

Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy

Lecture 3 — Dornach, April 9, 1921

This evening, I do not wish to continue directly with the considerations normally carried on here on Saturdays and Sundays. Instead — in order that the friends of our cause, [Note 1] who have gathered here, can take along as much as possible of what is more or less closely connected with the studies undertaken during this week — we shall venture into still more intimate considerations intended to relate to the questions already touched upon.

Even in reference to fructifying philology by means of anthroposophical spiritual science, I have indicated that an original form of sensibility for language has been lost and that in its place a more abstract orientation towards the things of the surrounding world has come about. I have pointed out that a significant developmental force in human history is represented in the fact that through Aristotle, in the fourth century before Christ, there emerged what subsequently was called logic. For it does indeed signify an orientation towards the world in an abstract sense to find one's way consciously into the logical element, which earlier had been present more unconsciously and instinctively in the constitution of the human soul.

I said that an inner concrete process was still experienced in ancient times that is comparable to what we can study in the processes of puberty. What appears in the child when it learns to speak, is a metamorphosis, a more inwardly developing metamorphosis of the process that unfolds later on in the human being in the process of reaching sexual maturity. And what runs its course inwardly in this process of learning to speak, in ancient times had aftereffects for people's whole life. The human being experienced himself as if through the word something were coming to expression in him that lived also in the things outside, something the things do not express, however, because they have, in a sense, become dumb. As the word resounded, something was felt within that corresponds to processes in the outer world. What was experienced then was much more substantial, much more closely connected to human life than what is inwardly experienced today in comprehending the world through abstract concepts. What human beings then experienced through the word was more organic, I would say, more instinctive, more inclined towards the animalistic soul element than what we can now experience through the conceptual, abstract grasp of things. We were brought closer to the spiritual life through this abstract comprehension. Yet, at the same time, we arrived at abstraction. Thus, at precisely the world-historical moment, when human beings were in a sense elevated to the point of gradually grasping the spirit, their mental experience at the same time suffered a dilution into abstractions — I can express these matters only in a more or less pictorial manner since our language has not yet coined words for it.

Naturally, this process did not develop in the same way in all of humanity. It took place earlier in those folk groups that were the foremost bearers of civilization; others remained behind. I was able to point out that in the eleventh century the population settled in central Europe still occupied a standpoint that must be designated as pre-Aristotelian compared to the Greek development of civilization. In central Europe, people advanced much later beyond the point the Greeks passed with Aristotle. Through Aristotelianism, the Greeks anticipated much of what came about for the central European nations and those counted among them because of their culture only in the first third of the fifteenth century.

Now, two things are connected with this development in regard to the comprehension of language and the abstract element. I have already pointed out one. As human soul life was lifted into abstraction through Aristotelianism — which still was only a symptom for a general comprehension of things within the Greek culture — it became estranged from the direct experience of the word, of language. With this, the portal leading to man's unfolding life in the direction of birth was closed. In their everyday experience, human beings no longer found their way back to the point where they could have realized through the process of acquiring speech how the soul-spiritual

element holds sway in them just as it does outside in the world. Due to this, they were also diverted from looking back still further. For the next stages would have shown what one might call overall union of the spirit with physical-corporeal matter. They would have yielded comprehension of preexistence, the insight that the human soul-spiritual element leads an existence in supersensory worlds prior to uniting with the corporeal nature that arises within physical matter. It is true that this insight did not exist in earlier times of humanity's evolution in the definitely conscious form in which we try to acquire it today through spiritual science; instead, it was present in a more instinctive manner. The remnants of it appear to us in the Oriental civilization, which consider looking upon the preexistent human soul a matter of course.

If the human being is then in a position of continuing further, something that is even more difficult to discern than preexistence becomes actual knowledge and perception, namely, repeated earth lives. This view existed in earlier ages of human development, though in an instinctive manner. It survived in a more poetic, imaginative form in the civilizations of the Orient when the former had already fallen into decadence, albeit a most significant, even beautiful decadence.

Thus, when we look back to former epochs of human evolution without the prejudices of modern anthropology, we find a mode of perception that, albeit instinctively, penetrated into things. Inasmuch as human beings still understood the processes of acquiring speech, they also grasped something of the soul activity within outer nature; and inasmuch as they understood the incorporation of the soul-spiritual into the physical corporeal element, they understood something of the spirit vibrating and weaving through the world.

To the extent that historical knowledge of the Greeks reaches back, only the sparse remnants of this ancient spirit perception are contained in the traditions of Greek civilization. If we go back beyond Aristotle and Plato to the Ionic philosophers, to around the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. in Greek development of thought, we find a philosophy, for example in the work of Anaxagoras, [Note 2] that cannot be comprehended on the basis of today's assumptions. Motivated by a certain healthy insight, the philosophers of the Occident should really admit to themselves that Western philosophy simply lacks the prerequisites to understand Anaxagoras. For what Anaxagoras acknowledges — though already in decadent form — as his nous dates back to those ages I have just spoken of, ages when people still sensed and perceived how the world is infused and woven through by spirit, how, out of spirit, the soul-spiritual being of man descends in order to unite with the physical-corporeal nature. In former times, this was an instinctive, concrete perception. Then it diminished to the knowledge present in the instinctive insight into the process of speech, something that in turn was lost during the Aristotelian age, particularly as far as the most advanced civilizations are concerned.

As I have already explained, when people still had insight into this process of emerging speech, they sensed something in the resounding of the word that was an expression for an objective happening in nature outside. Here, I come to an essential difference: What was conceived as the universal soul by those who can be called "knowledgeable about speech" in the ancient sense, was predominantly thought of as filling space, and human beings experienced themselves as having been formed out of this spirit-soul element filling out space. Yet this was something different from what we discover when we go back further beyond the nous of Anaxagoras. Then we arrive at something leading into the preexistence of human beings; it is something that does not merely deal with the fact that the human soul weaves and exists in the present within the universal spirit and soul. Instead, we find here that this human soul dwells with the universal spirit and soul in time.

We must be familiar with these matters through an inner comprehension, if we wish to gain truly historical insight into a most significant process in the development of civilization in western Asia and Europe. Nowadays, people really have no relevant conception of the state of mind of humanity living in the age when Christendom was established. Certainly, if you consider the general human soul condition of today in its particular configuration, you have to picture the great majority of those people of western Asia and Europe as having been uneducated in

comparison to the education of our modern age we are so proud of. Yet, in those times, there were individuals who towered above the great mass of uneducated humanity. I might say, the successors of the ancient initiates stood out because of significant knowledge, knowledge that indeed did not dwell in the soul the same way as does our knowledge, which is permeated everywhere by abstract concepts and has therefore attained to full consciousness. Something instinctive existed even in the highest knowledge of that period. Yet, at the same time, something forceful was inherent in this instinctive knowledge, something that still penetrated into the depths of things.

It is strange that many representatives of present-day traditional confessions have a curious fear of the possibility that somebody might discover that such penetrating knowledge did exist in past times, knowledge that arrived at refined concepts even if these were viewed more through instinctive pictures, as I said, and were expressed in forms of speech, for the comprehension of which there exists little feeling today.

Our anthroposophy is not intended as a renewal of what is called Gnosis, but it is the path that allows us to look into the nature of this Gnosis. In regard to its sources, our anthroposophy has nothing in common with the ancient Indian philosophies. It can nevertheless penetrate into the compelling, magnificent aspects, the outpouring from all things, of the Vedanta, Sankhya, or Yoga philosophies, because it once again attains in a conscious manner to those regions of the world that were then reached instinctively. Likewise, our anthroposophy can penetrate into the essence of the Gnosis. We know that this Gnosis was eradicated by certain sects of the first Christian centuries to the point where very little Gnostic knowledge is still available historically. The Gnosis has actually become known to modern humanity only through the documents of those who tried to disprove it. They included quotes from the recorded texts in their written refutations, whereas the original Gnostic texts themselves were lost. Thus, the Gnosis has really been handed down to posterity only through the documents of its enemies who naturally quoted only what they deemed suitable in conformity with their cleverness.

Just study the quotation skills of our opponents and you will gain an idea of how far one can penetrate into the nature of such a subject. When one has to depend on the documents of the opponents! Insight into the Gnosis has in most cases been dependent on the texts of its opponents – outwardly and historically it depends on them even today. Just imagine, it would certainly be in accordance with the wishes of somebody like Mr. von Gleich, [Note 3] if all anthroposophical texts should be burned up – surely, he would like that best – and that anthroposophy would be handed down to posterity only through his own proclamations! We only have to picture things by means of something that can truly call attention to them.

If, for these reasons, we are unable to look into what already existed in those times, we will go astray with all the treatises, be they ever so well meant and scientific that concern something most important in regard to the comprehension of Christianity. One point, where almost everything remains yet to be done because everything done so far by no means leads to what could be designated by an honest striving for knowledge as true insight, is the Logos concept we encounter at the beginning of the Gospel of John. This Logos concept cannot be comprehended if the soul-spiritual development of human beings belonging to the most advanced civilization of that age is not inwardly understood. This is the case particularly if there is no comprehension of the soul-spiritual development that ran its course in Greek culture and shone across into Asia, casting its shadows into what confronts us in the Gospel of John.

We must not approach this Logos concept merely by means of a dictionary or a superficial philological method. It can be approached only if we inwardly study the soul-spiritual development in question here, approximately from the fourth pre-Christian century until the fourth century A.D. No satisfactory history has yet been written about what then took place inwardly in the most advanced part of humanity and its representatives of wisdom. For this is related to the vanishing of any understanding for the process of learning to speak. The other matter, the comprehension of preexistence, was preserved in traditions until the time of Origen; [Note 4] yet it was lost to

inward understanding much earlier than the comprehension of the process of speech, of the resounding of the word in man's inner being.

If we focus on the soul-spiritual condition of the representatives of wisdom in Asia Minor and Europe, we discover that a transition took place. What had existed as a uniform process in perception, namely the resounding of the word and in it the being of the world, became differentiated into an orientation towards abstract concepts, ideas, and a feeling, a dull sensation of what was pushed down more into subconsciousness — the world as such. And what resulted from this? A certain fact came about in regard to the human soul life because of it. The word content and the ideal, conceptual content of consciousness were experienced in an undifferentiated manner by human beings in ancient times. Now, the conceptual content became separated.

Initially, however, it did retain something of what human beings had once possessed in the undifferentiated nature of word, concept, and percept. People spoke of "concepts"; they spoke of "ideas," but yet it is obvious — for example in Plato's case — that people still experienced the idea spiritually and full of content. As they spoke of the idea, it still contained something of what had earlier been perceived in the undifferentiated word concept. Thus, people already drew closer to the idea that is grasped as a mere concept, but this grasp still retained something of what was comprehended in the ancient resounding of words. As this transition developed, the content of the world grasped spiritually by the human being turned into what was then expressed as the Logos concept. The Logos concept is understood only when it is known that it contains this transition to the idea, but without any remnant of the ancient word concept in grasping this idea. As people spoke of the Logos as the world-creative element, they were not clearly but only dimly aware that this world-creative spirit element has something in its content that was grasped in earlier times through the perception of the word.

We must take into consideration this quite special nuance of the soul's experience of the outer world in the Logos. There existed a very special nuance of soul perception, the Logos perception. Aristotle then worked his way out of it, found his way closer to abstraction and attained from it subjective logic. In Plato, on the other hand, we find the idea as the world-creative principle; in Plato, it is still pervaded by concrete spirituality, because it still contains the remnants of the ancient word concept, being basically the Logos, though in diminished form.

Thus, we can picture that what came with Christ into the man Jesus was to be designated as the world-creative principle out of the views of that age. People had a concept for that, the concept that was indeed retained in the Logos concept. The Logos concept existed. With it, people tried to grasp what had been given to the world in the story of Christ Jesus. The concept, which had developed out of ancient times and had assumed a special form, was utilized to express the starting-point of Christianity; thus, the most sublime wisdom was used to see through this mystery. We must be able to place ourselves completely into that age, not in the sense of an external conception but in inwardly grasping the way people viewed the world at that time.

There is a great break between Plato and Aristotle. On the other hand, the whole style of the Gospel of John is composed in such a way that we see: It came about based on a living comprehension of the world-creative principle and, at the same time, because the one who wrote down the Gospel of John was familiar with the Logos concept that had already been lost. All translation of the Gospel of John is impossible if one cannot penetrate into the origin of the Logos concept. This Logos concept did indeed dwell in all vitality among the wise representatives of the most civilized part of the world between the fourth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D.

When Christianity became a state religion, something from which the later Catholic Church was developed, the era was reached when, in a sense, even the last nuance of the ancient "word," of the old word concept, was lost from this idea. Fundamentally, Aristotle did nothing but separate subjective logic from the Logos and develop the theory of this subjective logic. Yet, at the time the dominant condition of soul and spirit of mankind paid little heed to what Aristotle had established as subjective logic. On the contrary, Aristotelianism was forgotten, only entering again

into the later age by way of the Arabs. It did exist; but aside from being present in this roundabout way through tradition, people still clearly felt that one was dealing on the one hand with subjective logic, on the other with the perception of a world-creative principle in the Logos. In this concept, something was still contained of what one had grasped in the ancient conception of the resounding-of-the-word in man's inner being as the counter-image of the word-become-silent, namely, as the Logos creating nature in this becoming silent.

Then, in the fourth century A.D., this nuance was lost from the Logos concept. It can no longer be discovered; it vanished. It is retained at most in a few secluded thinkers and mystical seekers. It vanished from the general consciousness of even the representative Church Fathers and teachers. What then still appears as a most comprehensive, ideally spiritualized world view in somebody like Scotus Erigena [Note 5] no longer contains the ancient Logos concept, though that term is used. The former Logos concept is utterly filtered into an abstract thought concept. The world-creative principle is now understood not by means of the ancient Logos concept, but only through the sublimated or filtered thought concept. This is what then appeared in the text by Scotus [Note 6] concerning the division of nature, but it is something that basically had already completely disappeared from consciousness: this loss of the Logos concept, this transformation of it into the thought concept.

In regard to European humanity, concerning which I said that it retained for itself a more ancient development into a later age, it was considered necessary to go back even beyond the period during which the Logos concept had been active in its full vitality. But people traced it back in an abstract form, and this return in an abstract form was even dogmatized. At the Eighth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in A.D. 869, it was set down that the world and the human being are not to be conceived of as being membered into body, soul, and spirit, but merely into body and soul, and that the soul possesses a few spiritual qualities.

The other process of evolution I have just mentioned runs parallel to what had been dogmatically set down there. For a person who studies the development of Occidental civilization from the first Christian centuries, where much was still pervaded by Gnostic elements, up to the fourth and fifth centuries of our Christian era, it is an extraordinarily interesting fact to experience this diminishing of the Logos concept. Later, when the Gospels were translated, nothing, of course, could be brought into these translations of any feeling for the Logos concept as it had held sway within pre-Christian humanity in those eight centuries, in the middle of which lies the Mystery of Golgotha. This peculiarity of the period from which Christendom emerged must be studied also by means of such intimate aspects. Nowadays, people prefer to solve even the most difficult problems by means of the threadbare concepts, concepts that are easily acquired. Historical problems such as I have just mentioned, however allow a solution only if we seek the preparation for the solution in the acquisition of certain nuances of the human soul life, if we are willing to proceed from the honest assumption that in the present cultural age we simply do not possess in our soul life the nuance that leads to the Logos concept as it is meant in the Gospel of John. This is why we should not try to comprehend the Gospel of John with the vocabulary and conceptions of the present. If we attempt to understand the Gospel of John with present-day concepts, superficiality will dictate to us from the very outset. This is something that must be discerned with an alert eye of soul and this must be done in regard to history in these areas, for things are in a bad way at the present in regard to this history.

Only recently, I have had to call to mind an extraordinarily important fact in reference to this subject. A letter written by one of the most recognized theologians was brought to my attention — it was not addressed to me. [Note 7] This esteemed theologian of the present expressed himself on anthroposophists, Irvingites, and similar rabble. He confused everything. In his exposition, one point in particular stands out strangely. He says of himself that he has no sense for the sort of view that points to the super-sensible such as anthroposophy tries to do; he has to limit himself to what is given in human experience.

This is a theologian whose vocation it is to speak on and on about the super-sensible. He has become famous for having written fat historical volumes about the life of the super-sensible in human evolution. He is an authority for

countless people of stature at present. Such a modern theologian admits that he has no sense for the super-sensible but, instead, wishes to stick to “human experience!” Yet he talks about the super-sensible and does not say, I wish to remain within human sensory experience; therefore, I negate all theology. Oh no, in our age, he becomes a famous theologian! My dear friends, it is so important for us to be alert to everything that is in a certain sense a determining factor today among our young people, yet at the same time proves itself to be an inner impossibility.

It is necessary to grasp with inner energy how one is to proceed to sincere and honest insight. Perhaps it can be discerned particularly in problems such as the Logos problem, and a person who sees what anthroposophy as to set forth about such a problem should realize from this that anthroposophy is certainly not taking the easy way out. It tries to do research earnestly and honestly and it is only because of this that it comes into conflict with a number of contemporary trends. For today people actually have either hatred or fear of such thoroughness, which must, however, be striven for and is needed in all areas of scientific life. I ask you: does the opposition, which so readily dispenses shallow judgments concerning anthroposophy, even know what anthroposophy occupies itself with? Does it know that this anthroposophy struggles with problems such as the Logos problem, which, after all, is only one detail, albeit an important one? It really would be the duty of those who are leaders in the sciences to at least have a look at what they judge from the outside. But this is the problem, that external life can be made comfortable — and this applies to many people — if one shuns the inconvenience of searching in an earnest manner. To be sure, for all this love of convenience, one is not aware of the strong forces of decline in our present civilization. The attitude of “after us the deluge” powerfully dominates the currently prevalent scientific world.

This is what I wished to illustrate today by means of one important problem of philological and historical research. After all, it is my hope that if particularly the esteemed students will realize more and more how the conscientious attempt is made to focus especially on those problems current research ignores, the young people above all others will come to the realization that such paths have to be pursued. I harbor the hope and I also know: If we work sufficiently in the direction of developing enthusiasm and confessing to the truth, what is needed to achieve again forces of regeneration in human civilization will be attained after all. Perhaps certain forces of darkness can suppress for a while what is being striven for here. In the long run, they will be unable to do so if the reality corresponds to the will, if, in fact, something light-filled is contained in what anthroposophy wills. Indeed, truth has means that only truth can discover and that are undiscoverable for the powers of darkness. Let us unite, old and young, young and old, in order to attain a clear view for discovering such paths to truth!