

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Animal Soul

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Today we are to deal with the question of the ensoulment of creatures other than man, especially the question whether animals have any kind of soul. Such things appear superfluous to one who hurries by them without attention, and yet noted men of the past have already occupied themselves with them. Cartesius (Descartes), who at the beginning of the 17th Century was a keen renewer of the philosophy which decayed in the Middle Ages, put the question. But he regarded animals as machines — beings of which one could not really speak of a real ensoulment — reflex machines.

Whoever thoughtfully regards animal life can only share this view with difficulty. We need merely to point out that many animals in our environment perform actions, and enter into relationships even among themselves, which are difficult to imagine without a soul. One example is the faithfulness of the dog. We can only with difficulty give ourselves to the thought that nothing lives in its inner being analogous to what lives in man. If we consider certain performances, can we disregard a higher, spiritual activity? Let us consider, for example, a beaver's dam. This so artistically constructed performance would denote for a man a great spiritual effort. A deep wisdom lies, for instance, in the way certain beams are adapted most exactly in the correct angle, to the fall of the water, and the prevailing conditions.

Consider the ants. In each ant heap, you meet something like a wise state order of human beings — indeed transcending that of modern man. The ants are divided into three groups: workers, males, and females. It is demonstrable that the workers are very clever, the females more stupid, and the males very stupid. Everything in the structure is elaborately organized — the way they procure everything necessary for the building and for the rearing of the young, the way they lead their foraging expeditions, etc. If all this within a human state needs a soul, then we cannot deny an ensouling to these creatures. People always satisfy themselves with "instinct," but they never attempt to think about anything underlying this "instinct."

We must now also consider the other side, and not overlook the radical distinction between what man performs with his soul, and the animal with its soul. As an example, we will start from a definite fact. Travelers have often noticed that if they kindled a fire because of the cold, after they left it the apes would come and warm themselves at it. They never observed, however, that an ape had fetched some wood, to keep the fire going. It cannot arrive at this combination, and that is eminently important. It can never, from its own spiritual powers, do anything new, such as stir up the fire, etc.

If we want to make clear to ourselves the animal soul, we must start with this difference from the human soul. A further difference between the animal and human soul is that you can write a biography of each human soul, but not of the animal. That is very important. If you ask yourselves about your interests in different beings, you will find that you bring the same interest to an individual

man as in the case of the animals, to a whole group of similar ones. Think of a lion. You feel the same towards the lion-grandfather, father, son, grandson, etc., but this idea would appear to you nonsensical, if applied to human beings.

It says nothing when a dog owner perhaps maintains that he could write a biography of his dog. You could also write a biography of a pen, or the differences in the life of a pin and a needle. That is only an overdrawn distinction. Just as strongly as one whole animal species differs from another, does the single individual person differ from another.

One common soul lives in the entire animal group. As your ten fingers are members of your hands, so are all wolves members of the wolf group soul.

Now we must enter more exactly into the nature of the human soul, which formerly was not as individualized as it is today. At one point of human evolution, man stood far closer to the group soul. Tacitus, one hundred years after Christ, gives us a picture of the different tribal groups. All members of a group then felt themselves belonging together, naturally with gradations, for everything in human evolution is in stages. All members of a group then looked alike. The markedly individual physiognomies are the sign of this freeing of the individual souls from the group soul. You still find today, among savages, more or less the same features. We must hold fast to this fact, that the physiognomy coming to expression is the proof that the individuality works formatively on the body. This will be more and more marked among the further evolved human races. A time will come when the racial character entirely recedes. If a soul incarnates, now in this, now in that nationality, then the national distinctions vanish, and each one will always only remember himself the more his individuality has worked itself out. Formerly, when marriage only took place within the tribe, the members held together like the fingers of the hand, one revenging the wrong done to another, as if it had happened to himself, etc. This cohesion disappeared more and more; the larger, and more general, the aggregation of human beings, all the more individual became the soul and character. A medley does not arise, but the more the distinctions fall away, the more does individuality arise.

Now, in what way are the human group souls distinguished from the animal? For this we must go back far into the story of their origin.

There was a time in which man did not yet live, as now, in his various bodily sheaths and spiritual germ of his being. I mean the Lemurian Age. At that time the highest beings were a kind of human-animal, with physical, etheric, astral bodies, and the tendency to the ego, but not yet the ego itself, beings that were adapted to take up the divine germ. The soul which now lives in their inner being, had not yet left the bosom of the Godhead. It still lived in a soul-spiritual stratum. Think of a vessel of water with 1000 drops, which pass over without separation into each other, thus forming a unity. Take 1000 tiny sponges, each one of which can absorb one drop, and immerse them. Then each will be filled with one drop. You must think similarly that the human sheaths absorb the divine germ; thereby they first become individual and independent.

Now imagine that in the beginning the soul did not take up its dwelling in each single one, but that one soul distributed itself as group soul among many. What today dwells in one, then inhabited a whole tribe. Here you must grasp a new concept. Such a group soul does not die. The beautiful, significant side of death is a specific privilege of the individual human soul. If one part of the group soul dies, then it immediately replaces it, like the tentacle you cut from a polypus. Thus the group soul, which does not descend to the physical plane, feels death as the loss of one member, and birth as the growing of a similar one. It has not the privilege of death. Only when a sense being says "It is I," death begins to enter individual life. Man struggles for and attains his higher life through death. Unless death were overcome, he could not attain through it to higher life.

The soul of the animal is to be found on the astral plane, and is connected with each single member of its group by a thread. In order to understand how animal group souls arise, you must be clear what makes man the physical being that he is. When the divine germs descended, they found the bearers very different. Many were especially developed for conflict; others were similarly formed but more developed for work, for patience, etc., so that the various bodies differed greatly in development even in external form. What today exist as lower animals, as insects, etc., had already branched off during a former incarnation of the earth, and originated by themselves. We are now concerned only with animals from the fishes upwards. When that descent occurred into the waiting bodies, which outwardly (not inwardly) stood approximately at the stage of the fish body, there were no mammals yet existing. The human being who lived then had to move forward half swimming, half floating, and for this purpose had fin-like organs. That which took place in his body on earth, took place through the indwelling human soul. Only in the course of a long evolution was this body transformed to the present god-like body.

Many things remained stationary on this long path. Since, however, the earth was meantime transformed, this standing still caused a decline in the development of the bodies. Take two brothers — the one is transformed through the different ages of life, the other remains stationary at the childhood stage. At the age of 60, however, he no longer looks like a child. Thus the present fishes have come down and look different from how they looked formerly.

Humanity developed further, and fashioned everything to the mammalian body. Everywhere, again, are those who remain stationary — decadent human beings. If you really grasp aright, you will understand that all animals have aged at the youth stage, have aged too early, have adopted fixed forms which they should have gone beyond. They have, as it were, crystallized in their whole evolution. The upward development, indeed, now brought man into a peculiar position, with reference to certain characteristics. He lost security. Monkeys in captivity soon end through tuberculosis and other illnesses. Animals cannot stand the human way of life. Even as regards nourishment, they have a certain security. If a cow goes over a meadow, she knows exactly what plants are good for her. Man has that no more. He needs insecurity in order to come to freedom of choice. The present insecurity is necessary to reach security at a higher stage. Man adapts himself to higher stages. Thus his becoming insecure is the guarantee that he becomes independent. To have remained secure denotes something that has not advanced to the point where the ego can work in the individual being. We should wonder as little about animal wisdom as about the wisdom of our own hand. The single beaver is merely the handyman of the group soul on the astral plane.

The ant stands at quite a different stage from the beaver, and much further from us, because it already separated off at a much earlier planetary condition of the earth. In its one-sided development it has advanced much further than man. Man thinks, feels, wills, in fixed connection. If I see something which pleases me I grasp at it; the idea evokes the will. Without this interaction man would be very insecure. With the Chela, will, idea, and feeling are torn asunder, and must be quite separate. For general humanity that will first be attained at the Jupiter stage of the earth. But before he experiences this, the Guardian of the Threshold meets him, and gives him clarity about the whole of his previous life.

This falling apart into threefoldness has been gone through prematurely by certain animal group souls. As a matter of fact, individual parts in the brain of the Chela are differentiated like the ants in the ant hill. The ant has undertaken that prematurely and now remains like an unripe, clever child. The beaver group soul will have to make up for what it has missed; the ant soul has lost it once and for all, and goes quite other paths.

The animal souls are human souls that have become one-sided. Oken says: "The tongue is an ink fish." Naturally, that is not to be taken literally. The being, however, in which the characteristics of the tongue have become too prominent, remains stationary at that point. Paracelsus uttered the profound words: If we survey nature we simply see separate letters and the word they form is the human being. Imagine all the different qualities which you find together in man, allocated to different bodies, then you need a group soul. Animals are human beings which have remained stationary in the one-sided development of their characteristics.

Man became a discoverer through the loss of security. The first element which he learned to put to his service was fire. Therewith he reached the first stage of civilization which made him a productive being. He is an encyclopedia of the different animal souls.

Now you must still be clear on one point. If you go to the lower animals, you will find that they cannot directly express pain and pleasure through sound. The insects, indeed, produce noises, but they are body noises. Occult science here makes a quite decisive distinction between the sounding animals and the non-sounding ones. But, first, in man, does the inner sound become word, speech. Even the highest animals have only one-sidedly developed sounds. In a later epoch the animal group souls, not the single animals, will become human beings but quite differently constituted from the man today. Even before Theosophy, Goethe felt this and expressed it wonderfully in his "Metamorphosis of Animals"; that they (animals) are like a man laid asunder, that the entire animal kingdom looks out from out of the human form.

Thus man says to all animal beings (speaking of himself), "All this, comprised in one, art thou!"

Question:

Will further cleavages come in human evolution?

Answer:

Yes, and in fact that is what is called in Theosophy "going through the Crisis." We now stand in the Fifth Root Race. The Sixth Race will see quite another race, noble and beautiful, in contrast to the thrown off, decadence which will be a race of men, horribly ugly, animal-like, sensual, vicious, far more horror-provoking than our present humanity, because these will go on developing downwards. It is shown quite clearly in the Apocalypse how the division will occur in the so-called Last Judgment. He who is quite selfless can even now become ripe for the Sixth Race. He may still indeed continue to incarnate, but only in order to help the others. Many may perhaps find that the Judgment sounds harsh, but they have, as we know, the choice. Understand me aright, not for reincarnation, but for the Sixth Race.

Question:

Why do old people become mentally weak, even if the soul cannot change?

Answer:

The soul, indeed, does not change. It never descends from the stage once reached. But its instrument has become weak, like a great pianist who can no longer play as he played formerly, if he has a bad instrument. You will say the soul no longer knows its own stage. Yes, the soul does not see

itself as long as it is in a physical body. There is only to be found the reflection of the soul, the mirror image. Now the mirror becomes clouded or broken. Then it can no longer reflect. The Chela is really the first able to perceive his soul.

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