

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XI

At the close of this first stage of my life it became a question of inner necessity for me to attain a clearly defined position in relation to certain tendencies of the human mind. One of these tendencies was mysticism. As this passed in review before my mind at the various epochs in the evolution of humanity – in Oriental Wisdom, in Neo-Platonism, in the Christian Middle Ages, in the endeavours of the Kabalists – it was only with the greatest difficulty that I, with my different temper of mind, could establish any relationship to it. The mystic seemed to me to be a man who failed to come into right relation to the world of ideas, in which for me the spiritual has its existence. I felt that it was a deficiency in real spirituality when, in order to attain satisfaction in one's ideas, one plunges into an inner world void of all ideas. In this I could see no road to light, but rather a way to spiritual darkness. It seemed to me a powerlessness in cognition when the mind seeks to reach spiritual reality by an escape from ideas, which, indeed, the spirit does not actually reside, but through which it enters into human experience. And yet something attracted me toward the mystical strivings of humanity. This was the character of the inner experience of the mystics. They desire living contact with the sources of human existence, not merely a view of these, as something external, by means of ideal observation. And yet it was also clear to me that one arrives at the same kind of inner experience when one sinks down into the depths of the soul accompanied by the full and clear content of the ideal world, instead of stripping off this content when thus sinking into one's depths. I desired to carry the light of the ideal world into the warmth of the inner experience. The mystic seemed to me to be a man who cannot perceive the spirit in ideas and who is therefore inwardly chilled by ideas. The coldness which he feels in ideas drives him to seek through an escape from ideas for the warmth of which the soul has need.

As for myself, the warmth of my soul's experience increased in proportion as I shaped into definite ideas the previously indefinite experience of the spiritual world. I often said to myself: "How these mystics fail to understand the warmth, the mental intimacy, which one experiences when one lives in association with ideas permeated by the spiritual!" To me this living association had always been like a personal intercourse with the spiritual world.

The mystics seemed to me to strengthen the position of the materialistically minded observer of nature instead of weakening it. The latter objects to the observation of the spiritual world, either because he does not admit the existence of such a world, or else because he considers human understanding adapted to the physically visible one. He sets up boundaries of knowledge at that point where lie the boundaries of the physically perceptible. The ordinary mystic is of the same opinion as the materialist as regards human ideal knowledge. He maintains that ideas do not extend to the spiritual, and therefore that in ideal knowledge man must always remain outside the spiritual. Since, however, he desires to attain to the spirit, he turns to an inner experience void of ideas. He thus yields to the materialistic observer of nature in that he restricts ideal knowledge to the knowledge of the merely natural.

But if anyone enters into the interior of his own soul without taking ideas with him, he thus arrives at the inner region of mere feeling. Such a person then says that the spiritual cannot be reached by a way which is called in ordinary life a way of knowledge, but that one must sink down from the sphere of knowledge into the sphere of the feelings in order to experience the spiritual.

With such a view a materialistic observer of nature can declare himself in perfect agreement unless he considers all talk about the spirit as a fantastic playing with words which signifies nothing real whatever. He then sees in his system of ideas directed toward the things of sense the sole justifiable basis for knowledge, and in the mystical relation ship of man to the spirit something purely personal, to which one is either inclined or not inclined according to one's temperament, but of which one can never speak in the same way as one speaks of the content of a "positive knowledge." Man's relation to the spiritual must be relegated entirely, he thinks, to sphere of "subjective feeling."

While I held this before my mind the forces within my soul which stood in opposition to the mystic grew steadily stronger. The perception of the spiritual in inner mental experience was to me far more certain than the perception of the things of sense; to place boundaries of knowledge before this mental experience was to me quite impossible. I objected with all positiveness to mere feeling as a way into the spiritual. And yet, when I thought of the nature of the mystic's experience, I felt once more a remote kinship between this and my own attitude toward the spiritual world. I sought association with the spirit by means of spirit-illuminated ideas, in the same way as the mystic seeks this through association with the non-ideal. I also could say that my view rests upon "mystical" ideal experience.

To achieve for this mental conflict within myself the clarification which at length came about was not a matter of great difficulty; for the real perception of the spiritual casts light upon the

range of applicability of ideas, and this assigned proper limits to the personal. As an observer of the spiritual, one knows that the personal ceases to function in man when the very mind itself becomes an organ of perception of the spiritual world.

The difficulty, however, consisted in the fact that I had to find forms in which to express my perceptions in my writings. One can by no means easily find a new mode of expression for an observation which is unfamiliar to the reader. I had to choose between putting that which I found it needful to say either in those forms which are generally applied in the field of nature-observation, or in forms which are used by writers inclined toward mystical experiences. By the latter method the resultant difficulties seemed to me to be unavoidable.

I reached the conclusion that the form of expression in the sphere of the natural sciences consists in content-filled ideas, even though the content was materialistically thought out. I desired to form ideas which bore in the same way upon the spiritual as the natural-scientific ideas bore upon the physical. In this way I could preserve the ideal character for that which I had to say. This seemed to me impossible with the use of mystical forms; for these do not refer to the reality outside of man, but describe only subjective experiences within man. My purpose was, not to describe human experiences, but to show how a spiritual world is revealed in man through spiritual organs.

Out of such fundamental considerations I gave form to the ideas from which my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* later evolved. I did not, in the forming of these ideas, permit any mystical rhapsodies to become dominant within me, in spite of the fact that I perceived clearly that the ultimate experience of that which would manifest itself in ideas must be of the same character within the soul as the inner awareness of the mystic. Yet there was the difference that in my presentation of the matter man surrenders himself and the external spiritual world comes to objective manifestation, whereas the mystic strengthens his own inner life and in this way effaces the true form of the objective spiritual.

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