

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XXX

The decision to give public expression to the esoteric from my own inner experience impelled me to write for the Magazine for August 28, 1899, on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Goethe's birth, an article on Goethe's fairy-tale of *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*, under the title *Goethes Geheime Offenbarung*.¹ This article was, of course, only slightly esoteric. But I could not expect more of my public than I there gave. In my own mind the content of the fairy-tale lived as something wholly esoteric, and it was out of an esoteric mood that the article was written.

Since the 'eighties I had been occupied with imaginations which were associated in my thought with this fairy-tale. I saw set forth in the fairy-tale Goethe's way from the observation of external nature into the interior of the human mind as he placed this before himself, not in concepts, but in pictures of the spirit. Concepts seemed to Goethe far too poor, too dead, to be capable of representing the living and working forces of the mind.

Now in Schiller's letters concerning education in aesthetics, Goethe saw an endeavour to grasp this living and working by means of concepts. Schiller sought to show how the life of man is under subjection to natural necessity by reason of his corporeal aspect and to mental necessity through his reason. And he thought the soul must establish an inner equilibrium between the two. Then in this equilibrium man lives in freedom a life really worthy of humanity.

This is clever, but for the real life of the soul it is far too simple. The soul causes its forces, which are rooted in the depths, to shine into consciousness, but to disappear again in the very act of shining forth after they have influenced other forces just as fleeting. These are occurrences which even in arising also pass away; but abstract concepts can be linked only to that which continues for a longer or shorter time.

All this Goethe knew through experience; he placed his picture-knowledge in a fairy-tale over against Schiller's conceptual knowledge.

In experiencing this creation of Goethe's, one had entered the outer court of the esoteric.

This was the time when I was invited by Count and Countess Brockdorff to deliver a lecture at one of their weekly gatherings. At these meetings there came together seekers from all sorts of circles. The lectures there delivered had to do with all aspects of life and knowledge. I knew nothing of all this until I was invited to deliver a lecture; nor did I know the Brockdorffs, but heard of them then for the first time. The theme proposed was an article about Nietzsche. This lecture I gave. Then I observed that among the hearers there were persons with a great interest in the spiritual world. Therefore, when I was invited to give a second lecture, I proposed the subject "Goethe's Secret Revelation," and in this lecture I became entirely esoteric in relation to the fairy-tale. It was an important experience for me to be able to speak in words coined from the world of spirit after having been forced by circumstances throughout my Berlin period up to that time only to let the spiritual shine through my presentation.

The Brockdorffs were leaders of a branch of the Theosophical Society founded by Blavatsky. What I had said in connection with Goethe's fairy-tale led to my being invited by the Brockdorffs to deliver lectures regularly before those members of the Theosophical Society who were associated with them. I explained, however, that I could speak only about that which I vitally experienced within me as spiritual knowledge.

In truth, I could speak of nothing else. For very little of the literature issued by the Theosophical Society was known to me. I had known theosophists while living in Vienna, and I later became acquainted with others. These acquaintance ships led me to write in the Magazine the adverse review dealing with the theosophists in connection with the appearance of a publication of Franz Hartmann. What I knew otherwise of the literature was for the most part entirely uncongenial to me in method and approach; I could not by any possibility have linked my discussions with this literature.

So I then gave the lectures in which I established a connection with the mysticism of the Middle Ages. By means of the ideas of the mystics from Master Eckhard to Jakob Böhme, I found expression for the spiritual conceptions which in reality I had determined beforehand to set forth. I published the series of lectures in the book *Die Mystik im Aufgange des neuzeitlichen Geisteslebens*.²

At these lectures there appeared one day in the audience Marie von Sievers, who was chosen by destiny at that time to take into strong hands the German section of the Theosophical Society, founded soon after the beginning of my lecturing. Within this section I was then able to develop my anthroposophic activity before a constantly increasing audience.

No one was left in uncertainty of the fact that I would bring forward in the Theosophical Society only the results of my own research through perception. For I stated this on all appropriate occasions. When, in the presence of Annie Besant, the German section of the Theosophical Society was founded in Berlin and I was chosen its General Secretary, I had to leave the foundation sessions because I had to give before a non-theosophical audience one of the lectures in which I dealt with the spiritual evolution of humanity, and to the title of which I expressly united the phrase “Eine Anthroposophie.”³ Annie Besant also knew that I was then giving out in lectures under this title what I had to say about the spiritual world.

When I went to London to attend a theosophical congress, one of the leading personalities said to me that true theosophy was to be found in my book *Mysticism ...*, I had reason to be satisfied. For I had given only the results of my spiritual vision, and this was accepted in the Theosophical Society.

There was now no longer any reason why I should not bring forward this spiritual knowledge in my own way before the theosophical public, which was at first the only audience that entered without restriction into a knowledge of the spirit. I subscribed to no sectarian dogmatics; I remained a man who uttered what he believed he was able to utter entirely according to what he himself experienced in the spiritual world.

Prior to the founding of the section belongs a series of lectures – which I gave before *Die Kommenden*, entitled *Von Buddha zu Christus*.⁴ In these discussions I sought to show what a mighty stride the mystery of Golgotha signifies in comparison with the Buddha event, and how the evolution of humanity, as it strives toward the Christ event, approaches its culmination. In this circle I spoke also of the nature of the mysteries.

All this was accepted by my hearers. It was not felt to be contradictory to lectures which I had given earlier. Only after the section was founded – and I then appeared to be stamped as a “theosophist” – did any objection arise. It was really not the thing itself; it was the name and the association with the Society that no one wished to have.

On the other hand, my non-theosophical hearers would have been inclined to permit themselves merely to be “stimulated” by my discussions, to accept these only in a “literary” way. What lay upon my heart was to introduce into life the impulse from the spiritual world; for this there was no understanding. This understanding, however, I could gradually find among men interested theosophically.

Before the Brockdorff circle, where I had spoken on Nietzsche and the on Goethe's secret revelation, I gave at this time a lecture on Goethe's Faust, from an esoteric point of view.⁵

The lectures on mysticism led to an invitation during the winter from the same theosophical circle to speak there again on this subject. I then gave the series of lectures which I later collected into the volume *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.

From the very beginning I have let it be known that the choice of the expression “as Mystical Fact” is important. For I did not wish to set forth merely the mystical bearing of Christianity. My object was to set forth the evolution from the ancient mysteries to the mystery of Golgotha in such a way that in this evolution there should be seen to be active, not merely earthly historic forces, but spiritual supramundane influences. And I wished to show that in the ancient mysteries cult-pictures were given of cosmic events, which were then fulfilled in the mystery of Golgotha as facts transferred from the cosmos to the earth of the historic plane.

This was by no means taught in the Theosophical Society. In this view I was in direct opposition to the theosophical dogmatics of the time, before I was invited to work in the Theosophical Society. For this invitation followed immediately after the cycle of lectures on Christ here described.

Between the two cycles of lectures that I gave before the Theosophical Society, Marie von Sievers was in Italy, at Bologna, working on behalf of the Theosophical Society in the branch established there.

Thus the thing evolved up to the time of my first attendance at a theosophical congress, in London, in the year 1902. At this congress, in which Marie von Sievers also took part, it was already a foregone conclusion that a German section of the Society would be founded with myself – shortly before invited to become a member – as the general secretary.

The visit to London was of great interest to me. I there became acquainted with important leaders of the Theosophical Society. I had the privilege of staying at the home of Mr. Bertram Keightley, one of these leaders. We became great friends. I became acquainted with Mr. Mead, the very diligent secretary of the Theosophical Movement. The most interesting conversations imaginable took place at the home of Mr. Keightley in regard to the forms of spiritual knowledge alive within the Theosophical Society.

Especially intimate were these conversations with Bertram Keightley himself. H. P. Blavatsky seemed to live again in these conversations. Her whole personality, with its wealth of spiritual content, was described with the utmost vividness before me and Marie von Sievers by my dear host, who had been so long associated with her.

I became slightly acquainted with Annie Besant and also Sinnett, author of *Esoteric Buddhism*. Mr. Leadbeater I did not meet, but only heard him speak from the platform. He made no special impression on me.

All that was interesting in what I heard stirred me deeply, but it had no influence upon the content of my own views.

The intervals left over between sessions of the congress I sought to employ in hurried visits to the natural-scientific and artistic collections of London. I dare say that many an idea concerning the evolution of nature and of man came to me from the natural-scientific and the historical collections.

Thus I went through an event very important for me in this visit to London. I went away with the most manifold impressions, which stirred my mind profoundly.

In the first number of the Magazine for 1899 there appears an article by me entitled *Neujahrsbetrachtung eines Ketzers*.⁶ The meaning there is a scepticism, not in reference to religious knowledge, but in reference to the orientation of culture which the time had taken on.

Men were standing before the portals of a new century. The closing century had brought forth great attainments in the realm of external life and knowledge.

In reference to this the thought forced itself upon me: "In spite of all this and many other attainments – for example, in the sphere of art – no one with any depth of vision can rejoice greatly over the cultural content of the time. Our highest spiritual needs strive for something which the time affords only in meagre measure." And reflecting upon the emptiness of contemporary culture, I glanced back to the time of scholasticism in which, at least in concepts, men's minds lived with the spirit. "One need not be surprised if, in the presence of such phenomena, men with deeper intellectual needs find the proud structure of thought of the scholastics more satisfying than the ideal content of our own time. Otto Willmann has written a noteworthy book, his *Geschichte des Idealismus*⁷ in which he appears as the eulogist of the world-conception of past centuries. It must be admitted that the human mind craves those proud com-

prehensive illuminations through thought which human knowledge experienced in the philosophical systems of the scholastics ... Discouragement is a characteristic of the intellectual life at the turn of the century. It disturbs our joy in the attainments of the youngest of the ages now past.”

And in contrast to those persons who insisted that it was just “true knowledge” itself which showed the impossibility of a philosophy comprising under a single conception the totality of existence, I had to say: “If matters were as they appear to the persons who give currency to such voices, then it would suffice one to measure, weigh, and compare things and phenomena and investigate them by means of the available apparatus, but never would the question be raised as to the higher meaning of things and phenomena.”

This is the temper of my mind which must furnish an explanation of those facts that brought about my anthroposophic activity within the Theosophical Society. When I had entered into the culture of the time in order to find a spiritual background for the editing of the Magazine, I felt after this a great need to recover my mind in such reading as Willmann's *History of Idealism*. Even though there was an abyss between my perception of spirit and the form of Willmann's ideas, yet I felt that these ideas were near to the spirit.

At the end of September 1900, I was able to leave the Magazine in other hands.

The facts narrated above show that the purpose of imparting the content of the spiritual world had become a necessity growing out of my temper of mind before I gave up the Magazine; that it has no connection with the impossibility of continuing further with the Magazine.

As into the very element suited to my mind, I entered upon an activity having its impulse in spiritual knowledge.

But I still have to-day the feeling that, even apart from the hindrance here described, my endeavour to lead through natural-scientific knowledge to the world of spirit would have succeeded in finding an outlet. I look back upon what I expressed from 1897 to 1900 as upon something which at one time or another had to be uttered in opposition to the way of thinking of the time; and on the other hand I look back upon this as upon something in which I passed through my most intense spiritual test. I learned fundamentally to know where lay the forces of the time striving away from the spirit, disintegrating and destructive of culture. And from this knowledge came a great access of the force that I later needed in order to work outward from the spirit.

It was still before the time of my activity within the Theosophical Society, and before I ceased to edit the Magazine, that I composed my two-volume book *Conceptions of the World and of Life in the Nineteenth Century*, which from the second edition on was extended to include a survey of the evolution of world-conceptions from the Greek period to the nineteenth century, and then appeared under the title *Rätsel der Philosophie*.⁸

The external occasion for the production of this book is to be considered wholly secondary. It grew out of the fact that Cronbach, the publisher of the Magazine, planned a collection of writings which were to deal with the various realms of knowledge and life in their evolution during the nineteenth century. He wished to include in this collection an exposition of the conceptions of the world and of life, and this he entrusted to me.

I had for a long time held all the substance of this book in my mind. My consideration of the world-conceptions had a personal point of departure in that of Goethe. The opposition which I had to set up between Goethe's way of thinking and that of Kant, the new philosophical beginning at the turning-point between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Fichte, Schelling, Hegel – all this was to me the beginning of an epoch in the evolution of world-conceptions. The brilliant books of Richard Wahle, which show the dissolution of all endeavour after a world-conception at the end of the nineteenth century, closed this epoch. Thus the attempt of the nineteenth century after a world-conception rounded itself into a whole which was vitally alive in my view, and I gladly seized the opportunity to set this forth.

When I look back to this book the course of my life seems to me symptomatically expressed in it. I did not concern myself, as many suppose, with anticipating contradictions. If this were the case, I should gladly admit it. Only it was not the reality in my spiritual course. I concerned myself in anticipation to find new spheres for what was alive in my mind. And an especially stimulating discovery in the spiritual sphere occurred soon after the composition of the *Conceptions of the World and of Life*.

Besides, I never by any means penetrated into the spiritual sphere in a mystical, emotional way, but desired always to go by way of crystal-clear concepts. Experiencing of concepts, of ideas, led me out of the ideal into the spiritual-real.

The real evolution of the organic from primeval times to the present stood out before my imagination for the first time after the composition of *Conceptions of the World and of Life*.

During the writing of this book I had before my eyes only the natural-scientific view which had been derived from the Darwinian mode of thought. But this I considered only as a succession of sensible facts present in nature. Within this succession of facts there were active for me spiritual impulses, as these hovered before Goethe in his idea of metamorphosis.

Thus the natural-scientific evolutionary succession, as represented by Haeckel, never constituted for me something wherein mechanical or merely organic laws controlled, but as something wherein the spirit led the living being from the simple through the complex up to man. I saw in Darwinism a mode of thinking which is on the way to that of Goethe, but which remains behind this.

All this was still thought by me in ideal content ; only later did I work through to imaginative perception. This perception first brought me the knowledge that in reality quite other beings than the most simple organisms were present in primeval times. That man as a spiritual being is older than all other living beings, and that in order to assume his present physical form he had to cease to be a member of a world-being which comprised him and the other organisms. These latter are rejected elements in human evolution; not something out of which man has come, but something which he has left behind, from which he severed himself, in order to take on his physical form as the image of one that was spiritual. Man is a microcosmic being who bore within him all the rest of the terrestrial world and who has become a microcosm by separating from all the rest – this for me was a knowledge to which I first attained in the earliest years of the new century.

And so this knowledge could not be in any way an active impulse in *Conceptions of the World and of Life*. Indeed, I so conceived the second volume of this book that a point of departure for a deepening knowledge of the world mystery might be found in a spiritualized form of Darwinism and Haeckelism viewed in the light of Goethe's world-conception.

When I prepared later the second edition of the book, there was already present in my mind a knowledge of the true evolution. All through I held fast to the point of view I had assumed in the first edition as being that which is derived from thinking without spiritual perception, yet I found it necessary to make slight changes in the form of expression. These were necessary, first because the book by undertaking a general survey of the totality of philosophy had become an entirely different composition, and secondly because this second edition appeared after my discussions of the true evolution were already before the world.

In all this the form taken by my *Riddles of Philosophy* had not only a subjective justification, as the point of view firmly held from the time of a certain phase in my mental evolution, but

also a justification entirely objective. This consists in the fact that a thought, when spiritually experienced as thought, can conceive the evolution of living beings only as this is set forth in my book; and that the further step must be made by means of spiritual perception.

Thus my book represents quite objectively the pre-anthroposophic point of view into which one must submerge oneself, and which one must experience in this submersion, in order to rise to the higher point of view. This point of view, as a stage in the way of knowledge, meets those learners who seek the spiritual world, not in a mystical blurred form, but in a form intellectually clear. In setting forth that which results from this point of view there is also present something which the learner uses as a preliminary stage leading to the higher.

Then for the first time I saw in Haeckel the person who placed himself courageously at the thinker's point of view in natural science, while all other researchers excluded thought and admitted only the results of sense-observation. The fact that Haeckel placed value upon creative thought in laying the foundation for reality drew me again and again to him. And so I dedicated my book to him, in spite of the fact that its content – even in that form – was not conceived in his sense. But Haeckel was not in the least a philosophical nature. His relation to philosophy was wholly that of a layman. For this very reason I considered the attack of the philosophers that was just then raging around Haeckel as quite undeserved. In opposition to them, I dedicated my book to Haeckel, as I had already written in opposition to them my essay *Haeckel und seine Gegner*.⁹ Haeckel, in all simplicity as regards philosophy, had employed thought as the means for setting forth biological reality; a philosophical attack was directed against him which rested upon an intellectual sphere quite foreign to him. I believe he never knew what the philosophers wished from him. This was my impression from a conversation I had with him in Leipzig after the appearance of his *Riddle of the Universe*, on the occasion of a presentation of Borngräber's play *Giordano Bruno*. He then said: "People say I deny the spirit. I wish they could see how materials shape themselves through their forces; then they would perceive 'spirit' in everything that happens in a retort. Everywhere there is spirit." Haeckel, in fact, knew nothing whatever of the real Spirit. The very forces of nature were for him the "spirit," and he could rest content with this.

One must not critically attack such blindness to the spirit with philosophically dead concepts, but must see how far the age is removed from the experience of the spirit, and must seek, on the foundation which the age affords – the natural biological explanation – to strike the spiritual sparks.

Such was then my opinion. On that basis I wrote my *Conceptions of the World and of Life in the Nineteenth Century*.

1. *Goethe's Secret Revelation*.
2. *Mysticism at the Beginning of the Modern Spiritual Life*.
3. "An anthroposophy."
4. *From Buddha to Christ*.
5. This was the lecture which was later published, together with my discussions of Goethe's fairy-tale, by the Philosophische-Anthroposophische Verlag.
6. *New Year Reflections of a Sceptic*.
7. *History of Idealism*.
8. *Riddles of Philosophy*.
9. *Haeckel and His Opponents*.

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