

Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy

Lecture 4 — Dornach, April 15, 1921

A study I began before our course started will become fully comprehensible only if we go back even further in considering the development of humanity in recent history. Basically, we have only given a few indications concerning the developments in the nineteenth century. It will be our purpose today to follow the spiritual development of mankind further back in time, giving special attention to an extraordinarily important and incisive event in the evolution of Western civilization. It is the turning-point that came about in the fourth century. There emerged at that time a figure still vivid in the memory of Western civilization, namely, Aurelius Augustinus. [Note 1] We find in him a personality who had to fight with the great intensity, on the one hand, against what had come down from ancient times, something attempting during those first Christian centuries to establish Christianity on the basis of a certain ancient wisdom. On the other hand, he had to struggle against another element, the one that eventually was victorious in Western civilization. It rejected the more ancient form and limited itself to comprehending Christianity in a more external, material way, not to penetrate Christianity with ideas of ancient wisdom, but simply to narrate its events factually according to the course it had taken since its establishment, comprehending it intellectually as well as that was possible at that time.

These conflicts between the two directions — I would like to say, between the direction of a wisdom-filled Christianity and a Christianity seemingly tending toward a more or less materialistic view — these conflicts had to be undergone particularly by the souls of the fourth and the early fifth century in the most intense way. And in Augustine, humanity remembers a personality who took part in such conflicts.

In our time, however, we have to understand clearly that the historic documents call forth almost completely false ideas of what existed prior to the fourth century A.D. As clear as the picture may be since the fifth century, as unclear are all the ordinary ideas concerning the preceding centuries. Yet, if we focus on what people in general could know about this period prior to the fourth century A.D., we are referred to two areas. One area is that of knowledge, cultivated in the schools; the other is the area of ritual, of veneration, of the religious element. Something belonging to very ancient times of human civilization still extends into these two areas. Though cloaked in a certain Christian coloring, this ancient element was still more or less present during the first Christian centuries in both the stream of wisdom and that of ritual.

If we look into the sphere of wisdom, we find preserved there a teaching from earlier times. In a certain sense, however, it had already begun to be replaced by what we today call the heliocentric world system — I have spoken of this in earlier lectures here. Nevertheless, it still remained from former astronomical teachings, and might be designated as a form of astronomy, but now not from the standpoint of physical cosmological observation. In very ancient times, people arrived at this astronomy — let us call it etheric in contrast to our physical astronomy — in the following way: People of old were still fully aware of the fact that human beings by nature belong not only to the earth but also to the cosmic surroundings of the earth, the planetary system. Ancient wisdom had quite concrete views concerning this etheric astronomy. It taught that if we turn our attention to what makes up the organization of the upper part of the human being — and here I make use of expressions that are familiar to us today — insofar as we view the etheric body of man, the human being stands in interaction with Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. People thus considered certain reciprocal effects between the upper part of the human etheric body and Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. Furthermore, people found that the part of the human being that is of a more astral nature has a sort of interrelationship with Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. The forces that then lead man into his earthly existence and that bring it about that a physical body is fitted into this etheric body, these are the forces of the earth. Those forces, on the other hand, that cause the human being to have a certain perspective leading beyond his earthly life, are the forces of the sun.

Thus it was said in those ancient times that the human being comes out of unknown spiritual worlds he passes through in prenatal life but that it is not as if he merely entered into terrestrial life. Rather, he enters from extraplanetary worlds into planetary life. The planetary life receives him as I have described it, relating him to the sun, moon, earth, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The orbit of Saturn was considered to be the approximate sphere the human being enters with his etheric body out of extraplanetary into planetary life. Everything that is etheric in the human being was definitely related to this planetary life. Only insofar as the etheric body then expresses itself in the physical body, only to that extent was the physical body related to the Earth. Insofar as the human being in turn raises himself with his ego beyond the etheric and astral body, the ancients related this to the sun.

Thus, one had a form of etheric astronomy. It was certainly still possible for this etheric astronomy not merely to look upon the physical destinies of the human being in the way physical astronomy does. Instead, since people viewed the etheric body, which in turn stands in a more intimate relationship to the spiritual aspect of the human being, in an interplay with the same forces of the planetary system, the following possibility existed. Since the forces of destiny can express themselves out of the planetary system by way of the etheric body, it was possible to speak of the human constitution and to include in the latter the forces of destiny.

In this teaching of antiquity, this etheric astronomy, which was continued even after people already had developed the heliocentric system as a kind of esoteric-physical science, a last wisdom teaching had emerged from ancient instinctive wisdom investigations and had been retained as a tradition. People spoke of the influences of heaven in no other way but by saying, Indeed, these influences of heaven exist; they bear not only the affairs of nature but also the forces of human destiny. Thus, there certainly existed a connection between what we might call a teaching of nature, namely cosmology, and what passed over later into all that people now consider as astrology, something that in ancient times, had a much more exact character and was based on direct observation.

It was thought that when the human being has entered the planetary sphere on his way to a new birth and has been received by it insofar as his etheric body is concerned, he subsequently enters the earth. He is received by the earth. Yet, even here, people did not merely think of the solid earth. Rather, they thought of the earth with its elements. Apart from the fact that the human being is received by the planetary sphere — whereby he would be a super-earthly being, whereby he would be what he is only as a soul — it was said that like a child he is received by the elements of the earth, by fire or warmth, by air, water, and the solid earth. All of these elements were considered the actual earth. Consequently, it was thought, the human being's etheric body is so tinged by these external elements, so saturated, that now the temperaments originate in it. Thus, the temperaments were pictured as closely tied to the etheric body, hence to the life organization of the human being. Therefore, in what is actually physical in man — at least, in what manifests through the physical body — this ancient teaching also saw something spiritual.

The most human aspect of this teaching, I would say, was something that can still be clearly discerned in the medical science period. The remedies and the teaching of medicine were certainly a product of this view of the relationship of the etheric body to the planetary system as well as of the way the etheric human being penetrates, as it were, into the higher spheres, into air, water, warmth, and earth, so that the physical impressions of the etheric soul temperaments found their way into his organization: black gall, white gall, and the other fluids, phlegm, blood, and so on. According to this commonly held view the nature of the human constitution can be known from the body fluids. It was not customary in medicine in those days to study the individual organs, of which drawings could be made. The intermingling of the permeation with fluids was studied, and a particular organ was viewed as a result of a special penetration of fluids. People then thought that in a healthy person the fluids intermingled in a specific manner; an abnormal intermingling of fluids was seen in a sick person. Thus we may say that the medical insight resulting from this teaching was definitely founded on the observation of the fluid human organism. What we call knowledge of the human organism today is based on the solid, earthly organism of man. In regard to the view of the

human being, the course taken has led from an earlier insight into the fluid man to a more modern insight into the solid human being with sharply contoured organs.

The direction taken by medicine runs parallel to the transition from the ancient etheric astronomy to modern physical astronomy. The medical teaching of Hippocrates [Note 2] still corresponds essentially to etheric astronomy, and, actually, the accomplishments of this medical conception concerned with the intermingling of fluids in man remained well into the fourth century A.D. in an exact manner, not only in tradition as it was later. Just as this ancient astronomy was subsequently obscured after the fourth century and physical astronomy took the place of the old etheric astronomy in the fifteenth century, so, too, pathology and the whole view of medicine was then based on the teachings of the solid element, of what is bounded and expressed by sharp contours in the human organism. This is in essence one side of humanity's evolution in the inorganic age.

Now we can also turn our attention to what has remained of those ancient times in cultic practices and religious ceremonies. The religious ceremonies were mainly made available to the masses; what I have just been describing was predominantly considered to be a treasure of wisdom belonging to centers of learning. Those cultic practices that found their way from Asia into Europe and that, insofar as they are religious endeavors, correspond to the view I have just explained, are known as Mithras worship. [Note 3] It is a worship we find even as late as the first Christian centuries extending from East to West; we can follow its path through the countries of the Danube as far as the regions of the Rhine and on into France. This Mithras worship, familiar to you as far as its outer forms are concerned, may be briefly characterized by saying that along with the earthly and cosmic context the conqueror of the Mithras-Bull was depicted imaginatively and pictorially in the human being, riding on the bull and vanquishing the bull-forces.

Nowadays, we are easily inclined to think that such images — all cultic pictures, religious symbolizations which, if we may say so, have emerged organically out of the ancient wisdom teachings — are simply the abstract, symbolic product of those teachings. But it would be absolutely false if we were to believe that the ancient sages sat down and said, Now we must figure out a symbol. For ourselves we have the teaching of wisdom; for the ignorant masses we have to think up symbols that can then be employed in their ceremonial rites, and so on. Such assumptions would be totally wrong. An assumption approximately like that is entertained by modern Freemasons; they have similar thoughts about the nature of their own symbolism. But this was certainly not the view of the ancient teachers of wisdom.

I should now like to describe the view of these sages of old by referring in particular to the connections of the Mithra worship to the world view I have just outlined above. A fundamentally important question could still be raised by those who had retained a vivid view of how the human being is received into the planetary world with his etheric body, of how man is subsequently received into the sphere of earthly elements into warmth or fire, air, water, and earth, of how through the effects of these elements on the human etheric being black gall, white gall, phlegm, and blood are formed. They asked themselves a question that can occur now to a person who truly possesses Imaginative perception. In those times, the answer to this question was based on instinctive Imaginative perception, but we can repeat it today in full consciousness. If we develop an Imaginative conception of this entrance of the human being from the spiritual world through the planetary sphere into the terrestrial sphere of fire, air, water, and earth, we arrive at the realization that if something enters from the spheres beyond into the planetary sphere, hence into the earth's sphere, and is received there, this will not become a true human being. If we develop a picture of what is actually evolving there, if we have an Imaginative view of what can be beheld in purely Imaginative perception outside the planetary sphere, then enters into and is received by the planetary sphere and is subsequently taken hold of by the influences emanating from the earth sphere, we see that this does not become a human being. We do not arrive at a view of man; instead we attain to a conception that can be most clearly represented if we picture not a human being but a bull, an ox.

The ancient teachers of wisdom knew that no human beings would exist on earth if there were nothing besides this extraplanetary being that descends into the planetary sphere of evolution. They saw that at first glance one does arrive at the conception of the gradual approach of an entity out of extraplanetary spheres into the planetary and hence the earth sphere. But if one then proceeds from the content of these conceptions and tries to form a vivid imaginative view, it does not turn into a human being; it becomes a mere bull. And if one comprehends nothing more in the human being but this, one merely comprehends what is bull-like in human beings. The ancient teachers of wisdom formed this conception. Now they said to themselves, In that case, human beings must struggle against this bull-like nature with something still higher. They must overcome the view given by this wisdom. As human beings, they are more than beings that merely come from the extra-planetary sphere, enter into the planetary sphere, and from there are taken hold of by the terrestrial elements. They have something within them that is more than this.

It is possible to say that these teachers of wisdom came as far as this concept. This was the reason they then developed the image of the bull and placed Mithras on top of it, the human being who struggles to overcome the bull, and who says of himself, I must be of far loftier origin than the being that was pictured according to the ancient teaching of wisdom.

Now these sages realized that their ancient teaching of wisdom contained an indication of what is important here. For this teaching did look upon the planetary sphere, upon Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus, moon, and so on. It also said that as the human being approaches the earth, he is constantly lifted up by the sun so as not to be submerged completely in the terrestrial elements, so as not to remain merely what proceeds from the etheric body and the mixture of black and white gall, phlegm, and blood when it is received by the planetary sphere and when the astral body is received by the other planetary sphere through Mercury, Venus, moon. What lifts man upward dwells in the sun. Therefore, these sages said, Let us call man's attention to the sun forces dwelling in him; then he will turn into Mithras who is victorious over the bull!

This then was the cultic image. It was not meant to be merely a thought-out symbol but was actually to represent the fact, the cosmological fact. The religious ceremony was more than a mere outer sign; it was something that was extracted, as it were, out of the essence of the cosmos itself.

This cultic form was something that had existed since very ancient times and had been brought across from Asia to Europe. It was, in a sense, Christianity viewed from one side, viewed from the external, astronomical side, for Mithras was the sun force in man. Mithras was the human being who rebelled against the merely planetary and terrestrial aspects.

Now, a certain endeavor arose, traces of which can be observed everywhere when we look back at the first Christian centuries. The tendency arose to connect the historical fact, the Mystery of Golgotha, with the Mithras worship. Great were the numbers of people at that time, especially among the Roman Legions, who brought with them into the lands on the Danube and far into central Europe, indeed even into western Europe, what they had experienced in Asia and the Orient in general. In what they brought across as the Mithras worship there lived feelings that, without reflecting the Mystery of Golgotha, definitely contained Christian views and Christian sentiments. The worship of Mithras was considered as a concrete worship relating to the sun forces in man. The only thing this Mithras worship did not perceive was the fact that in the Mystery of Golgotha this sun force itself had descended as a spiritual entity and had united itself with the human being Jesus of Nazareth.

Now there existed schools of wisdom in the East up until the fourth century A.D. that by and by received reports and became aware of the Mystery of Golgotha, of Christ. The further east we go in our investigations, the clearer this becomes. These schools then attempted to spread a certain teaching throughout the world, and for a time there was a tendency to let flow into the Mithras cult what agrees with the following supersensory perception: The true Mithras is the Christ; Mithras is his predecessor. The Christ force must be poured into those forces in man that

vanquish the bull. To turn the Mithras worship into a worship of Christ was something that was intensely alive in the first Christian centuries up until the fourth century. One might say that the stream intending to Christianize this Mithras worship followed after the spreading of the latter. A synthesis between Christendom and the Mithras worship was striven for. An ancient, significant image of man's being — Mithras riding on and vanquishing the bull — was to be brought into relationship with the Christ Being. One might say that a quite glorious endeavor existed in this direction, and in a certain respect it was a powerful one.

Anyone who follows the spread of Eastern Christianity and the spread of Arianism [Note 4] can see a Mithras element in it, even though in already quite weakened form. Any translation of the Ulfilas-Bible [Note 5] into modern languages remains imperfect if one is unaware that Mithras elements still play into the terminology of Ulfilas (or Wulfila). But who pays heed nowadays to these deeper relationships in the linguistic element? As late as in the fourth century, there were philosophers in Greece who worked on bringing the ancient etheric astronomy into harmony with Christianity. From this effort then arose the true Gnosis, which was thoroughly eradicated by later Christianity, so that only a few fragments of the literary samples of this Gnosis have remained.

What do people really know today about the Gnosis, of which they say in their ignorance that our anthroposophy is a warmed-over version? Even if this were true, such people would not be able to know about it, for they are familiar only with those parts of the Gnosis that are found in the critical, Occidental-Christian texts dealing with the Gnosis. They know the quotes from Gnostic texts left behind by the opponents of the Gnosis. There is hardly anything left of the Gnosis except what could be described by the following comparison. Imagine that Herr von Gleich would be successful in rooting out the whole of anthroposophical literature and nothing would remain except his quotations. Then, later on, somebody would attempt to reconstruct anthroposophy based on these quotes; then, it would be about the same procedure in the West as that which was applied to the Gnosis. Therefore, if people say that modern anthroposophy imitates the Gnosis, they would not know it even if it were the case, because they are unfamiliar with the Gnosis, knowing of it only through its opponents.

So, particularly in Athens, a school of wisdom existed well into the fourth century, and indeed even longer, that endeavored to bring the ancient etheric astronomy into harmony with Christianity. The last remnants of this view — man's entering from higher worlds through the planetary sphere into the earth sphere — still illuminate the writings of Origen; they even shine through the texts of the Greek Church Fathers. Everywhere one can see it shimmer through. It shines through particularly in the writings of the genuine Dionysius the Areopagite. [Note 6] This Dionysius left behind a teaching that was a pure synthesis of the etheric astronomy and the element dwelling in Christianity. He taught that the forces localized, as it were, astronomically and cosmically in the sun entered into the earth sphere in Christ through the man Jesus of Nazareth and that thereby a certain previously nonexistent relationship came into being between the earth and all the higher hierarchies, the hierarchies of the Angels, of Wisdom, the hierarchies of the Thrones and the Seraphim, and so on. It was a penetration of this teaching of the hierarchies with etheric astronomy that could be found in the original Dionysius the Areopagite.

Then, in the sixth century, the attempt was made to obliterate the traces even of the more ancient teachings by Dionysius the Areopagite. They were altered in such a way that they now represented merely an abstract teaching of the spirit. In the form in which the teaching of Dionysius the Areopagite has come down to us, it is a spiritual teaching that no longer has much to do with etheric astronomy. This is the reason he is then called the "Pseudo-Dionysius." In this manner, the decline of the teaching of wisdom was brought about. On the one hand, the teachings of Dionysius were distorted; on the other hand, the truly alive teaching in Athens that had tried to unite etheric astronomy with Christianity was eradicated. Finally, in regard to the cultic aspect, the Mithras worship was exterminated.

In addition, there were contributions by individuals such as Constantine. [Note 7] His actions were intensified later by the fact that Emperor Justinian [Note 8] ordered the School of Philosophers in Athens closed. Thus, the last

remaining people who had occupied themselves with bringing the old etheric astronomy into harmony with Christianity had to emigrate; they found a place in Persia where they could at least live out their lives. Based on the same program, according to which he had closed the Athenian Academy of Philosophers, Justinian also had Origen declared a heretic. For the same reason, he abolished Roman consulship, though it led only a shadowy existence, people sought in it a kind of power of resistance against the Roman concept of the state, which was reduced to pure jurisprudence. The ancient human element people still associated with the office of consul disappeared in the political imperialism of Rome.

Thus, in the fourth century, we see the diminishing of the cultic worship that could have brought Christianity closer to man. We observe the diminishing of the ancient wisdom teaching of an etheric astronomy that tried to unite with the insight into the significance of the Mystery of Golgotha. And in the West, we see an element take its place that already carried within itself the seeds of the later materialism, which could not become a theory until the fifteenth century when the fifth post-Atlantean epoch began, but which was prepared in the main through taking the spiritual heritage from the Orient and imbuing it with materialistic substance.

We must definitely turn our minds to this course of European civilization. Otherwise, the foundations of European civilization will never become quite clear to us. It will also never become really clear to us how it was possible that, again and again, when people moved to the Orient, they could bring back with them powerful spiritual stimuli from there. Above all else, throughout the first part of the Middle Ages, there was lively commercial traffic from the Orient up the Danube River, following exactly those routes taken by the ancient Mithras worship, which, naturally, had already died away at the beginning of the Middle Ages. The merchants who traveled to the Orient and back again, always found in the East what had preceded Christianity but definitely tended already towards Christianity. We observe, moreover, that when the Crusaders journeyed to the Orient, they received stimuli from the remnants they could still discern there, and they brought treasures of ancient wisdom back to Europe.

I mentioned that the ancient medical knowledge of fluids was connected with this old body of wisdom. Again and again, people who traveled to the Orient, even the Crusaders and those who journeyed with the Crusades, upon their return always brought back with them remnants of this old medicine to Europe. These remnants of an ancient medicine were then transmitted in the form of tradition all over Europe. Certain individuals who at the same time were ahead of their age in their own spiritual evolution then went through remarkable developments, such as the personality we know under the name Basilus Valentinus. [Note 9]

What kind of personality was he? He was somebody who had taken up the tradition of the old medicine of fluids from the people with whom he had spent his youth, at times without understanding it from this or that indication. Until a short time ago — today it is already less often the case — there still existed in the old peasant's sayings remnants of this medical tradition that had been brought over from the Orient by the many travelers. These remnants were in a sense preserved by the peasantry; those who grew up among peasants heard of them; as a rule they were those who then became priests. In particular those who became monks came from the peasantry. There, they had heard this or that of what was in fact distorted treasure of ancient wisdom that had become decadent. These people did undergo an independent educational development. Up until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the educational development an individual went through by means of Christian theology was something much more liberal than it was later on. Based on their own spirituality, these priests and monks gradually brought a certain amount of order into these matters. They pondered what they had heard; out of their own genius, they connected the various matters. Thus originated the writings that have been preserved as the writings of Basilus Valentinus.

Indeed, these conditions also gave rise to a school of thought from which Paracelsus [Note 10] even Jacob Boehme [Note 11] learned. Even these individuals still took up the treasure of ancient medical wisdom that lived, I might say, in the folk group soul. One can notice this primarily in Jacob Boehme, but also in Paracelsus and others, even if one considers their writings only in a superficial way. If you look closely at, for example, Jacob Boehme's text

“De Signatura Rerum,” you will find in the manner of his presentation that what I have said is very obvious. It is a form of old folk wisdom that basically contained distorted ancient wisdom. Such old folk wisdom was by no means as abstract as our present-day science; instead, there still existed a sensitivity for the objective element in words. One felt something in the words. Just as one tries to know through concepts today, one felt in the words. One knew that the human being had drawn the words out of the objective essence of the universe itself.

This can become evident in Jacob Boehme's efforts to feel what really lies concealed in the syllable, “sul,” or again in the syllable, “phur” of “sulphur”. See how Jacob Boehme struggles in “De Signatura Rerum,” to draw something out of a word, to draw out an inner word-extract, to draw something out of the word “sulphur” in order to come to an entity. The feeling is definitely present there that when one experiences the extract of words, one arrives at something real. In former times, it was felt, something had settled into the words the human soul absorbed when it moved from spheres beyond through the planetary sphere into earthly existence. But what the soul placed into the words due to its closeness to the intermingling of fluids when the child learned to speak was still something objective. There was still something in speech that was like instruction by the gods, not merely like human instruction. In Jacob Boehme we see this noble striving that can be expressed somewhat as if he had felt, I would like to consider speech as something in which living gods work behind the phenomena into the human organization in order to form speech and, along with speech, a certain treasure of wisdom.

Thus we see that the ancient body of wisdom does indeed continue on into later ages, though already taken up by modern thinking, which, it is true, is yet barely evident in such original and outstanding minds like Jacob Boehme and Paracelsus. Into what has thus been brought forth the purely intellectualistic, theoretical element is now imprinted, the element that is based on man's physical thinking and takes hold only of the physical realm. We see how, on the one hand, purely physical astronomy arises, and how, on the other hand, physiology and anatomy come about, which are directed exclusively upon the clearly defined organs of man — in short, the whole medical adumbration.

Thus, the human being gradually finds himself surrounded by a world that he comprehends only in a physical sense and in which he himself as a cosmic being certainly has no place. Concerning himself, he grasps only what he has become by virtue of the earth; for it is thanks to the earth that he has become this solidly bounded, physical, organic being. He can no longer reconcile what is revealed to him of the universe through physical astronomy with what dwells in his form and points to something else. He turns his attention away from the manner in which the human form indicates something else. He finally loses all awareness of the fact that his striving for erect posture and the special manner and means by which he attains to speech out of his organism cannot originate from the Mithras-Bull, but only from Mithras. He no longer wishes to occupy himself with all this, for he is sailing full force into materialism. He has to sail into materialism, for religious consciousness itself, after all, has absorbed only the external, material phenomenon of Christianity. It has then dogmatized this external, material phenomenon without attempting to perceive through some wisdom how the Mystery of Golgotha took place, but instead trying to determine through stipulations what truth is.

Thus we observe the transition from the ancient Oriental position of thinking based on cosmic insight to the specifically Roman-European form of observation. How were matters "determined" in the Orient, and how could something be “determined” about the Mystery of Golgotha based on Oriental instinctive perception? If we take the insight coming out of the cosmos, looking up at the stars, that insight, though it was an instinctive, elemental insight, should lead to, or was at least supposed to lead to, the meaning of the Mystery of Golgotha. This was the path taken in the Orient. Beginning with the fifth century, there was no longer any sensitivity for this path. By replacing the Asiatic manner of determination more and more with the Egyptian form, earlier Church Councils had already pointed out that the nature of the Mystery of Golgotha should not be determined in this manner, but that the majority of the Fathers gathered at the Councils should decide. The juristic principle was put in the place of the Oriental principle of insight; dogmatism was brought into the juristic element. People no longer had the feeling that

truth must be determined out of universal conscience. They began to feel that it was possible to ascertain, based on resolutions of the Councils, whether the divine and the human nature in Christ Jesus was two natures or one, and other such things. We see the Egypto-Roman juristic element pervading the innermost configuration of Occidental civilization, an element that even today is deeply rooted in human beings who are not inclined to permit truth to determine their relationship to it. Instead, they wish to make decisions based on emotional factors; therefore, they have no other measure for determining things except majority rule in some form.

We shall say more about this tomorrow.