

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Elemental Spirits of Birth and Death

GA 177

Lecture 4 from the Lecture Cycle titled [Fall of the Spirits of Darkness](#)

"Humanity must accept that destructive spiritual beings — who previously held a rightful place — have entered into everyday life, bringing disruption and division."

6 October 1917, Dornach

As I said in my earlier lectures, the time has come for humanity to know certain truths concerning the spiritual background to the physical world. If people are not going to be prepared to accept these truths out of their own good will, they will be forced to learn them from the terrible events that will happen as time goes on.

The question may arise as to why now is the time for humanity to learn these truths, some of which are liable to shock people. They have of course existed for a long time, but humanity in general was protected and did not have to accept them. Many of these truths were carefully guarded in the ancient Mysteries, as you know, so that people in the surrounding areas were not exposed to the disturbing effect of these truths. Now, we have often said that it is fear of the great truths that prevents people from accepting them. Those who have this fear today — and there are indeed many of them — could of course say: Why cannot humanity go on in a kind of sleep state where these truths are concerned? As it is, people have grown tense and fearful in recent times, and why should they be exposed to those great and fearsome truths?

Let us go into this question, first of all considering why from now on humanity has to be treated differently, as it were, by the world of the spirit than has been the case so far in this post-Atlantean age.

In my earlier lectures I spoke of the non-physical world which borders directly on our physical world. This is the world humanity will need to know about in the time which lies just ahead. You know, as soon as you enter into a non-physical world, everything is different from the way it is here. You get to know certain entities, and above all things of a special nature which are hidden from the sight of weak humanity — 'sight' here includes anything conveyed in insights and ideas.

Why has the human eye been deflected from this other world in the post-Atlantean age, right up to the present moment? It is because there are entities in this next-door world — other, higher worlds lie beyond it — which could only be made known to human beings under certain conditions. They have a specific function in the whole universe and especially also in human evolution. There are many different kinds of these entities in the other region.

Today I want to talk to you about one class of such entities, the class whose function in the great scheme of things is connected with human birth and death. You should never believe that human birth and death are actually as they present themselves to the senses. Spiritual entities are involved when a human being enters this physical world from the non-physical, and then leaves it again for the non-physical world. To give them a name, let us call them the 'elemental spirits of birth and death' for the moment. It is true that the individuals who until now were initiated in the Mysteries considered it to be their strict duty not to speak to people in general of these elemental spirits of birth and death. If one were to speak of them, and of the whole way in which these elemental spirits live, one would be speaking of something that would seem like red-hot coals to people, for this is how humanity has developed in the post-Atlantean age. We might also use another analogy. If people get to know more about the essential nature of these elemental spirits of birth and death and do so in full consciousness, they come to know powers which are inimical to life in the physical world.

Anyone with more or less normal feelings, even today, will be shaken to learn the truth that in order to bring about birth and death in the physical world, the divine spirits who guide world destinies have to use elemental spirits who actually are the enemies of everything human beings seek and desire for their welfare and well-being here in the physical world. If everything was done just to suit the wishes of human beings — to be comfortable in this physical world, be fit and well as we go to sleep and wake up again and go about our work — if all spirits were of a kind to see to it that we have such a comfortable life, birth and death could not be. To bring about birth and death the gods need entities whose minds and whole way of looking at the world give them the urge to destroy and lay waste to everything which provides for the welfare of human beings here in the physical world.

We have to get used to the idea that the world is not made as people would really like it to be and that there exists the element which in the Egyptian Mysteries was known as 'iron necessity'. As part of this iron necessity, entities hostile to the physical world are used by the gods to bring about birth and death for human beings.

So we are looking at a world that is immediately next to our own, a world that day by day, hour by hour, has to do with our own world, for the processes of birth and death happen every day and every hour here on earth. The moment human beings cross the threshold to the other world they enter into a sphere where entities live and are active whose whole conduct, views and desires are destructive for ordinary physical human life. If this had been made known to people outside the Mysteries before now, if people had been given an idea of these entities, the following would inevitably have happened. If people who are quite unable to deal with their instincts and drives, with their passions, had known that destructive entities were present around them all the time, they would have used the powers of those destructive entities. They would not have used them the way the gods do in birth and death, however, but within the realm of physical life. If people had felt the desire to be destructive in some sphere or other, they would have had ample opportunity to make these entities serve them, for it is easy to make them serve us. This truth was kept hidden to protect ordinary life from the destructive elemental spirits of birth and death.

The question is, should we not continue to keep them hidden? This is not possible, and for quite specific reasons, one of which is connected with a great, important cosmic law. I could give you a general formula, but it will be better to use the actual form it is taking now and in the immediate future to demonstrate this law to you. As you know, not long ago growing numbers of impulses came into human evolution which did not exist before and which are quite characteristic of our present civilization. Try and go back in your mind to times not very long ago. You will find times when there were no steam locomotives, when people did not yet use electricity as we do now; times perhaps when only thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci ^[1] were able to have the idea, theoretically and on the basis of experiments, that humans could create apparatus which would enable them to fly. All this

has come to realization in a relatively short time. Just consider how much depends on the use of steam, of electricity, of the changes in atmospheric density which has made airships possible, or the knowledge of statics which has led to the aeroplane. Consider everything which has come into human evolution in recent times. Think of the destructive powers of dynamite, etc., and you can easily imagine, seeing how swiftly this has gone, that new and different fabulous things of this kind will be the goal of future human endeavour. I think you can easily see that the ideal for the near future will be to have not more and more Goethes, but more and more Edisons. This really is the ideal of modern humanity.

Modern people do, of course, believe that all this — the telegraph, telephones, the use of steam Power, etc. — happens without the participation of spiritual entities. This is not the case, however. The development of human civilization involves the participation of elemental spirits, even if people do not know about it. Modern materialists imagine that the telephone and telegraph, and the steam engines driven long distances and also used by farmers, have been constructed merely on the basis of what people produce by the sweat of their brow. Everything people do in this respect is under the influence of elemental spirits. They are always involved and helping us in this. People are not taking the initiative on their own in this field — they are guided. In laboratories, workshops, really everywhere where the spirit of invention is active, elemental spirits are providing the inspiration.

The elemental spirits who have given impulses to our civilization from the eighteenth century onwards are of the same kind as those used by the gods to bring about birth and death. This is one of the mysteries which human beings have to discover today. And the law of world history of which I have spoken is that as evolution proceeds, the gods always rule for a time within a particular sphere of elemental spirits and then human beings enter into this same sphere and use the elemental spirits. In earlier times, the elemental spirits of birth and death essentially served the divine spirits who guided the world; since our day — and this has been going on for some time now — the elemental spirits of birth and death are serving technology, industry and human commerce. It is important to let this disturbing truth enter into our souls with all its power and intensity.

Something is happening in this fifth post-Atlantean period of civilization which is similar to something that happened in Atlantean times, during the fourth Atlantean period. I have spoken of this before. Up to the fourth Atlantean period the divine spirits who guide human evolution used certain elemental spirits. They had to use them because not only birth and death had to be brought about at that time, but also something else, which may be said to be closer to the earth. You will remember some of the descriptions I have given of the Atlantean age, when human beings were still flexible in their physical nature and their souls could make their bodies grow large or remain dwarf-like, with their outer appearance depending on their inner nature. Please call this to mind again. [2] Today the service certain elemental spirits give to the divine spirits on occasions of birth and death is clearly apparent in physical terms. In those times, when outer appearance was in accord with inner nature, certain elemental spirits were serving the gods for the whole of human life. When the Atlantean age had reached its fourth period, people again began to rule the elemental spirits, which had previously been used by the gods, to govern the growth and general physiognomy of human beings. Human beings gained control of certain divine powers and made use of them.

The consequence was that from about the middle of the Atlantean age it was possible for individuals who desired to harm their fellow human beings to use all kinds of creative powers on them — keeping them dwarf-sized in growth or making them into giants, or letting the physical organism develop in such a way that the individual concerned would be an intelligent person or a cretin. A terrible power was in human hands in the middle of the Atlantean age. You know, for I have drawn attention to this, that this was not kept secret, though not from any kind of evil intent. According to one of the laws of world history, something which initially was the work of the gods had

to become the work of human beings. This led to serious mischief in the Atlantean age, so that over the last four or three periods of civilization the whole of Atlantean civilization had to be guided towards its own destruction. Our own civilization was saved and brought across from Atlantis, as I have described elsewhere, and you will recall my descriptions of what happened in the Atlantean age.

In the last three, or two, periods of post-Atlantean civilization in the fifth stage of earth evolution, work now done by the gods will again become work to be done by humanity. We are only in the early stages of the technological, industrial and commercial activities which proceed under the influence of the elemental spirits of birth and death. This influence and its effects will be increasingly more radical. Until now, the elemental spirits of birth and death have been guided by the gods and their influence has been limited to the coming into being and passing away of humans at the physical level. But the civilization of our own and future ages has to be such that these spirits can be active in technology, industry, commerce, and so on.

There is also another, quite specific, aspect to this. As I have said, these elemental spirits are the enemies of human welfare and want to destroy it. We have to see things straight and not have any illusions concerning the radical nature of this. Civilization must progress in the fields of technology, industry and commerce. But by its very nature such a civilization cannot serve the well-being of humanity in the physical world; it can only prove destructive to the human weal.

This will be an unpalatable truth for people who never tire of making great speeches on the tremendous advances made in modern civilization, for they see things in abstract terms and know nothing of the rise and fall which is part of human evolution. I have made brief reference to the causes of destruction in Atlantis. The commercial, industrial and technological civilization which is now in its beginnings harbours elements which will lead to the decline and fall of the fifth earth period. And we only see things straight and face reality if we admit that we are here beginning to work on something which must lead to catastrophe.

This is what it means to enter into iron necessity. Looking for an easy way out people might say: Alright, I won't take the tram. It might even go so far — though even members of the Anthroposophical Society are unlikely to take things this far — that people will not go on trains, and so on. This would be complete nonsense, of course. It is not a matter of avoiding things but of getting a clear picture, real insight into the iron necessities of human evolution. Civilization cannot continue in an unbroken upward trend; it has to go through a succession of rising and falling waves.

There is, however, something else which can happen, something people generally do not want to know about today but which is exactly what modern humanity will have to discover. Insight — a clear picture of the necessity which exists — is what will have to come to all human minds. It will necessarily mean that much will have to change in the frame of mind in which we consider the world. Human beings will need to live with inner impulses which they still prefer to ignore today, for these go against the good life they want. There are many such impulses. Let me give you just one example.

People today, especially if they want to be good people, wanting nothing for themselves but only to be selfless and desire the good of others, will of course seek to develop certain virtues. These, too, are iron necessities. Now, of course, there is nothing to be said against a desire for virtue, but the problem is that people are not merely desiring to be virtuous. It is quite a good thing to want to be virtuous, but these people want more. If one looks to the unconscious depths of the human soul one finds that in the present time people are not really much concerned to develop the actual virtues. It is much more important to them to be able to feel themselves to be virtuous, to give themselves up entirely to a state of mind where they can say: 'I am truly selfless, look at all the things I do to

improve myself! I am perfect, I am kind, I am someone who does not believe in authority.' They will then, of course, eagerly follow all kinds of authorities. To feel really good in the consciousness of having one particular virtue or another is endlessly more important to people today than actually having that virtue. They want to feel they have the virtue rather than practise it.

As a result, certain secrets connected with the virtues remain hidden to them. They are secrets which people instinctively feel they do not want to know, especially if they are modern idealists who like to feel good in the way I have described. All kinds of ideals are represented by societies today. Programmes are made, and a society states its principles, which are to achieve one thing or another. The things people want to achieve in this way may indeed be very nice, but to find something nice in an abstract way is not enough. People must learn to think in terms of reality. Let us look at the aspect of reality when it comes to people having virtues. Perfection, benevolence, beautiful virtues, rights — it is nice to have them all in the outer social sphere. However, when people say: 'It is our programme to achieve perfection in some particular way, benevolence in some particular direction, we aim to establish a specific right', they usually consider this to be something absolute which can be brought to realization as such. 'Surely', people will say, 'it must be a good thing to be more and more perfect?' And 'What better ideal can there be but to have a programme that will make us more and more perfect?' But this is not in accord with the law of reality. It is right, and good, to be more and more perfect, or at least aim to be so, but when people are actually seeking to be perfect in a particular direction, this search for perfection will after a time change into what in reality is imperfection. A change occurs through which the desire for perfection becomes a weakness. Benevolence will after a time become prejudicial behaviour. And however good the right may be that you want to bring to realization — it will turn into a wrong in the course of time. The reality is that there are no absolutes in this world. You work towards something that is good, and the way of the world will turn it into something bad. We therefore must seek ever new ways, look for new forms over and over again. This is what really matters.

The swing of the pendulum governs all such human efforts. Nothing is more harmful than belief in absolute ideals, for they are at odds with the true course of world evolution.

A good way of demonstrating things — not to prove, but merely to illustrate — is to use certain ideas. And to some extent, ideas from the physical sciences can be used as symbols to illustrate non-physical ideas. Imagine we have a pendulum suspended here (drawing on the board). Now you see, if you take the pendulum to this point, to one extreme, and then let go, it will go to this point to find its equilibrium. It follows this path. Why does it do so? Because it is subject to gravity, people say. It goes down, but once it has reached the lowest point does not stop there. The downward movement has given it a certain inertia, which it uses to move to the other side. It then goes down again. It means that when the pendulum travels this distance, the downward movement gives it sufficient energy to swing to the other side. This provides an analogy that may be used to give a strong visual image of one thing or another. Thus we may say: A virtue — perfection, benevolence — goes in this direction, but then goes in the opposite direction. Perfection becomes weakness, benevolence uncritical adoration, and right turns into wrong in the course of evolution.



People prefer not to consider such ideas today. Just imagine trying to explain to a solid middle-class citizen who is establishing a society which is to serve certain ideals: You are now setting up an ideal, but in making it part of the process of evolution you will create the opposite effect, and you will do so in a relatively short time. Well, he would think you are not only no idealist, but a real devil. Why should the effort to be perfect not go towards increasing perfection, and why should right not continue to be right for ever and ever? It is extremely difficult for people today to have ideas based on reality instead of ideas that are one-sided abstractions. Yet they will have to learn to have such ideas, for they will not progress without them. They will also have to become used to the idea that progress in civilization will gradually make it necessary for us to use the elemental spirits of birth and death. And in doing so, humanity will have to live with the fact that a destructive element becomes part of human evolution.

Every now and then, people who refuse to familiarize themselves with anthroposophy — which is the only means of finding the right attitude to such things — find the right ideas by themselves, from instinct. What is the significance of all this? The elemental spirits of birth and death are, of course, messengers of Ahriman. The iron necessity of world evolution forces the gods to use Ahriman's messengers to control birth and death. When they ask the elemental spirits to act on their behalf they do not allow the powers of these messengers to enter the physical world. But as civilization goes into its decline, from the fifth post-Atlantean period onwards, this element has to come in again, so that catastrophe may be brought about. Human beings must use these powers themselves. Ahriman's messengers are therefore an iron necessity; they have to bring about the destruction that will lead to the next step forward in civilization. This is a terrible truth, but it is so. And nothing will avail where this truth is concerned but to get to know it and to see it clearly. We shall be discussing this further and you will see how many things there are which call for the right attitude to these truths.

Instinct, I have said, makes some people realize that something is necessary. One such individual is Ricarda Huch, ^[3] who has written a number of excellent books at the present time — though none that somehow comes even close to anthroposophy. Her latest work, on Luther's faith, is remarkable — not so much because of insight, but because of the instinct to be found in this book. If you read the first three chapters of the book you find there a strange cry — I think we may call it such — a cry for humanity to find again what has really been lost since Luther came on the scene. Before his day atavistic clairvoyance still existed. Ricarda Huch says that what humanity needs most of all today is to get to know the devil. She does not consider it so necessary for people to come to know God; it is much more important, she says, to get to know the devil.

Ricarda Huch does not know, of course, why this is necessary, but she has an instinctive feeling that it is so. Hence her remarkable cry for knowledge of the devil in the first chapters of the book. This is highly symptomatic and significant for our time. Her thinking is: People will come to know God again once they know that the devil is all around them. Individuals like this, who still do not want to take up anthroposophy, will always look for a way to apologize for their statements. Ricarda Huch does feel that people must get to know the devil as someone who is very real; but she immediately says, as a kind of apology, that one should not, of course, imagine the devil to be walking around in the street with horns and a tail. Oh, but he does walk around! 'They never know the devil is about, Not even when he has them by the collar.' [4] Modern abstract thinking immediately needs an apology, even if someone knows instinctively what is most urgently needed. But there is a good and real instinct for the present time behind this cry for the devil. People should not simply grow blindly, as if asleep, into what iron necessity demands of them in the immediate future, which is to use the messengers of the devil in our work in laboratories, workshops, banks and everywhere else. They have to use them so that civilization may progress; but they must know the devil, they must know that the keys which are used, say, to unlock the vaults have the devil's power in them. Ricarda Huch knows this instinctively, and people need to know it, for only knowledge will take us into the future in the right way. It is of immense importance that there are people who, out of instinct, point to the need which exists to know the devil and not walk past him fast asleep, for he is getting more and more powerful.

Perhaps there is something else that is characteristic — I mention it only in passing: In Paradise, too, it was a woman who instinctively allowed the functions of the devil to enter into Paradise. I think it is not much to the credit of men in our civilization that they are still calling this kind of thing superstition and refuse to have anything to do with it, once again leaving it to a woman. It may indeed be characteristic that a woman, Ricarda Huch, is calling for the devil, just as once in Paradise it was Eve who let in the devil. This merely as a passing comment.

It is the devil who will and must be the bearer of our future civilization. This is a harsh truth, but it is important. It is intimately bound up with the fact that destructive powers will have to enter into the future progress of civilization. Above all — and I will speak of this tomorrow — destructive powers will have to enter into the whole field of education, and especially the education of children, unless the matter is taken in hand with wisdom. Because of the general trend of civilization, and the customary practices and emotions of people, destructive powers will also enter more and more into the whole social sphere. They will above all bring more and more destruction into the actual relationships between people.

Humanity should seek to bring Christ's words to realization: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' [Matthew 18:20]. Technological and commercial progress will not bring this to realization, but rather: Where two or more want to fight and assault each other in my name, there am I in the midst of them. This will happen more and more in the social life and because of this there is a general difficulty today in presenting truths which will bring people together.






Let us conclude by being clear in our minds, at least for the moment — we shall continue with the subject tomorrow and the day after — about the frame of mind in which people generally receive truths. People do not like to be told truths today because they simply do not believe truth to be something which comes to human beings directly from the world of the Spirit. Modern people believe truth must always be something grown in their own garden. People in their twenties have their own point of view, they do not need to be convinced of a truth, they do not need to have the truth revealed to them, they have their own point of view. And someone who has eagerly fought for the truth, a young fellow of twenty-four, just finished at university where he may have attended lectures

on philosophy — he has his point of view and enters into discussion with another who has just as eagerly fought for his own truth. Each of them believes that the absolute certain truth grows in his own garden, even if the soil has not been prepared. People are not inclined to receive truths; they announce themselves the possessors of truth. This is the characteristic element in the present time.

Ricarda Huch has put it rather nicely. She points out that in the period of Enlightenment in Europe, our present state of mind, or call it what you will, which is absolutely awash with chauvinism, was preceded by Nietzscheanism, which was far more sublime than anything connected with native pride and chauvinism. Many, many people became followers of Nietzsche and it was he who set up the ideal of the 'tawny beast'. People actually had little idea of what this meant. Ricarda Huch says: People who did not even have what it takes to be a decent pet rabbit fancied themselves as 'tawny beasts' of the kind Nietzsche presented. [5] There you have the modern bourgeois point of view. One does not have what it takes to be a decent rabbit, but if someone establishes a high ideal — that is how they like to see themselves! One considers oneself to be this, without doing anything to achieve it. People do not feel they need to develop, for they cannot bear the idea of being something in the future; they want to be something now. This splits them apart into human atoms, each with his own point of view, with no one able to understand anyone else.

There, in this mood where no one can understand anyone else, you see the destructive powers at work in human society. This is driving people apart. It was, of course, the devil who presented people with the temptation to be 'tawny beasts'. They did not actually become such beasts, but even so, the nineteenth-century impulses which destroy social life in the twentieth century have certainly taken root. We will continue with this tomorrow.

Notes

1.  Leonardo da Vinci, 1452–1519.
2.  Examples are the chapter on the evolution of the world and the human being in *Occult Science. An Outline* (trans. by G. and M. Adams; Rudolf Steiner Press, London 1969) and the chapter on our Atlantean forebears in *Cosmic Memory* (translated by K. E. Zimmer; Steinerbooks, New York 1976).
3.  Ricarda Huch (1864–1947), German writer: *Luthers Glaube, Briefe an einen Freund* (Luther's faith, letters to a friend), Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1916. A new edition of the work appeared in 1964.
4.  Quote from Goethe's *Faust*, Part 1, scene in Auerbach's Tavern. Trans. by Philip Wayne; Penguin.
5.  The German term for 'tawny beast' is 'blonde Bestie'. Nietzsche experts are in two minds about the interpretation of the term. It comes from Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887, I, 11): 'das Raubtier, die prachtvolle nach Beute Istern schweifende blonde Bestie' (the predator, that magnificent blonde/tawny beast roaming far and wide lusting for prey). One interpretation is that this refers to the Janissary, a 'killing order' of warriors who in their boyhood had been taken from Christian families by the Turks and, thus removed from the humanizing influence of a family, trained to be utterly ruthless and inhuman. Other experts, and clearly also Ricarda Huch, think the term refers to a lion. (Translator.)



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