

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XVII

At this time there was established in Germany a branch of the Ethical Culture Society which had originated in America. It seems obvious that in a materialistic age one ought only to approve an effort in the direction of a deepening of ethical life. But this effort arose from a fundamental conception that aroused in me the profoundest objections.

The leader of this movement said to himself: "One stands to-day in the midst of the many opposing conceptions of the world and of life as regards the life of thought and the religious and social feelings. In the realm of these conceptions men cannot be brought to understand one another. It is a bad thing when the moral feelings which men ought to have for one another are drawn into the sphere of these opposing opinions. Where will it lead if those who feel differently in matters religious and social, or who differ from one another in the life of thought, shall also express their diversity in such a way as thus to determine also their moral relationships with respect to those who think and feel differently. Therefore one must seek for a foundation for purely human ethics which shall be independent of every world-concept, which each one can recognize no matter how he may think in reference to the various spheres of existence."

This ethical movement made upon me a profound impression. It had to do with views of mine which I held to be most important. For I saw before me the deep abyss which the way of thinking characteristic of the most recent times had created between that which occurs in nature and the content of the moral and spiritual world.

Men have come to a conception of nature which would represent the evolution of the world as being without moral or spiritual content. They think hypothetically of a purely material primal state of the world. They seek for the laws according to which from this primal state there could gradually have been formed the living, that which is endued with soul, that which is permeated with spirit in the form characteristic of this present age. If one is logical in such a way of thinking – so I then said to myself – then the spiritual and moral cannot be conceived as anything other than a result of the work of nature. Then one faces facts of nature which are from the spiritual and moral point of view quite indifferent, which in their own process of evolution

have brought forth the moral as a by-product, and which finally with moral indifference likewise bury it.

I could, of course, perceive clearly that the sagacious thinkers did not draw these conclusions; that they simply accepted what the facts of nature seemed to say to them, and thought in regard to these matters that one ought simply to allow the world-significance of the spiritual and moral to rest upon its own foundation. But this view seemed to me of little force. It made no difference to me that people said: "In the field of natural occurrences one must think in a way that has no relation to morality, and what one thus thinks constitutes hypotheses; but in regard to the moral each man may form his own ideas." I said to myself that whoever thinks in regard to nature even in the least detail in the manner then customary, such a person cannot ascribe to the spiritual-moral any self-existent, self-supporting reality. If physics, chemistry, biology remain as they are – and to all they seem to be unassailable – then the entities which men in these spheres consider to be reality will absorb all reality; and the spiritual-moral could be nothing more than the foam arising from this reality.

I looked into another reality – a reality which is spiritual and moral as well as natural. It seemed to me a weakness in the effort to attain knowledge not to be willing to press through to that reality. I was forced to say to myself according to my spiritual perception: "Above the natural occurrences, and also the spiritual-moral, there is a veritable reality, which reveals itself morally but which in moral activity has at the same time the power to embody itself as an occurrence which attains to equal validity with an occurrence in nature." I thought that this seemed indifferent to the spiritual-moral only because the latter had lost its original unity of being with this reality, as the corpse of a man has lost its unity of being with that in man which is endowed with soul and with life.

To me this was certain; for I did not merely think it: I perceived it as truth in the spiritual facts and beings of the world. In the so-called "ethicists" there seemed to me to have been born men to whom such an insight appeared to be a matter of indifference; they revealed more or less unconsciously the opinion that one can do nothing with conflicting philosophies; let us save the principles of ethics, in regard to which there is no need to inquire how they are rooted in the world-reality. Undisguised scepticism as to all endeavour after a world-concept seemed to me to manifest itself in this phenomenon of the times. Unconsciously frivolous did any one seem to me who maintained that, if we let world-concepts rest on their own foundations, we shall thus be able to spread morality again among men. I took many a walk with Hans and Grete Olden through the Weimar parks, during which I expressed myself in radical fashion on the theme of this frivolity. "Whoever presses forward with his perception as far as is possible for man," I said, "will find a world-event out of which there appears before him the reality of

the moral just as of the natural.” In the recently founded *Zukunft* I wrote a trenchant article against what I called ethics uprooted from all world-reality, which could not possess any force. The article met with a distinctly unfriendly reception. How, indeed, could it be otherwise, when these “ethicists” themselves had been obliged to come forward as the saviours of civilization?

To me this matter was of immeasurable importance. I wished to do battle at a critical point for the confirmation of a world-concept which revealed ethics as firmly rooted along with all other reality. Therefore, I was forced to battle against this ethics which had no philosophical basis.

I went from Weimar to Berlin in order to seek for opportunities to present my view through the press.

I called on Herman Grimm, whom I held in high honour. I was received with the greatest possible friendliness. But it seemed to Herman Grimm very strange that I, who was full of zeal for my cause, should bring this zeal into his house. He listened to me rather unresponsively, as I talked to him of my view regarding the ethicists. I thought I could interest him in this matter which to me seemed so vital. But I did not in the least succeed. When, however, he heard me say “I wish to do something,” he replied, “Well, go to these people; I am more or less acquainted with the majority of them; they are all quite amiable men.” I felt as if cold water had been thrown over me. The man whom I so highly honoured felt nothing of what I desired; he thought I would “think quite sensibly” when I had convinced myself by a call on the “ethicists” that they were all quite congenial persons.

I found in others no greater interest than in Herman Grimm. So it was at that time for me. In all that pertained to my perceptions of the spiritual I had to work entirely alone. I lived in the spiritual world; no one in my circle of acquaintances followed me there. My intercourse consisted in excursions into the worlds of others. I loved these excursions. Moreover, my reverence for Herman Grimm was not in the least diminished. But I had a good schooling in the art of understanding in love that which made no move toward understanding what I carried in my own soul.

This was then the nature of my loneliness in Weimar, where I had such an extensive social relationship. But I did not ascribe to these persons the fact that they condemned me to such loneliness. Indeed, I perceived that unconsciously striving in many people was the impulse toward a world-concept which would penetrate to the very roots of existence. I perceived how a manner of thinking which could move securely while it had to do only with that which lies imme-

diately at hand yet weighed heavily upon their souls. "Nature is the whole world" – such was that manner of thinking. In regard to this way of thinking men believed that they must find it to be correct, and they suppressed in their souls everything which seemed to say one could not find this to be correct. It was in this light that much revealed itself to me in my spiritual surroundings at that time. It was the time in which my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, whose essential content I had long borne within me, was receiving its final form.

As soon as it was off the press, I sent a copy to Eduard von Hartmann. He read it with close attention, for I soon received back his copy of the book with his detailed marginal comments from beginning to end. Besides, he wrote me, among other things, that the book ought to bear the title: *Erkenntnistheoretischer Phänomenalismus und ethischer Individualismus*.¹ I He had utterly misunderstood the sources of the ideas and my objective. He thought of the sense-world after the Kantian fashion even though he modified this. He considered this world to be the effect produced by reality upon the soul through the senses. This reality, according to his view, can never enter into the field of perception which the soul embraces through consciousness. It must remain beyond consciousness. Only by means of logical inferences can man form hypothetical conceptions regarding it. The sense-world, therefore, does not constitute in itself an objective existence, but is merely a subjective phenomenon existing in the soul only so long as this embraces the phenomenon within consciousness.

I had sought to prove in my book that no unknown lies behind the sense-world, but that within it lies the spiritual. And concerning the world of human ideas, I sought to show that these have their existence in that spiritual world. Therefore the reality of the sense-world is hidden from human consciousness only so long as the soul perceives by means of the senses alone. When, in addition to the sense-perceptions, the ideas are also experienced, then the sense-world in its objective reality is embraced within consciousness. Knowing does not consist in a copying of a real but the soul's living entrance into that real. Within the consciousness occurs that advance from the still unreal sense-world to the reality of this world.

In truth is the sense-world also a spiritual world; and the soul lives together with this known spiritual world while it extends its consciousness over it. The goal of the process of consciousness is the conscious experience of the spiritual world, in the visible presence of which everything is resolved into spirit.

I placed the world of spiritual reality over against phenomenalism. Eduard von Hartmann thought that I intended to remain within the phenomena and abandon the thought of arriving from these at any sort of objective reality. He conceived the thing as if by my way of thinking

I were condemning the human mind to permanent incapacity to reach any sort of reality, to the necessity of moving always within a world of appearances having existence only in the conception of the mind (as a phenomenon).

Thus my endeavour to reach the spirit through the expansion of consciousness was set over against the view that “spirit” exists solely in the human conception and apart from this can only be “thought.” This was fundamentally the view of the age to which I had to introduce my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. The experience of the spiritual had in this view of the matter shriveled up to a mere experience of human conceptions, and from these no way could be discovered to a real (objective) spiritual world.

I desired to show how in that which is subjectively experienced the objective spiritual shines and becomes the true content of consciousness; Eduard von Hartmann opposed me with the opinion that whoever maintains this view remains fixed in the sensibly apparent and is not dealing at all with an objective reality.

It was inevitable, therefore, that Eduard von Hartmann must consider my “ethical individualism” dubious.

For what was this based upon in my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*? I saw at the centre of the soul's life its complete union with the spiritual world. I sought so to express this fact that an imaginary difficulty which disturbed many persons might resolve itself into nothing. That is, it is supposed that, in order to know, the soul – or the ego – must differentiate itself from that which is known, and therefore must not merge itself with this. But this differentiation is also possible when the soul swings, like a pendulum, as it were, between the union of itself with the spiritual real on the one hand and the sense of itself on the other. The soul becomes “unconscious” in sinking down into the objective spirit, but with the sense of itself it brings the completely spiritual into consciousness.

If, now, it is possible that the personal individuality of men can sink down into the spiritual reality of the world, then in this reality it is possible to experience also the world of moral impulses. Morality becomes a content which reveals itself out of the spiritual world within the human individuality; and the consciousness expanded into the spiritual presses forward to the perception of this revelation. What impels man to moral behaviour is a revelation of the spiritual world in the experiencing of the spiritual world through the soul. And this experience takes place within the individuality of man. If man perceives himself in moral behaviour as acting in reciprocal relation with the spiritual world, he is then experiencing his freedom. For

the spiritual world works within the soul, not by way of compulsion, but in such a way that man must develop freely the activity which enables him to receive the spiritual.

In pointing out that the sense-world is in reality a world of spiritual being and that man, as a soul, by means of a true knowledge of the sense-world is weaving and living in a world of spirit – herein lies the first objective of my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. In characterizing the moral world as one whose being shines into the world of spirit experienced by the soul and thereby enables man to arrive at this moral world freely – herein lies the second objective. The moral being of man is thus sought in its completely individual unity with the ethical impulses of the spiritual world. I had the feeling that the first part of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and the second part form a spiritual organism, a genuine unity. Eduard von Hartmann was forced, however, to feel that they were coupled together quite arbitrarily as phenomenalism in the theory of knowledge and individualism in ethics.

The form taken by the ideas of the book was determined by my own state of soul at that time. Through my experience of the spiritual world in direct perception, nature revealed itself to me as spirit; I desired to create a spiritual natural science. In the self-knowledge of the human soul through direct perception, the moral world entered into the soul as its entirely individual experience.

In the experience of spirit lay the source of the form which I gave to my book. It is, first of all, the presentation of an anthroposophy which receives its direction from nature and from the place of man in nature with his own individual moral being.

In a certain sense *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* released from me and introduced into the external world that which the first period of my life had brought before me in the form of ideas through the destiny which led me to experience the natural-scientific riddles of existence. The further way could now consist in nothing else than a struggle to arrive at ideal forms for the spiritual world itself.

The forms of knowledge which man receives through sense-perception I represented as inner anthroposophical experience of the spirit on the part of the human soul. The fact that I had not yet used the term anthroposophic was done to the circumstance that my mind was always striving first to attain perception and scarcely at all after a terminology. My task was to form ideas which could express the human soul's experience of the spiritual world.

An inner wrestling after the formation of such ideas comprises the content of that episode of my life which I passed through between my thirtieth and fortieth years of age. At that time fate

placed me usually in an outer life-activity which did not so correspond with my inner life that it could have served to bring this to expression.

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