

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

Conscience and Astonishment

As Indications of Spiritual Vision in Past and Future

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Since we can meet so seldom, it will perhaps be good to touch upon some questions today, through which anthroposophy is directly concerned with life. Anthroposophists will often be asked: what does anthroposophy mean for someone not yet able to see into the spiritual worlds by means of clairvoyant consciousness? For the content of spiritual science is in the main received, derived and imparted through research undertaken through clairvoyant consciousness. It must be emphasised again and again that everything, all the facts and relationships, investigated and imparted from clairvoyant consciousness, must be comprehended by healthy human understanding. Once the things found by clairvoyant consciousness are there, they can be grasped and understood by the logic inherent in every ordinary human being, if only his judgment is unprejudiced enough.

Further, it can be asked: are there not facts experienced in normal human life which give direct support to the assertion by spiritual research, that our physical world and all its phenomena have underlying them a spiritual world? There are indeed many facts in ordinary life of which we could say that man would never comprehend them, although he has to accept their existence, without the recognition of a spiritual world.

We can look to begin with at two facts in ordinary human consciousness which cannot be explained without taking the presence of a spiritual world into consideration. Man knows these indeed as everyday facts, but does not usually regard them in the right light; if he did, there would be no necessity for a materialistic conception of the world. The first of these facts can be regarded in connection with very familiar events in ordinary life.

When a man faces a fact which he cannot explain with the conceptions that he has acquired up to that moment, he is astonished. Someone for example who saw for the first time a car or a train in movement (though such things will soon not be unusual even in the interior of Africa) would be very astonished, because he would think something like this: According to my experience up to now it seems impossible to me that a thing can move along quickly, without having something harnessed to it in front, that can pull it. But I can see that this is moving along quickly without being pulled! That is astonishing. What a man does not yet know causes him astonishment; something he has already seen, no longer astonishes him. Only the things which cannot be connected with previous experiences cause astonishment; let us keep this fact of ordinary life clearly before us. And we can bring it now into connection with another fact, which is very remarkable. Human beings are faced in ordinary life with many things that they have never seen before and which they nevertheless accept without astonishment. There are many such events. What are they?

It would be very astonishing, for example, if someone was to find in the ordinary way that after sitting quietly on his chair he suddenly began to fly up through the chimney into the air. It would indeed be astonishing; but when this happens in a dream he would do it all without being in any way amazed. We experience in dreams much more fantastic things than this, but are not astonished although we cannot relate them to daily events. In waking life we are even astonished if somebody leaps high into the air; but in a dream we can fly without being surprised at all. So we are faced with the fact that while in waking life we are astonished about things we had not experienced previously, in dreams we are not at all amazed.

As a second fact from which we shall begin, we have the question of conscience. When a man does something, and with a sensitive nature even when he thinks, something stirs in him that we call conscience. This conscience is entirely independent of the external significance of events. We could for example have done something very advantageous to us, and yet this act might be condemned by our conscience. Everyone feels that when conscience goes into action something influences the judgment of an act that has nothing to do with its utility. It is like a voice that says within us: Truly, you should have done this, or you should not have done this — this is the fact of conscience, and we know how strong its warning power can be, and how it can pursue us through life. We know that the presence of conscience cannot be denied.

Now we can consider again the life of dreams. Here we may do the strangest things which would cause us the most terrible pangs of conscience if we did them in waking life. Anyone can confirm this from his own experience, that he does things in dreams without his conscience stirring at all; while if he were to do them awake the voice of conscience would speak.

Thus these two facts, amazement and conscience, are excluded in a remarkable way from the life of dreams. Ordinarily man does not notice such things; nevertheless they throw their light upon the depths of our existence.

There is something else that throws light on this, concerned less with conscience than with astonishment. In ancient Greece the saying appears that all philosophy begins with astonishment, with wonder. The feeling expressed in this saying — the feeling of the Greeks themselves — cannot be found in the earlier periods of Greek history; only from a certain point in the development of philosophy is it to be found. Earlier periods did not have this feeling. Why was it that from a certain point onwards in ancient Greece this observation about astonishment was made? We have seen that we are astonished about something that does not fit in with our previous life; but if we have only this kind of astonishment this is nothing specially remarkable. Someone who is astonished about a car or train is simply unaccustomed to see such things. It is much more remarkable that a man can begin to be astonished about accustomed things. For example there is the fact that the sun rises every morning. Those people who are accustomed to this fact with their ordinary consciousness are not surprised about it. But when there is astonishment about the everyday things, which one is accustomed to see, philosophy and knowledge arise. **Those men are the richer in knowledge, who are able to be astonished about things which the ordinary man simply accepts. Only then does a man strive for knowledge. For this reason, it was said in ancient Greece: All philosophy begins in wonder.**

How is it with the conscience? Once more it is interesting, that the word 'conscience' — and therefore the concept too, for only when we have a conception of something does the word appear — is also only to be found in ancient Greece from a certain time onwards. It is impossible to find in earlier Greek literature, about up to the time of Aeschylus, a word that should be translated 'conscience'. But we find one in the later Greek writers, for example Euripides. Thus it can be pointed out precisely that conscience is something, just as is amazement about familiar things, known to man

only from a certain period of ancient Greece onwards. What sprang up at this time as the activity of conscience was something quite different among the earlier Greeks. It did not then happen that the pangs of conscience appeared when a man had done something wrong. Men had then an original, elemental clairvoyance; going back only a short time before the Christian era we would find that all human beings still had this original clairvoyance. If a man then did something wrong, it was not followed by the stirring of conscience, but a demonic form appeared before the old clairvoyance, and a man was tormented by it. Such forms were called Erinys or Furies. Only when men had lost the capacity to see these demonic forms did they become able to feel, when they had done something wrong, the power of conscience as an inner experience.

What do such facts show? What really happens in the everyday fact of astonishment — when for example a tribesman from the depths of Africa, suddenly transported to Europe, sees here the trains and cars for the first time? He is astonished because his astonishment presupposes that something new is entering his life, something that he before saw differently.

If now a developed man has a particular need to find explanations for many things, including everyday things, because he is able to be astonished about everyday things — this too presupposes that he had seen the thing differently before. No-one would be able to reach another explanation of the sunrise, distinct from the mere appearance of its rising, if he had not seen it differently before. But it might be objected that we see the sunrise happening in just the same way from our earliest youth; would it not be nonsensical to be astonished about it? There is no other explanation of this than that if we are amazed about it after all, we must have experienced it earlier in another condition, in a way different from our present experience in this life. For if spiritual science says that man exists between birth and a previous life in another condition, we have in the fact of astonishment about something so everyday as a sunrise an indication of this earlier condition, in which man also perceived the sunrise, but in another way, without bodily organs. He perceived all this then with spiritual eyes and spiritual ears. In the moment where dim feelings lead him to say: 'You face the rising sun, the roaring sea, the growing plant, and are filled with wonder!' — there is in this wonder the knowledge, that all this has once been perceived in another way, not with bodily eyes. He has looked at all these with his spiritual eyes before he entered the physical world. He feels dimly: 'Yet this is all different, from the form in which you saw it earlier.' This was, and could only be, before birth. These facts compel us to recognise that knowledge would not be possible at all if man did not enter this life from a preceding super-sensible existence. Otherwise there would be no explanation for amazement and the knowledge that follows from it. Naturally man does not remember in clear pictures what he experienced in a different way before birth; but though it is not in the form of clear thought, it is present in feeling. It can only be brought as a clear memory through initiation.

Now we can go deeper into the fact that we are not amazed in dreams. First the question must be answered, what a dream really is. Dreams are an ancient heritage from earlier incarnations. Men passed in earlier incarnations through other conditions of consciousness which were similar to clairvoyance. In the further course of evolution man lost the capacity to look clairvoyantly into the world of soul and spirit. It was a shadowy clairvoyance; evolution proceeded gradually, from the earlier, shadowy clairvoyance into our present clear, waking consciousness, which could develop in the physical world — in order, when it is fully developed, to ascend again into the worlds of soul and spirit with the capacities which man has acquired with his 'I' in waking consciousness. But what did men acquire then in the old clairvoyance? Something has remained; the life of dreams. But the life of dreams is distinguished from the old clairvoyance by the fact that it is an experience of present-day man, and present-day man has developed a consciousness which contains the impulse to acquire

knowledge. Dreams, as a remnant of an earlier consciousness, do not contain the impulse to acquire knowledge and for this reason man feels the distinction between waking consciousness and the consciousness of dreams.

Astonishment, which did not exist in the ancient shadowy clairvoyance, cannot enter even today the consciousness of dreams. Astonishment and wonder cannot enter the life of dreams. We have them in the waking consciousness, which is directed to the external world. In his dreams, man is not in the external world; he is placed into the spiritual world, and does not experience physical things. But it was in facing the physical world that man learned amazement. In dreams he accepts everything as it comes, as he did in the old clairvoyance. He could do this then because the spiritual powers came and showed him the good and evil that he had done; man did not then need wonder. Dreams thus show us by their own character that they are inherited from ancient times, when there was not yet any astonishment about everyday things, and not yet a conscience.

Why was it necessary that man, having once been clairvoyant, could not remain so? Why has he descended? Did the gods perhaps drive him down unnecessarily? It is really so, that man could never have acquired what lies in his capacity of wonder and what lies in his conscience, if he had not descended. Man descended in order to acquire knowledge and conscience; he could only do so through being separated for a time from these spiritual worlds. And he has achieved knowledge and conscience here, in order to ascend once more with them.

Spiritual science shows us that man spends each time a period between death and a new birth in a purely spiritual world. We experience to begin with after death the time of Kamaloca, the condition in the soul world where desires are purified, where man is only half in the spiritual world, so to speak, because he still looks back upon his impulses and attachments and is thus still drawn by what bound him to the physical world. Only when this Kamaloca period has been wiped out does he experience purely spiritual life in its fulness, in the realm of spirit.

When a man enters this purely spiritual world, what is his experience? How is it experienced by every human being? Consideration even by the quite ordinary understanding leads to the conclusion that our environment between death and a new birth must appear entirely different from what we have in physical life. Here we see colours because we have eyes; here we hear sounds because we have ears. But when in spiritual existence after death we have no eyes and no ears, we cannot perceive these colours, and sounds. Even here we see and hear badly or not at all, if we have not got good eyes and ears. It is self-evident that we have to conceive the spiritual world as entirely different from the world in which we here live between birth and death. We can form a picture of the way in which this world must alter when we pass through the gate of death with the help of a comparison. A man sees a lamb and a wolf. By means of the organs of perception available to him in physical life man perceives the lamb and the wolf; he sees them as material lamb, as material wolf. Other lambs and wolves too he recognises, and calls them lamb and wolf. He has a conceptual picture of a lamb, and another of a wolf. It could now be said, and is in fact said: the conceptual picture of the animal is not visible, it lives within the animal; one does not really see materially the essential being of lamb and wolf. One forms mental pictures of the essential being of the animal, but this essential being is in itself invisible.

There are theorists who hold that the concepts of wolf and lamb which we form for ourselves live only within us, and that they have nothing to do with the wolf and the lamb themselves. A man who holds this view should be asked to feed a wolf with lambs until all material parts of the wolf body have been renewed, according to scientific research — then the wolf would be built entirely of matter from lambs. And then this man should see whether the wolf has turned into a lamb! But if the result

is nevertheless that the wolf has not become a lamb, it has been proved that 'wolf', as a fact, is something distinct from the material wolf and that the wolf's objective existence is something more than a material thing.

This invisible reality, which in ordinary life one only forms as a concept, one actually sees after death. One does not see there the lamb's white colour, or hear the sounds which it makes but one beholds the invisible power which works in the lamb. For the one who lives in the spiritual world this is just as real, this is actually there. Where a lamb is standing, there stands too a spiritual reality, which becomes visible for man after death. And it is the same with all phenomena of the physical environment. One sees the sun differently, the moon differently, everything differently; and one brings something of this with one, while entering through birth into a new existence. And if through this there arises the feeling that one has once seen something quite differently, then there descends with one's astonishment and wonder the power of knowledge.

It is something different, if one observes a human action. Then the element of conscience is added. If we wish to know what this is we must turn our attention to a fact of life which can be confirmed without the development of clairvoyance. The moment of falling asleep must be carefully observed. One can learn to do this without any clairvoyance; this experience is open to anyone. Just before one falls asleep, things first lose their sharp outlines, colours grow faint, sounds not only grow weaker, but it is as if they go away from us into the distance; they reach us only from far away, they grow weaker just as if they were going into the distance. The way in which the whole visible world grows less distinct is a transformation like the oncoming of mist. And the limbs grow heavier. One feels in them something which one has not felt before in waking life; it is as if they acquired their own weight, their own heaviness. In waking life if one were to consider it one should really feel that a leg, when one is walking, or a hand, which one raises, have for us no weight. We raise our hand, carrying a hundredweight — why is the hundredweight heavy? We raise our hand and it carries itself — why do we feel no weight? The hand belongs to me, and so its heaviness is not felt; the hundredweight is outside me, and since it does not belong to me, it is heavy. Let us imagine a being from Mars descending to the earth, knowing nothing about earthly things; and the first thing he sees is a man holding a weight in each hand. To begin with he would have to suppose that both these weights belong to the man as if they were part of his hands, part of his whole being. If he then later had to accept the idea that the man feels a difference between the hundredweight and his hand, he would find it astonishing. We really only feel something as a weight if it is outside us. So that if man feels his limbs beginning to become heavy as he falls asleep, this is a sign that man goes out of his body, out of his physical being.

Much now depends upon a delicate observation, which can be made at the moment when the limbs grow heavy. A remarkable feeling appears. It tells us: 'You have done this — you have left this undone!' Like a living conscience the deeds of the previous day stand out. And if something is there that we cannot approve of we toss on our bed and cannot fall asleep. If we can be content with our action there comes a happy moment as we fall asleep, when a man says to himself: 'Could it always be so!' Then there comes a jolt — that is when man leaves his physical and ethereal body, and then a man is in the spiritual world.

Let us observe the moment of this phenomenon, which is like a living conscience, more exactly. A man has not really any power to do something reasonable, and tosses about on his bed. This is an unhealthy condition which prevents him from getting to sleep. It happens at the moment when we are about to leave the physical plane through falling asleep, in order to ascend into another world; but this is not willing to accept what we call our 'bad conscience'. A man cannot fall asleep because

he is cast back by the world into which he should enter in sleep. Thus if we say that we will listen to our conscience about some action, this means that we have a presentiment of what the human being will need to be in future in order to enter the spiritual world.

Thus we have in astonishment an expression of what we have seen at an earlier time, and conscience is an expression of a future vision in the spiritual world. Conscience reveals whether we shall be horrified or happy, when we are able to behold our actions in the realm of spirit. Conscience is a presentiment that reveals prophetically how we shall experience our deeds after death.

Astonishment and the impulse towards knowledge on the one hand, and the conscience on the other — these are living signs of the spiritual world. These phenomena cannot be explained without bringing in the spiritual worlds. A man will be more inclined to become an anthroposophist if he feels reverence and wonder before the facts of the world. The most developed souls are those which are able to feel wonder more and more. The less one can feel wonder, the less advanced is the soul. Human beings bring to the everyday things of life far less wonder than they bring for example to the starry sky in its majesty. But the real higher development of the soul only begins when one can feel as much wonder about the smallest flower and petal, about the most inconspicuous beetle or worm, as about the greatest cosmic events. These things are very remarkable; a man will generally be moved very easily to ask for the explanation of something which strikes him as sensational. People who live near a volcano for example will ask for the explanation of volcanic eruptions, because people in such regions have to be alert about such things and give them more attention than everyday affairs. Even people who live far away from volcanoes ask for an explanation of them, because these events are startling and sensational for them too. But when a man enters life with such a soul, that he is astonished about everything, because he feels something of the spiritual through all his surroundings, then he is not very much more astonished about a volcano than about the little bubbles and craters which he notices in a cup of milk or coffee on his breakfast table. He is just as interested in small things as in great things.

To be able to bring wonder everywhere — that is a memory of the vision before birth. To bring conscience everywhere into our deeds is to have a living presentiment that every deed which we fulfil will appear to us in the future in another form. Human beings who feel this are more predestined than others to find their way to spiritual science.

We live in a time in which certain things are being revealed which can only be explained through spiritual science. Some things defy every other explanation. People behave very differently towards such things. We have certainly in our time many human characters to observe, and yet within the great variety of shades of character we encounter two main qualities.

We can describe one group as meditative natures, inclined towards contemplation, able everywhere to feel astonishment, feeling everywhere their conscience stirred. Many sorrows, many heavy melancholic moods can pile up in the soul if the longing for explanations remains unsatisfied. A delicate conscience can make life very difficult. Another kind of human being is present today. They have no wish for such an explanation of the world. All the things that are brought forward as explanations derived from spiritual research appear to them terribly dull, and they prefer to live actively and unheedingly, rather than asking for explanations. If you even begin to speak about explanations, they yawn at once. And certainly with people of this kind, conscience is less active than with the others. What is the source of such polarities in character? Spiritual science is ready to examine the reasons for the one quality of character, remarkable for its tendency towards meditation, its thirst for knowledge — while the other is prepared to enjoy life simply without seeking any explanation.

If the compass of the human soul is examined by means of spiritual research — one can only indicate these things, many hours would be needed to give a more thorough description — it can be found that many of those whose lives have a meditative quality, who need to seek explanations for what is around them, can be followed back to previous lives in which they had an immediate knowledge in their souls about the fact of reincarnation. Even today there are many human beings on earth who know it, for whom repeated earthly lives are an absolute fact. We need only think of those in Asia. Thus those men who in the present time lead a meditative life, are in the present connected with a previous incarnation in which they knew something about repeated earthly lives.

But the other, more insensitive natures come over from previous lives in which nothing was known about reincarnation. They have no impulse to burden themselves much with what conscience says about the deeds of their lives, or to be concerned much with seeking explanations. Very many people with us in the Occident have this quality; it is indeed the mark of occidental civilisation, that men have forgotten, so to speak, their earlier lives on earth. Indeed, they have forgotten them; but civilisation is standing at a turning point where a memory for former lives on earth will revive. Men who are living today are going to meet a future which will have as its characteristic the renewal of connection with the spiritual world.

This is still the case only with very few human beings; but certainly in the course of the twentieth century it will become widespread. It will take this form; let us assume that a man has done something, and is troubled afterwards by a bad conscience. It is like this at the present time. But later, when the connection with the spiritual world has been restored, a man will feel impelled, after he has done this or that, to draw back from his action as if with blindfolded eyes. And then something like a dream picture, but one that is entirely living for him will arise; a future event, which will happen because of his deed. And men experiencing such a picture will say something like this to themselves: 'Yes, it is I who am experiencing this, but what I am seeing is no part of my past!'

For all those who have heard nothing of spiritual science this will be a terrible thing. But those who have prepared for what all will experience will say to themselves: 'This is indeed no part of my past, but I will experience it in the future as the karmic result of what I have just done.'

Today we are in the anteroom of that time, when the karmic compensation will appear to men in a prophetic dream-picture. And when you think of this experience in the course of time developing further and further, you can conceive the man of the future who will behold the karmic judgment upon his deeds.

How does something like this happen — that human beings become capable of seeing this karmic compensation? This is connected with the fact that human beings once had no conscience but were tormented after evil deeds by the Furies. This was an ancient clairvoyance which has passed away. Then came the middle period when they no longer saw the Furies, but what was brought about by the Furies previously now arose inwardly as conscience. A time is now gradually approaching in which we shall again see something — and this is the karmic compensation. That man has now developed conscience begins to enable him to behold the spiritual world consciously.

Just as some human beings in the present have become meditative natures because they acquired powers in earlier incarnations which reveal themselves — like a memory of these lives — in the power of wonder, — in the same way the men of today will bring over powers into their next incarnation if they now acquire knowledge of the spiritual worlds. But it will go badly in the future world for those who today reject any explanation of the law of reincarnation. This will be a terrible fact for these souls. We are still living in a time in which men can manage their lives without any explanation of them which relates them to the spiritual worlds. But this period, in which this has been permitted by

the cosmic powers, is coming to an end. Those men who have no connection with the spiritual world will awaken in the next life in such a way that the world into which they are born once more is incomprehensible to them. And when they leave once more the physical existence which has been incomprehensible to them, they will have no understanding either after death for the spiritual world into which they are growing. Of course they enter the spiritual world; but they will not grasp it. They will find themselves in an environment which they do not comprehend, which appears not to belong to them, and torments them as a bad conscience does. Returning once more into a new incarnation, it is just as bad; they will have all kinds of impulses and passions and will live in these, because they are not able to develop any wonder, as in illusions and hallucinations. The materialists of the present time are those who are going towards a future in which they will be terribly tormented by hallucinations and illusions; for what a man thinks in the present life, he experiences then as illusion and hallucination.

This can be conceived as an absolute reality. We can picture for example two men walking in a street together at the present time. One is a materialist, the other a non-materialist. The latter says something about the spiritual world; and the other says, or thinks: 'What nonsense! That is all illusion!' Indeed, for him, this is illusion, but for the other, who made the remark about the spiritual world, it is no illusion. The consequences for the materialist will begin to appear already after death, and then very definitely in the next earthly life. He will then feel the spiritual worlds as something that torments him like a living rebuke. In the period of Kamaloca between death and a new birth he will not feel the distinction between Kamaloca and the spiritual realm. And when he is born again, and the spiritual world approaches him in the way that has been described, then it appears to him as something unreal, as an illusion, as a hallucination.

Spiritual science is not something intended simply to satisfy our inquisitiveness. We are not sitting here simply because we are more inquisitive than other people about the spiritual world, but because we have some feeling for the fact that human beings in the future will not be able to live without spiritual science. All efforts which do not take this fact into account will become decadent. But life is arranged in such a way that those who resist spiritual knowledge at the present time will have the opportunity to approach it in later incarnations. But there must be outposts. Human beings who through their karma have a longing for spiritual knowledge already in the present can become outposts through this. You have this opportunity because there must be outposts, and you can be among them. Other human beings who cannot yet come to spiritual knowledge according to their karma, even though they do not reject it, will find later the longing for spiritual knowledge arising within them, more from the general karma of mankind.

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