

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

Fundamentals of the Science of Initiation

GA 191

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To-day I wish to speak to you of some fundamental pieces of knowledge of the science of initiation, which will then supply to us a kind of foundation for that which we shall consider to-morrow and the day after to-morrow. To-day we shall first speak of something which lies in the consciousness of every human being, but is not grasped clearly enough in the ordinary course of life. When we speak of such things, we always speak of them from the standpoint of our present time, in the sense and meaning which I have often explained to you: namely, that knowledge is not in any way valid for all time and for every place, but that it is only valid for a certain definite time, indeed, only for a definite region of the earth. Thus, certain standpoints of knowledge would be valid, for instance, for the European civilisation, and other standpoints would be valid — let us say — for the knowledge of the East.

Everybody knows that we live, as it were, between two poles of our knowledge. Everyone feels that, on the one hand, we have the knowledge gained through our senses. A plain, unprejudiced person learns to know the world through his senses, and is even able to sum up what he sees and hears, and, in general, what he perceives through his senses. After all, that which science supplies to us, in the form in which science now exists in the Occident, is merely a summary of that which the senses convey to us.

But everyone can feel that there is also another kind of knowledge, and that it is not possible to be in the full sense of the word a real human being living in the ordinary world, unless another kind of knowledge is added to the one which has just been characterized. And this kind of knowledge is connected with our moral life. We do not only speak of ideas pertaining to the knowledge of Nature, and explaining this or that thing in Nature, we also speak of ethical ideas, ethical ideals. We feel that they are the motives of our actions, and that we allow them to guide us when we ourselves wish to be active in the ordinary world. And every man will undoubtedly feel that this knowledge of the senses, with the resulting intellectual knowledge (for, the intellectual knowledge is merely a result, an appendix of the knowledge transmitted by the senses) is a pole of our cognitive life which cannot reach as far as the ethical ideas. The ethical ideas are there, but when we pursue, for instance, natural science, we cannot find these ethical ideas by contemplating the plant-world, the mineral world, or by following any other branch of modern natural sciences. The tragic element of our time consists, for instance, in trying to discover, upon a natural-scientific basis, ideas which are to be applied to the social sphere. If sound common sense were adopted, this would never be possible. The ethical ideas exist as if on another side of life. And our life is indeed under the influence of these two streams: on the one hand, the knowledge of Nature, and on the other hand, the ethical knowledge.

From my *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* you will know that the highest ethical ideas required by us as human beings are given to us when we grasp moral intuitions, and that when we begin to gain possession of these ethical ideas, they are the foundation of our human freedom. On the other

hand, you may perhaps also know that for certain thinkers there has always been a kind of abyss between that which is given, on the one hand, by the knowledge of Nature, and on the other hand, by ethical knowledge. The philosophy of Kant is based upon this abyss, which he is unable to bridge completely. For this reason, Kant has written a Critique of Theoretical Reason, of Pure Reason, as he calls it, where he grapples with natural science, and where he says all that he has to say about natural science, or the knowledge of Nature. On the other hand, he has also written a Critique of Practical Reason, where he speaks of ethical ideas. We might say: The whole human life is born for him out of two roots which are completely severed from one another, which he describes in his two chief critical studies.

Of course, it would be unfortunate for the human being if there were no connecting bridge between these two poles of our soul-life. Those who earnestly pursue, on the one hand, spiritual science, and on the other hand, earnestly consider the tasks of our present time, must eagerly ask themselves: Where is the bridge connecting ethical ideas and the ideas of Nature?

To-day we shall adopt the standpoint which I would like to characterize as a historical standpoint, in order to come to a knowledge of this bridge. You already know from the explanations which have recently been given here, that in past times man's soul-constitution was essentially different from that of a later time. The origin of Christianity really forms a deep incision in the whole evolution of humanity. And only if we understand what has really arisen in the evolution of humanity through the birth of Christianity we shall understand human reason.

That which lies behind the rise of Christianity — not to mention Jewish history — is the whole extent of pagan culture. Jewish culture was, after all, a preparation for Christianity. This whole extent of pagan culture is essentially different from our modern Christian culture. The more we go back into time, the more we shall find that this pagan culture had a uniform character. It was principally based upon human wisdom. I know that it is almost offending for a modern man to hear that, as far as wisdom is concerned, the ancients were far more advanced than modern man; nevertheless it was so. In ancient pagan times a wisdom extended over the earth, which was far nearer to the origin of things than our modern knowledge, particularly our modern natural sciences. This ancient, this primeval knowledge, was very concrete, it was a knowledge intensively connected with the spiritual reality of things. Something entered the human soul through man's knowledge of the reality of things. But the special characteristic of this ancient pagan wisdom was the fact that the human beings obtained it in such a way (you know that they obtained it from the Mysteries of the Initiates) that this wisdom contained both a knowledge of Nature, and an ethical knowledge. This extraordinarily significant truth in the history of human evolution, this truth which I have just explained to you, is ignored to-day only because people cannot go back to the truly characteristic times of the ancient pagan wisdom. A historical knowledge does not reach back so far as to enable us to grasp the times when the human beings who looked up to the stars really received from the stars, on the one hand, a wisdom explaining to them in their own way the course of the stars, but on the other hand, it also told them how they were to behave and act here upon the earth. Metaphorically speaking, (yet it is not entirely metaphorical, but quite objective up to a certain degree), we might say, that the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Chaldean civilisations were, for instance, of such a kind that men could read the laws of Nature in the course of the stars, but in the star's course they could also read the rules governing that which they were to do upon the earth.

The *codices* of the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs contain, for instance, rules concerning that which was to become law. It was so that for centuries ahead that which would later on become law was foretold prophetically. Everything contained in these *codices* was read from the course of the stars. In

those ancient times there was no astronomy such as we have it now, merely containing mathematical laws of the movements of the stars or of the earth, but there was a knowledge of the cosmos which was at the same time moral knowledge, ethics.

The doubtful element of modern astrology, which does not go beyond the stage of dilettantism, is that people no longer feel that its contents can only be a complete whole if the laws discovered in it are at the same time moral laws for the human beings. This is something extraordinarily significant.

In the course of human evolution, the essence of that primeval science was lost. This lies at the foundation of the fact that certain Secret Schools — but the schools of an earnest character have really ceased to exist at the end of the 18th century — and even certain Secret Schools of the Occident, have again and again pointed back to this lost science, to the lost Word. As a rule, those who came later no longer knew what was meant by the expression "Word". Nevertheless, this conceals a certain fact. In Saint-Martin's books we may still find an echo showing that up to the end of the 18th century it was very clearly felt that in ancient times men possessed a spiritual wisdom which they obtained simultaneously with their knowledge of Nature. Their spiritual wisdom also contained their moral and ethical wisdom; this had already disappeared in the eight centuries preceding the rise of Christianity. We may even say: Ancient Greek history is, essentially, the gradual loss of primeval wisdom.

If we study the philosophers before Socrates, namely Heraclitus, Thales, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, the philosophers of the tragic epoch, as Nietzsche called them — I have dealt with them in my book *Riddles of Philosophy*, and have tried to give as good as possible a picture, from an external standpoint — if we study these philosophers (but the external writings tell us very little about them), we shall find again and again that the passages which have remained like oases in a desert, re-echo a great, encompassing wisdom and knowledge which existed in the remote past of human evolution. The words of Heraclitus, of Thales, Anaxagoras and Anaximenes, appear to us as if humanity had, as it were, forgotten its primeval wisdom and only remembered occasionally some fragmentary passages. The few passages of Thales, Anaxagoras, of the seven Greek sages, etc., which have been handed down to us traditionally, appear to us like fragmentary recollections.

In Plato we still encounter a kind of clear consciousness of this primeval wisdom; in Aristotle everything has been transformed into human wisdom.

And among the Stoics and Epicureans this gradually disappears. The ancient primeval knowledge only remains like an old legend. This is how matters stood with the Greeks.

The Romans — and they were by Nature a prosaic, matter-of-fact nation — even denied that this primeval knowledge had any meaning at all, and they transformed everything into abstractions. The course which I have just described to you in regard to the primeval knowledge, was necessary for the evolution of humanity. Man would never have reached freedom in the course of his development, had the primeval wisdom, which came to him indirectly through atavistic clairvoyance, remained in its original intensity and significance. Nevertheless, this primeval knowledge was connected with everything which could reach man from divine heights in the form, I might say, of moral impulses. This had to be rescued. The moral impulse had to be rescued for man.

Among the many things which we have already explained in regard to the Mystery of Golgotha we have also explained that the divine principle which descended to the earth through the man, Jesus of Nazareth, contained the *moral power* which was little by little dispersed and cleft through the waning and gradual dying out of the ancient primeval wisdom. It is indeed so — although this may seem paradoxical to a modern man — that we can say: Once upon a time there was an old primeval

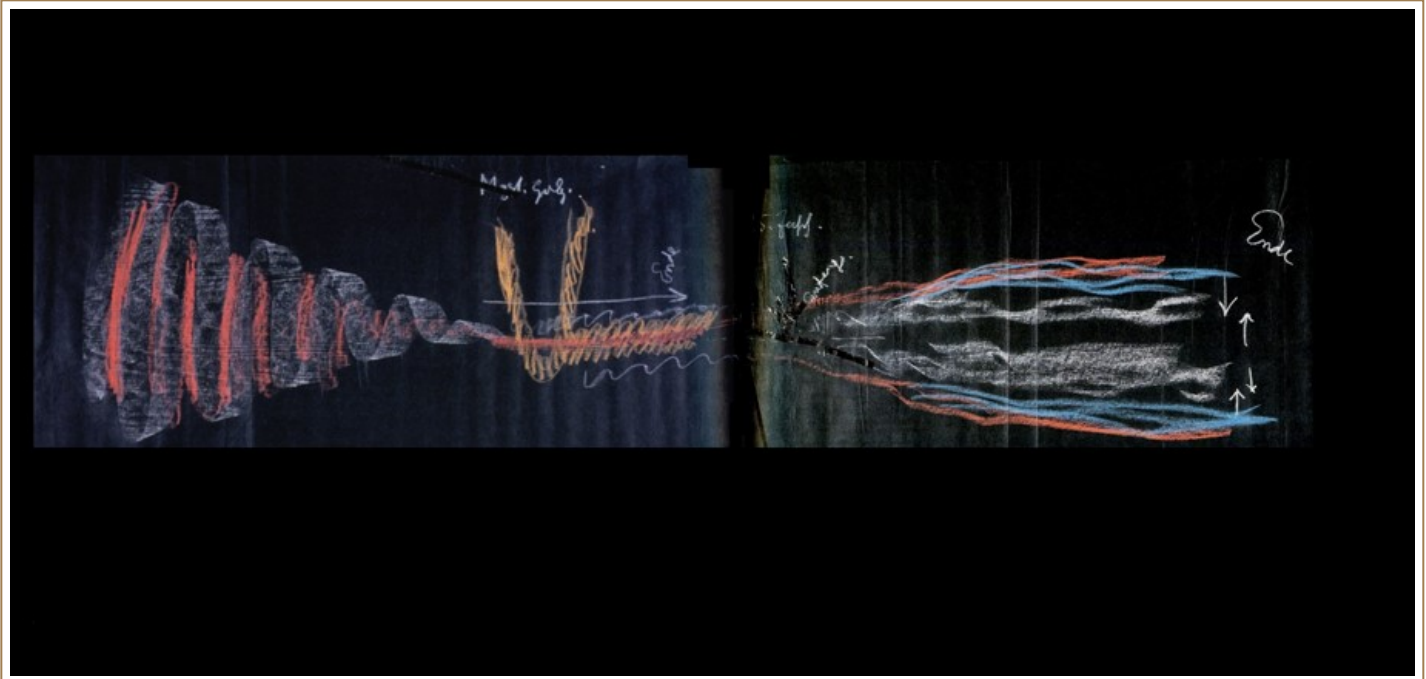
wisdom. Man's moral power and moral wisdom were connected with primeval knowledge; this was contained in it as an integrant. The ancient primeval wisdom then lost its power, it could no longer be the bearer of a moral impulse

This moral impulse had, as it were, to be taken under the wing of the Mystery of Golgotha. And for the civilisation of the Occident, the further continuation was the Christ Impulse which has arisen from the Mystery of Golgotha containing that which had remained as a kind of moral extract from the ancient primeval wisdom.

It is very strange to follow, for instance, that which Occidental civilisation contains in the form of true science, true wisdom, up to the 8th or 9th century after Christ. Try to read the description of Occidental wisdom up to the 8th and 9th century, as contained in my book, *Riddles of Philosophy*, and you will see that, after all, this course of development contains nothing of what may be designated as knowledge, in our modern meaning. For this arises towards the middle of the 15th century, at the time of Galilei. Until that time, knowledge has really been handed down traditionally from the primeval wisdom of the past. It is no longer a wisdom gained through inner intuition, no longer a primeval wisdom experienced inwardly, but an external wisdom handed down traditionally. I have often told you the story of Galilei, the story which is not an anecdote, namely, how Galilei had to make a great effort in order to convince a friend of the truth of his statements. Like all the other people of the Middle Ages who pursued wisdom, this friend was accustomed to accept what was contained in the books of Aristotle, or in the other traditional works. Everything which was taught at that time was traditional. That which was contained in the books of Aristotle was handed down traditionally. And the learned friend of Galilei agreed with Aristotle that the nerves go out from the heart. Galilei endeavoured to explain to him that according to the knowledge he had gained by studying a corpse, he was obliged to say something else: namely, that in the human being the nerves go out from the head, or the brain. This Aristotelian thinker could not believe it. Galilei then led him to the corpse, showed him that the nerves in fact go out from the brain and not from the heart, and felt sure that his friend would now have to believe what he saw with his own eyes. But his friend said: "Indeed, this appears to be true; I can see with my own eyes that the nerves proceed from the brain. But Aristotle says the opposite, namely that the nerves proceed from the heart. If I have to choose between the evidence of the senses in Nature and Aristotle's statements, I prefer to believe in Aristotle, and not in Nature!" This is not an anecdote, but a true occurrence. After all, in our time we simply experience the same thing, only the other way round.

You see, at that time all knowledge was traditional. A new knowledge only began with the time of Galilei, Copernicus, and so forth. But throughout these centuries the moral impulse was borne by the Christian impulse. It was essentially connected with the religious element. This was not the case in pagan times. The pagans realised that when they obtained cosmic wisdom, they obtained at the same time a moral impulse.

A new impulse arose towards the middle of the 15th century, an impulse which completely severed the connection with everything that existed in the form of ancient wisdom, even though this merely existed traditionally. It is very interesting to see the passion with which those who brought to the surface this new science — for instance, *Giordano Bruno* — abuse everything which existed in the form of old traditional wisdom. Bruno almost begins to rave when he rails against the recollections of ancient wisdom. Something entirely new arises. In fact, we shall be far from understanding human evolution if we are unable to look upon this new element which thus arises, as a beginning.



Schema FMC00.054 above represents the blackboard drawing by Rudolf Steiner in the lecture of 1919-10-17-GA191. It depicts, on the left, the old mystery wisdom and clairvoyance dying out. In the middle in orange (the parabola), the Mystery of Golgotha (at the vertex of the parabola). On the right, the new beginning through the Christ Impulse of spiritualization and the new clairvoyance and wisdom.

We may say (a drawing is made on the blackboard above): If we indicate, here, the Mystery of Golgotha ... the moral impulse will continue from there, but what was that which the Mystery of Golgotha carried from an older into a more recent time? What was it, in reality, while it was being borne in that direction? It was an *end*. The more we progress, the more the ancient wisdom disappears, even in its traditional form. We may say that it continues to drip like water, in the form of traditional knowledge; but a new element, a *beginning*, arises with the 15th century.

Indeed, we have not advanced very far in this new direction. The few centuries which have elapsed since the middle of the 15th century have brought us some natural science, but we have not progressed far since that beginning.

What is this new wisdom? You see, it is a wisdom which, to begin with, in the form in which it has appeared, has this peculiarity: Contrary to the ancient pagan wisdom, it does not contain a moral impulse. You may study as much as possible of this new wisdom, of this Galilei wisdom — mineralogy, geology, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. etc., — but you will never be able to draw a moral impulse out of this knowledge of Nature.

If modern people think that they can establish sociology upon the foundation of natural sciences, this is a tremendous illusion. For it is impossible to squeeze out of natural science, such as it exists to-day, that kind of knowledge which can be an ideal for human actions. For natural science is altogether in an elementary stage, and we can only hope that by developing more and more, it will again come to the point of containing, as natural science, moral impulses.

If the knowledge of Nature were to continue only in accordance with its own form, it would not be able to produce moral impulses out of its own nature. A new super-sensible knowledge will have to develop by the side of this knowledge of Nature. This super-sensible knowledge will then contain once more the rays of a moral will. And when the beginning which was made towards the middle of

the 15th century will have reached its end at the conclusion of the evolution of the earth, then super-sensible knowledge will flow together with the knowledge of the senses, and a unity will arise out of this.

When the old pagan sage, or the follower of pagan wisdom received pagan wisdom from his initiate in the Mysteries, he received *at one and the same time* a knowledge of Nature, a cosmic knowledge, an anthropogenesis and a moral science, and this was simultaneously a moral impulse. All this was one.

To-day it is necessary to admit that we obtain on the one hand, a knowledge of Nature, and on the other hand, super-sensible knowledge. This knowledge of Nature is, as such, devoid of moral impulses. Moral impulses must be gained through a super-sensible knowledge. Since the social impulses must, after all, be moral impulses, no true social knowledge, and not even a sum of social impulses can be imagined, unless man rises to super-sensible knowledge.

It is important that modern man should realise that he must strike out a new course in regard to social science; he must tread a different path than that of natural science. But I am at the same time obliged to draw your attention to a strange paradox: — I have often explained to you here that the deepest truths of the science of initiation appear strange to the ordinary every-day consciousness, may even appear crazy to an extreme materialist, but in our time it is necessary to grow acquainted with this wisdom which appears so paradoxical to-day. For in our time many things which appear foolish to men are wisdom before God. It would be a good thing if this bible passage were to be considered a little by those who brush aside Anthroposophy with a supercilious smile, or who criticize it in a vile way. They should consider that what they look upon as foolishness may be "wisdom before the Gods". It would be a very good thing if several people — and by "several" I mean many — particularly those who go to church with their prayer book and revile Anthroposophy, were to insist less upon their proud faith and look more closely into that which is really contained in the Christian faith. In our time it is necessary to become acquainted with several things which appear paradoxical. You see, two things are possible to-day. Someone may become acquainted with the natural science of to-day (I shall now characterize these two things rather sharply), he may, for instance, take up the facts supplied by the science of chemistry, physics, biology, etc. He may study diligently and eagerly the Theory of Evolution which has arisen from the so-called Darwinism. If he studies all this he may become a materialist, as far as his world conception based on knowledge is concerned. Indeed, he will become a materialist; this cannot be denied. Since men, as it were, so quickly arrive at an opinion, they become materialists if they give themselves up wholly to the external knowledge of Nature, according to the intentions of some of their contemporaries. But it is also possible to do something else. In addition to that which physics, chemistry, mineralogy, botany, geology, biology, offer, in addition to that which these sciences teach, we may also direct our attention to what we do in the physical laboratory, to our behaviour during an experiment; we may watch carefully how we behave in the chemical laboratory and what we do there; we may watch the way in which we investigate plants, animals, and their evolution.

Goethe's knowledge of Nature is chiefly based upon the fact that he has deeply studied the way in which others have come to their knowledge. The greatness of Goethe depends upon this very fact, namely, that he has deeply occupied himself with the way in which others have attained to their knowledge. And it is very, very significant to penetrate really into the essence and spirit of an essay by Goethe, such as "The Experiment as Mediator between Object and Subject". Here we may see how Goethe carefully follows the way in which phenomena of Nature are handled. What we may call the method of investigation, this is something which he has studied with the greatest attention. If you read my *Introduction to Goethe's Natural-Scientific Writings* you will find what great results Goethe has reached by thus pursuing the natural-scientific method.

In a certain way, that which Goethe has done can be developed further for the achievements of the 19th century and up to the 20th century ... but Goethe was no longer able to do this.

I therefore state: Two things are possible. Let us keep to this, to begin with. We remain by the results which natural science supplies, or else we investigate the attitude needed in order to arrive at these natural scientific results. Let us keep to what we have said in regard to the knowledge of Nature; let us now observe the human striving after knowledge from another standpoint.

You know that beside natural science there is also a spiritual knowledge; in the form of Anthroposophy, the knowledge of man, we may pursue cosmology, anthropology, etc., in such a way that they lead to the kind of results described, for instance, in my *Occult Science*. There, we may find positive knowledge pointing to the spiritual world. Just as we obtain positive knowledge in natural science, in mineralogy, geology, etc., so we have, here, a positive knowledge referring to the spiritual world. In our anthroposophical movement it was particularly important for me to spread also this kind of positive knowledge concerning the spiritual world in the various books which I have written. Now we may also tackle things in such a way that we observe chiefly the way in which these things are done, and do not merely aim at obtaining knowledge. We observe how a person describes something, how he rises from external observation to inner observation; how he arrives to a higher spiritual conception, not through scientific investigations in the laboratory, in the clinic, in the astronomical observatory, but through his inner soul-development, along a mystical path. This would be parallel to the observation of the natural-scientific method, of the handling, of the way in which things are done. Also here we have this twofold element: to watch the *results*, and to watch the *way* in which our soul comes to these results.

Let us take hypothetically something which may seem rather paradoxical. Let us suppose that someone were to pursue the natural-scientific methods, like Goethe: he will certainly not become a materialist, but will undoubtedly accept a spiritual world-conception. An infallible way of overcoming materialism in our modern time is to have in insight into the natural-scientific methods of investigation. In the natural-scientific sphere, men become materialists only because they do not observe, because they insufficiently observe the way in which they carry on their investigations. They are satisfied with results, with what the clinic, the laboratory, the observatory supply. They do not progress as far as Goetheanism, i.e. the observation of their manner of research; for those who allow themselves to be influenced by the natural-scientific manner of contemplating the world and of handling things in order to reach knowledge, will at least become idealists, and probably spiritualists, if they only proceed far enough.

If we now try to avoid reaching the positive results of spiritual science, if we find it boring to enter into the details of spiritual science, and only like to hear again and again how man's soul becomes mystical, if we concentrate our chief attention upon the methods leading to the spiritual sphere, this will be the greatest temptation for really becoming materialists. The greatest temptation for becoming materialists is to ignore the concrete results of spiritual science and to emphasize continually the importance of mystical research, mystical soul-concentration, and the methods of entering the spiritual world.

You see this is a paradox. Those who observe natural science, natural research, become spiritualists; those who disdain to reach a real spiritual knowledge and who always speak of mysticism and of how spiritual knowledge is gained, are exposed to the great temptation of becoming more than ever materialistic. This should be known to-day. We cannot do without the knowledge of such things.

To-day we have monistic societies. Those who give themselves the air of leaders in these monistic societies spread a very superficial world-conception. They condense the external materialistic results of natural science to a superficial world-conception. This is so easy for modern men who do not wish to make a great effort, who prefer to go to the "movies" rather than to other places, and consequently prefer to accept a kind of cinema-science — for materialism is nothing else — they prefer this to something which must be worked out inwardly. These leaders of monistic societies therefore supply a superficial materialism. Undoubtedly they are, at least for a time, temporarily noxious creatures, for they spread errors. It is not good if they flourish, for of course they turn the heads of people in a materialistic way. Nevertheless they are the less dangerous elements, for to begin with they are generally honest people, but this honesty does not protect them against this spreading of errors; however, they are for the most part frankly honest and their errors will be overcome. They will only have a temporary significance.

But there are other people who systematically, knowingly, refuse to lead man towards the concrete positive results of spiritual-science. Indeed, they nourish the aversion which exists to-day through a certain love of ease, the aversion of penetrating into the positive concrete results of spiritual science. You know that the things described in my *Occult Science* must be studied several years if we wish to understand them, they are not comfortable for a modern man, who may indeed send his son to the university, if he is to become a chemical scientist; nevertheless, if he is to recognize and grasp heaven and earth in a spiritual way, he expects him to do this in a twinkle, at least in one evening, and from every lecture on the super-sensible worlds he expects to have the whole sum of cosmic wisdom. Concrete results of a positive spiritual research are uncomfortable for most men, and this aversion is made use of by certain personalities of the present time who persuade men that they do not need these things, that it is not necessary to pursue the positive concrete details of spiritual facts. "What is this talk of the higher hierarchies which must first be known? What is this talk of Saturn, Sun, Moon, Earth, Jupiter, Venus, Vulcan etc.? All this is unnecessary." They will tell you: "If you concentrate deeply, if your soul becomes quite mystical, you shall reach the God within you". They will tell you these things, give general indications on the connection of the material and the super-sensible world. They nourish man's aversion to penetrate into the concrete spiritual world. Why do they do this? Because apparently, apparently they wish to spread a spiritual mentality, but in reality they aim at something else: Along this path, more than ever, they seek to produce materialism. For this reason the leaders of the monistic societies are less harmful. But the others who so often spread mysticism to-day, and who always speak of all kinds of mystical things, they are those who truly foster materialism, who foster it in a most refined way. They put into the heads of men that one or the other way leads into the spiritual world, and they avoid speaking about it concretely. They chiefly speak in general phrases and if they remain victorious they will undoubtedly succeed in making the third generation entirely materialistic. To-day, the more certain and also more refined way leading into materialism is to transmit mysticism traditionally, a mysticism which despises to penetrate into positive spiritual-scientific results. Many things which appear to form part of the spiritual literature of to-day foster materialism far more strongly than, for instance, the books of Ernst Häckel.

You see, these things are uncomfortable to hear, because in setting them before men we strongly appeal to their power of discernment, but men do not wish to listen to this appeal to their power of discernment. They are much more satisfied if every kind of mystical nonsense stimulates an inner lust of the soul. This is why there are so many opponents, particularly of those efforts which to-day honestly pursue spiritual life by disdaining to approach men with a shallow mysticism of a general nature. True spiritual science arouses opposition. In the present time there are numerous people and communities who do not in any way wish that a true spiritual regeneration and elevation should take

hold of humanity, and who make use of the fact that materialism is undoubtedly festering if they speak to men of mysticism in general terms. They make use of this fact. For this reason they wage war to the knife where they encounter honest paths which are meant to lead into spiritual science.

I have thus characterized an extensive literature which exists to-day. In reality everyone who takes up a mystical book, no matter of what kind, should appeal strongly to his own judgment. This is strictly necessary. For this reason we should not be led astray by the fact that the many pseudo-mystical scribbles of our present time seem to be so easily accessible. Of course, people will easily understand us if we tell them, for instance: "You only need to penetrate deeply into your inner being and God will be within you; your God whom you only find by treading your own path; no one can show you this path because every other man speaks of another God", or similar stuff. To-day you will find this in many books, and it is described in a most tempting and misleading manner.

I would like you to take to heart these things very deeply. For that which is to be reached through our anthroposophical movement can only be reached through the fact that you are at least a small number of people who strive to cultivate the characterized power of discernment; it would be fatal for humanity if no effort were made to develop this power of discernment. To-day we must try to stand firmly on our feet, if we do not wish to lose our foothold in the midst of the confusion and chaos of the present. We may often ask to-day after the cause of so much confusion in humanity. But we can almost touch these causes. We may find them in insignificant facts, but we must be able to judge these little facts on the right way.

It is uncomfortable to see this immediately, in the many forms in which it exists on all sides. Many grotesque paradoxes can be found not only in rather loathsome places, but also in the modern life of humanity. They undoubtedly exist also in the modern life of humanity. And it is necessary to-day to strive to obtain a clear understanding, an understanding as sharp as a blade, if we wish to gain a firm foothold. This is the essential thing.

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