the wonderful structure of the human brain only when we learn to investigate Imaginatively. Then, the human brain appears as a realized human Imagination. Imaginative perception teaches us to become familiar with the external brain, the brain we come to know through psychology and anatomy, as a realized Imagination. This is significant.

Another fact is no less important. Let us bear in mind that the human brain is an actual human Imagination. We are indeed born with a brain, if not a fully developed one, at least with a brain containing the tendencies of growth. It tries to develop to the point of being a realized Imaginative world, to be the impression of an Imaginative world. This is, as it were, the ready-made aspect of our brain, namely, that it is the replica of an Imaginative world. Into this impression of the Imaginative world we then build the conceptual experiences attained during the time between birth and death. During this period we have conceptual experiences; we conceive, we transform the sense perceptions into thoughts; we judge, we conclude, and so on. We fit this into our brain. What kind of activity is this?

As long as we live in immediate perception, as long as we remain in the interplay with the external world, as long as we open our eyes to the colors and dwell in this relationship with colors, as long as we open our organs of hearing to sounds and live within them, the external world lives on in us by penetrating our organism through the senses as through channels. With our inner life, we encompass this external world. But the moment we cease to have this immediate experience of the outer world — something I already called your attention to yesterday — the moment we turn our eye away from the world of colors, allow our ear to become inattentive to the resounding of the external world, the moment we turn our senses to something else, this concreteness — our interplay with the external world in perceiving — penetrates into the depths of our soul. It may then be drawn to the surface again in

the form of pictures by memory. We may say that during our life between birth and death insofar as our thought life is concerned, our interplay with the external world consists of two parts: the immediate experience of the external world in the form of perceptions and the transformed thoughts. We surrender, as it were, completely to the present; our inner activity loses itself in the present. Then, however, this immediate activity continues. To begin with, it is not accessible to our consciousness. It sinks down into the subconscious but may be drawn to the surface again into memory. In what form, then, does it exist in us?

This is a point that can be explained only by a direct view attainable in Imagination. A person who honestly pursues his way in his scientific striving cannot help but admit to himself that the moment the riddle of memory confronts him he cannot advance another step in his research. For due to the fact that the experiences of the immediate present sink down into the subconscious, they become inaccessible to ordinary consciousness; they cannot be traced further.

But when we work in a corresponding way upon the human soul by means of the soul-spiritual exercises that have frequently been discussed in my lectures, we reach a stage where we no longer lose sight of the continuations of our direct life of perceptions and thoughts into conceptions that make memories possible. I have often explained to you that the first result of an ascent to Imaginative thinking is to have before your soul, as a mighty life-tableau, all your experiences since birth. The stream of experience normally flows along in the unconscious, and the single representations, which emerge in memory, rise up from this unconscious or subconscious stream through a half-dreamy activity. Those who have developed Imaginative perception are offered the opportunity to survey the stream of experiences as in one picture. You could say that the time that has elapsed since birth then takes on the appearance of space. What is normally within the subconscious is then beheld in the form of interconnected pictures. When the experiences that otherwise escape into the subconscious are thus raised to direct vision, we are able to observe this continuation of present, immediate perceptual and thought experiences all the way into conceptions that can be remembered. It is possible to trace what happens in us to any sort of experience we have in our mind, from the point in time when we first lose sight of it until the moment we recall it again. After all, between experiencing something and remembering it again something is taking place continuously in the human organism, something that becomes visible to imaginative perception. It is possible to view it in Imaginations, but it is now revealed in a quite special way.

The thoughts that have lost themselves, as it were, in the subconscious region an activity connected with our life-impulses, our impulses of growth; they stimulate an activity in us that is related to our impulse of death. The significant result revealing itself to Imaginative perception in the way I could only allude to today is the following: Human beings do not connect the memory-activity, leading to the renewal of thinking, of thought and perceptual experiences, with what calls us into physical life and maintains digestion in this life, so that substances that have become useless are replaced by usable ones, and so on. The power of memory that descends into the human being is not related to this ascending life system in man. It is linked to something we also bear within us ever since our birth, something we are born with just as we are born with the forces through which we live and grow. It is connected with what then appears to us, concentrated into one moment, in regard to the whole organism in dying.

Death only appears as a great riddle as long as it is not observed within the continuous stream of life from birth to death. Expressing myself paradoxically, I might say that we die not only when we die. In reality, we die at every moment of our physical life. By developing within our organism the activity leading to memory as recollective thinking — and in ordinary physical life every form of cognition is actually linked up with memory — insofar as this cognition is developed, we die continuously. A subtle form of death, proceeding from our head organization, is forever going on within us. By carrying out this activity that continues on into memory, we constantly begin the act of dying. But the forces of growth existing in the other members of the human organism counteract this process of death; they overcome the death forces. Thus we maintain life. If we only depended on our head organization, on the system of nerves and senses, each moment in life would really become a moment of death for us. As human beings

we continuously vanquish death, which streams out, as it were, from our head to the remaining organism. The latter counteracts this form of death. Only when the remaining organization becomes weakened, exhausted through age or some kind of damage, thus preventing the counteraction against the death-bearing forces of the human head, only then does death set in for the whole organism.

Indeed, in our modern thinking, in the thinking of today's civilization, we really work with concepts that lie side by side like erratic blocks, without being able to correctly recognize their interrelationship. Light must enter into this chaos of erratic blocks constituting our world of concepts and thoughts. On the one hand, we have human cognition which is so intimately tied to the faculty of memory. We observe this human cognition and have no idea of its kinship to our conception of death. And because we are completely ignorant of this relationship, what could otherwise be deciphered in life remains so enigmatic. We are unable to connect the experiences of everyday life with the great extraordinary moments of experience. The insufficient spiritual view over what lies around as fragmentary blocks in our conceptual world brings it about that despite the splendid achievements of the nineteenth century life has gradually become so obscure.

Let us now consider the second system, the second member of the human organization, the rhythmical organization. It is also present in the human head organization. The interior of the human head breathes together with the breathing organism. This is an external physiological fact. But the breathing process of the human head lies, as it were, more within; it conceals itself from the system of nerves and senses. It is covered over by what constitutes the chief task of the head organization. Still, the human head has its own concealed rhythmical activity. This activity becomes evident mainly in the human chest organization, in those processes of the human organism that are centered in the organs of breathing and in the heart.

When we observe the outward appearance of this organization, unlike in the case of the head organization, we cannot see in it a kind of plastic image for what exists as its counterpart in the soul, namely, the life of feeling. When we observe the soul experiences, our feelings manifest as something more or less undefined. We have sharp contours in our thoughts. We also have clear concepts of thought associations. In the details pertaining to our life of feeling we have no such sharp outlines. There, everything interpenetrates, moves and lives. You will not find an Herbartian who, in making an outline of the life of emotion, would characterize this in a sketch that might resemble one drawn by an anatomist or a physiologist for the lungs or the heart and circulatory system. Here, you find that such a relationship does not exist between the inner soul element and the outer aspects. This is also the reason why Imaginative cognition does not suffice to bring before the soul this relationship between the soul's life of feeling and the rhythmical system. For this we need what I have characterized in my books as Inspiration, Inspirative perception. This special form of perception through Inspiration attains to the insight that our emotional life has a direct link to the rhythmical system. Just as the system of nerves and senses is linked to the conceptual life, so the rhythmical life is linked to the life of feelings.

But, metaphorically speaking, the rhythmical system is not the wax impression of the emotional life in the same way that the brain's configuration is the wax impression of the conceptual life. Consequently we cannot say that our rhythmical system is an Imaginative replica of our life of feeling. We must say instead that what unfolds and lives in us as the rhythmical system has come about through cosmic Inspiration, independently of any human knowledge. It is inspired into us. The activity carried out in the breathing and in the blood circulation is not merely something that lives within us enclosed by our skin; it is a cosmic event, like lightning and thunder. After all, through our rhythmical system, we are connected with the outer world. The air that is now within me was outside before; it will be outside again the next moment. It is an illusion to believe that we only live enclosed within our skin. We live as a member of the world that surrounds us, and the form of our rhythmical system, which is closely connected to our movements, is inspired into us out of this world.

Summing this up, we can say: As the basis of the human head we have, first of all, the realization of an Imaginative world. Then, in a manner of speaking, below what thus realizes itself as an Imaginative world, we have the realm of the rhythmical system, an Inspired world. Concerning our rhythmical system, we can only say: An Inspirative world is realized within it.

How do matters stand in regard to our metabolic system, our limb-system? Metabolism belongs together with the limb-system, as I have pointed out already. Our metabolic processes stand in a direct relationship with our volitional activity. But this relationship reveals itself neither to Imaginative nor to Inspirative perception. It discloses itself only to Intuitive cognition, to what I have described in my books as "Intuitive knowledge." This explains the difficulty of seeing in the external physical processes of metabolism the realization of a cosmic Intuition. This metabolism, however, is also present in the rhythmical system. The metabolism of the rhythmical system conceals itself behind the life-rhythm, just as the life-rhythm conceals itself behind the activity of nerves and senses in the human head.

In the case of the human head we have a realized Imaginative world; hidden behind it a realized Inspirative world in regard to the rhythm in the head. Still further behind this, there is the metabolism of the head, hence a realized Intuitive element. Thus we can comprehend our head, if we [see] in it the confluence of the realized Imaginative, Inspired, and Intuitive elements. In the human rhythmical system the Imaginative is omitted; there we have only the realization of the Inspired and Intuitive elements. And in the metabolic system Inspiration, too, is omitted; there, we are dealing only with the realization of a cosmic Intuition.

In the threefold human organism, we thus bear within us first the organization of the head, a replica of what we strive for in cognition through Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition. In trying to understand the human head, we should really have to admit to ourselves that with mere external, objective knowledge gained through the observation of the outer sensory world, which is not even Imagination and does not rise up to the Intuitive element, we should stop short of the human head. For the inner being of the human head begins to disclose itself only to Imaginative knowledge; behind this lies something still deeper that reveals itself to Inspiration. In turn, behind this, lies something that makes itself known to Intuitive knowledge. The rhythmical system is not even accessible to Imagination. It reveals itself only to Inspirative cognition, and what is concealed beneath it is the Intuitive element. Within the human organism, we certainly ought to find metabolism incomprehensible. The true standpoint in regard to the human metabolism can be none other than the following. We can only say that we observe the metabolic processes of the external world; we try to penetrate into them with the aid of the laws of objective perception. Thus we attain knowledge of the external metabolism in nature. The instant this outer metabolism is transformed and metamorphosed into our inner metabolism it becomes something quite different; it turns into something in which dwells the element that discloses itself only to Intuition.

We would therefore have to say: In the world that presents itself to us as the sensory realm, the most incomprehensible of all incomprehensible problems is what the substances, with which we become familiar externally through physics and chemistry, accomplish within the human skin. We would have to admit: we must rise up to the highest spiritual comprehension if we want to know what really takes place within the human organism in regard to the substances we know so well in their external aspects in the world outside.

Thus we see that in the structure of our organism there are, to begin with, three different activities. First of all, something that discloses itself to Intuitive knowledge is active in the structure of the human organism, building it up out of the world's substances. In addition something is active in this organism that reveals itself to Inspirative knowledge; it fits the rhythmical system into the metabolic organism. Finally, something is active in the human organism that reveals itself to Imaginative knowledge; it builds in the nervous system. And when this human organism enters through birth into the external physical world, all that is ready-made, as it were, by virtue of its own nature, then evolves further inasmuch as human beings develop objective knowledge between birth and death.

Concerning this objective knowledge we have seen that it is tied to the activity of memory; it is not connected with constructive but with destructive forces. We have seen that this form of knowledge is a slow dying proceeding from the head. We may therefore say that the human organism was built up through what could be comprehended by means of Intuition, Inspiration, and Imagination. This dwells in this human organism in a manner inaccessible to present-day cognition. On the other hand, what is built into our organism between birth and death by means of our objective insights breaks down and destroys this organism. We actually think and form concepts on the basis of this destruction when we unfold our conceptual life, the life of thoughts.

We really cannot be materialists when we comprehend what this knowledge, so intimately linked with the faculty of memory consists of. For if we wanted to be materialists, we would have to imagine that we are built up by forces of growth; that those forces are active that absorb the substances and transmit them to the various organs in order to bring about, in a wider sense, the digestive processes within our organism. We should have to picture this faculty, inherent in growth, digestion, and the constructive forces in general, continuing and culminating somewhere in the conceptual process, in thinking which arrives at objective knowledge. Yet this is not the case. The human organism is built up through something that is accessible to Intuition, to Inspiration, and to Imagination. Our organism is built up when it has absorbed these forces into itself. But then regression begins, the process of decay, and what brings this decay about is ordinary knowledge between birth and death.

Through the processes of ordinary perception we do not build anything into the constructive forces; rather, by destroying what has been built up, we create, first of all, the foundations for a continuous element of death in ourselves. Into this continuing element of death we place our knowledge. We do not immerse ourselves in material elements when we think; no, we destroy the material element. We hand it over to the forces of death. We think our way into death, into the destruction of life. Thinking, ordinary perception, is not related to growing, budding life. It is related to death, and when we observe human perception, we do not find an analogy for it in the natural formations including the human brain. We discover an analogy only in the corpse that decays after death. For what the decaying body represents, I might say, intensively, in a certain greatness, must continuously take place within us when we perceive objectively in the ordinary sense of the word.

Look upon death if you wish to comprehend the cognitive process. Do not look upon life in a materialistic manner; look upon what represents the negation, the elimination of life. Then you arrive at a comprehension of thinking. To be sure, what we call death then acquires an entirely different meaning; based on life it attains to a different significance.

Even external phenomena enable us to grasp such things. Yesterday, I said to you that the culmination of the materialistic world view lies in the middle or in the last third of the nineteenth century. This culmination viewed death as something that must absolutely be rejected. In a sense people at that time felt noble by viewing death in this way, as ending life. Life alone they wanted to consider and wished to see it as ending with death. Frequently, one looks back somewhat disdainfully upon the "child-like folk-consciousness." Take the word "verwesen," (to decompose) which points to the process of what occurs after death. The prefix "ver" always indicates a movement towards what the word expresses. "Verbruedern" (to become like brothers, to fraternize) means to move in the direction of becoming brothers; "versammeln" (to gather together) indicates moving in the direction of gathering, of meeting. In the vernacular, "verwesen" does not mean decomposing, ceasing to be; it means moving in the direction of Wesen, of being, of life. Such word formations, connected with a spiritual way of grasping the world during the epoch of instinctive knowledge, have become exceedingly rare. In the nineteenth century people materialized everything; they no longer lived in the spiritual essence permeating the word. Many examples could be cited to show that the culmination of materialism became evident even in speech.

We can therefore understand that after the human being had been developed, as I said yesterday, to a point of culmination by forces that disclose themselves to Inspiration, Intuition, and Imagination, he then attained to the highest culmination in the nineteenth century, followed in turn by a decadence. We can understand that the human being distanced himself, as it were, from the power enabling him to comprehend himself inwardly by developing in the strongest measure the forces that, as conceptual forces, are most akin to death, the forces of abstraction. It is from this point that it is possible, proceeding from today's lecture, to advance to what constitutes the actual, essential impulse within what we may call the materialistic impulse of knowledge in human history.