

Materialism and the Task of Anthroposophy

Lecture 1 — Dornach, April 2, 1921

It was in the middle and second half of the nineteenth century that materialism had its period of greatest development. In today's lecture we will center our interest more on the theoretical side of this materialistic evolution. A great deal of what I shall have to say about the theoretical aspect can also be said in almost the same words of the more practical aspect of materialism. For the moment, however, we will leave that aside and turn our attention more to the materialistic world conception that was prevalent in the civilized world in the middle and second half of the nineteenth century.

We shall find that we are here concerned with a twofold task. First, we have to gain a clear perception of the extent to which this materialistic world view is to be opposed, of how we must be armed with all the concepts and ideas enabling us to refute the materialistic world view as such. But in addition to being armed with the necessary conceptions, we find that from the point of view of spiritual science we are required at the same time to do something more, namely, to understand this materialistic world view. First of all, we must understand it in its content; secondly, we must also understand how it came about that such an extreme materialistic world view was ever able to enter human evolution.

It may sound contradictory to say that it is required of man on the one hand to be able to fight the materialistic world view, and on the other hand to be able to understand it. But those who base themselves on spiritual science will not find any contradiction here; it is merely an apparent one. For the case is rather like this. In the course of the evolution of mankind moments must needs come when human beings are in a sense pulled down, brought below a certain level, in order that they may later by their own efforts lift themselves up again. And it would really be of no help to mankind at all if by some divine decree or the like it could be protected from having to undergo these low levels of existence. In order for human beings to attain to full use of their powers of freedom, it is absolutely necessary that they descend to the low levels in their world conception as well as in their life. The danger does not lie in the fact that something like this appears at the proper time, and for theoretical materialism this was the middle of the nineteenth century. The danger consists in the fact that if something like this has happened in the course of normal evolution, people then continue to adhere to it, so that an experience that was necessary for one particular point in time is carried over into later times. If it is correct to say that in the middle of the nineteenth century materialism was in a certain sense a test mankind had to undergo, it is equally correct to say that the persistent adherence to materialism is bound to work terrible harm now, and that all the catastrophes befalling the world and humanity that we have to experience are due to the fact that a great majority of people still tries to cling to materialism.

What does theoretical materialism really signify? It signifies the view regarding the human being primarily as the sum of the material processes of his physical body. Theoretical materialism has studied all the processes of the physical, sensory body, and although what has been attained in this study is still more or less in its first beginnings, final conclusions have nevertheless already been drawn from it in regard to a world view. Man has been explained as the confluence of these physical forces; his soul nature is declared to be merely something that is produced through the workings of these physical forces. It is theoretical materialism, however, that initiated investigation of the physical nature of the human being, and it is this, the extensive examination of man's physical nature, that must remain. On the other hand, what the nineteenth century drew as a conclusion from this physical research is something that must not be allowed to figure as more than a passing phenomenon in human evolution. And as a passing phenomenon, let us now proceed to understand it.

What is really involved here? When we look back in the evolution of mankind — and with the help of what I have given in Occult Science [Note 1] we are able to look back rather far — we can see that the human being has passed through the greatest variety of different stages. Even if we limit our observation to what has taken place in the course of earth evolution, we are bound to conclude that this human being started with a form that was quite primitive in comparison to its present form, and that this form then underwent gradual change, approaching ever nearer to the form the human being possesses today. As long as we focus on the rough outline of the human form, the differences will not appear to be so great in the course of human history. When we compare with the means at the disposal of external history, the form of an ancient Egyptian or even an ancient Indian with the form of a man of present-day European civilization, we will discover only relatively small differences, as long as we stay with the rough outlines or superficial aspects of observation. For such a rough viewpoint, the great differences in regard to the primitive forms of development emerge only in early man in prehistoric ages.

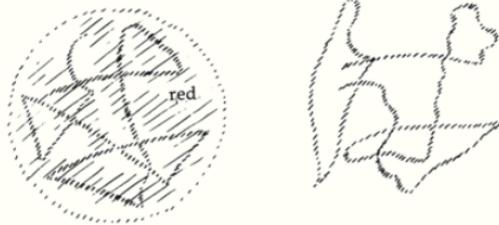
When we refine our observation, however, when we begin to study what is hidden from outer view, then what I have said no longer holds good. For then we are obliged to admit that a great and significant difference exists between the organism of a civilized man of the present and the organism of an ancient Egyptian, or even an ancient Greek or Roman. And although the change has come about in a much more subtle and delicate manner in historical times, there has most assuredly been such change in regard to all the finer forming and shaping of the human organism. This subtle change reached a certain culmination in the middle of the nineteenth century. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is nevertheless a fact that in regard to his inner structure, in regard to what the human organism can possibly attain, man had reached perfection at about the middle of the nineteenth century. Since then, a kind of decadence has set in. Since that time, the human organism has been involved in retrogression. Therefore, also in the middle of the nineteenth century, the organs that serve as the physical organs of human intellectual activity had reached perfection in their development.

What we call the intellect of man requires, of course, physical organs. In earlier ages, these physical organs were far less developed than they were in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is true that what arouses our admiration when we contemplate the Greek spirit, particularly in such advanced Greeks as Plato and Aristotle, is dependent on the fact that the Greeks did not have such perfect organs of thinking, in the purely physical sense, as had men of the nineteenth century. Depending on one's preference, one might say, "Thank heaven that people in Greek times did not possess thinking organs that were as perfect as those of the people in the nineteenth century!" If on the other hand, one is a pedant like those of the nineteenth century, wishing to cling to this pedantry, then one can say, "Well, the Greeks were just children, they did not have the perfect organs of thought that we have; accordingly, we must look with an indulgent eye upon what we find in the works of Plato and Aristotle." School teachers often speak in this vein, for in their criticism they feel vastly superior to Plato and Aristotle. You will only fully understand what I have just indicated, however, if you make the acquaintance of people — and there are such! — who have a kind of vision that one may call, in the best sense of the word, a clairvoyant consciousness.

In such people, the presence of clairvoyant consciousness — if there are any in the audience who possess a measure of it, they will please forgive me for telling what is the plain truth — is due to the inadequate development of the organs of intellect. It is quite a common occurrence in our day to meet people who have a measure of clairvoyant consciousness and possess extraordinarily little of what is today called scientific intellect. True as this is, it is equally true that what these clairvoyant people are able to say or write down through their own faculty of perception, may contain thoughts far cleverer than the thoughts of people who show no signs whatever of clairvoyance but function with the best possible organs of intellect. It may easily happen that clairvoyant people who, from the point of view of present-day science are quite stupid — please forgive this expression — produce thoughts cleverer than the thoughts of recognized scientists without being themselves any the cleverer for producing them! This actually occurs. And to what is it due? It comes about because such clairvoyant persons do not need to exercise any organs of thought in order to arrive at the clever thoughts. They create the corresponding images out of the spiritual world, and the images already have within them the thoughts. There they are, ready-

made, while other people who are not clairvoyant and can only think have to develop their organs of thought first before they can develop any thoughts. If we were to sketch this, it would be like this. Suppose a clairvoyant person brings something out of the spiritual world in all manner of pictures (see drawing, red). But in it, thoughts are contained, a network of thoughts. The person in question does not think this out, instead, he sees it, bringing it along from the spiritual world. He has no occasion to exercise any organ of thought.

Consider another person who is not gifted with clairvoyance, but who can think. Of all that has been drawn in red below, there is nothing at all present in him. He does not bring any such thing out of the spiritual world. Neither does he bring this thought skeleton with him out of the spiritual world (see drawing on left). He exerts his organs of thinking and through them produces this thought skeleton (see drawing).



In observing human beings today, one can find among everywhere examples of all the stages between these two extremes. For one who has not trained his faculty of observation, it is nevertheless most difficult to distinguish whether a person is actually clever, in the sense that he thinks by means of his organs of reason, or whether he does not think with them at all, but instead by some means brings something into his consciousness, so that only the pictorial, imaginative element is developed in him, but so feebly that he himself is not even aware of it. Thus, there are any number of people today who produce most clever thoughts without having to be clever on that account, while others think very clever thoughts but have no special connection to any spiritual world. To learn to apprehend this distinction is one of the important psychological tasks of our age, and it affords the basis for important insight into human beings at the present time. With this explanation you will no longer find it difficult to understand that empirical super-sensible observation shows that the majority of mankind possessed the most perfectly developed organs of thought in the middle of the nineteenth century. At no other time was there so much thinking done with so little cleverness as in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Go back to the twenties of the nineteenth century – only, people do not do this today – or even a little earlier, and read the scientific texts produced then. You will discover that they have an entirely different tone; they do not yet contain the completely abstract thinking of later times which depends on man's physical organs of thought. We need not even mention what came from the pen of people like Herder, Goethe or Schiller; grand conceptions still dwelled in them. It does not matter that people do not believe this today and that commentaries today are written as if this were not the case. For those who write these commentaries and believe that they understand Goethe, Schiller, and Herder simply do not understand them; they do not see what is most important in these men.

It is a fact of great significance that about the middle of the nineteenth century the human organism reached a culmination in respect of its physical form and that since that time it has been regressing; indeed, in regard to a rational comprehension of the world it is regressing rapidly in a certain sense.

This fact is closely connected with the development of materialism in the middle of the nineteenth century. For what is the human organism? The human organism is a faithful copy of man's soul-spiritual nature. It is not surprising that people who are incapable of insight into the soul and spirit of man see in the structure of the human organism

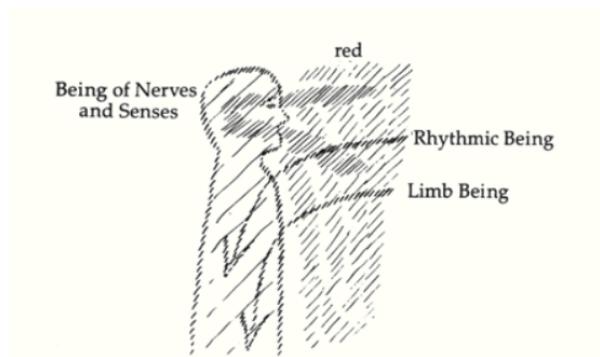
an explanation of the whole human being. This is particularly the case when one takes into special consideration the organization of the head, and in the head in turn the organization of the nerves.

In the course of my lectures in Stuttgart, [Note 2] I mentioned an experience that is really suited to throw light on this point. It happened at the beginning of the twentieth century in a gathering of the Giordano Bruno Society of Berlin [Note 3]. First, a man spoke — I would call him a stalwart champion of materialism — who was a most knowledgeable materialist. He knew the structure of the brain as well as anyone can know it today who has studied it conscientiously. He was one of those who see in the analysis of the brain's structure already the full extent of psychology — those who say that one need only know how the brain functions in order to have a grasp on the soul and to be able to describe it. It was interesting; on the blackboard, the man drew the various sections of the brain, the connecting strands, and so on, and thus presented the marvelous picture one obtains when one traces the structure of the human brain. And this speaker firmly believed that by having given this description of the brain he had described psychology. After he had finished speaking, a staunch philosopher, a disciple of Herbart, [Note 4] rose up and said, "The view propounded by this gentleman, that one can obtain knowledge of the soul merely by explaining the structure of the brain, is one I must naturally object to emphatically. But I have no cause to take exception to the drawing the speaker has made. It fits in quite well with my Herbartian point of view, namely, that ideas form associations with one another, and connecting strands of a psychic character run from one idea to another." He added that as a Herbartian, he could quite well make the same drawing, only the various circles and so on would for him not indicate sections of the brain but complexes of ideas. But the drawing itself would remain exactly the same!

A most interesting situation! When it is a matter of getting down to the reality of a subject, these two speakers have diametrically opposed views, but when they make drawings of the same thing, they find themselves obliged to come up with identical drawings, even though one is a wholehearted Herbartian philosopher and the other a staunchly materialistic physiologist.

What is the cause of this? It is in fact this: We have the soul-spirit being of man; we bear it within us. This soul-spirit being is the creator of the entire form of man's organism. It is therefore not surprising that here in the most complete and perfect part of the organism, namely the nervous system of the brain, the replica created by the soul-spirit being resembles the latter in every way. It is indeed true that in the place where man is most of all man, so to speak, namely in the structure of his nerves, he is a faithful replica of the soul-spiritual element. Thus, a person who, in the first place, must always have something the senses can perceive and is content with the replica, actually perceives in the copy the very same thing that is seen in the soul-spiritual original. Having no desire for soul and spirit and only concentrating, as it were, on the replica, he stops short at the structure of the brain. Since this structure of the brain presented itself in such remarkable perfection to the observer of the mid-nineteenth century, and considering the predisposition of humanity at that time, it was extraordinarily easy to develop theoretical materialism.

What is really going on in the human being? If you consider the human being as such — I shall draw an outline of him here — and turn to the structure of his brain, you find that first of all man is, as we know, a threefold being: the limb being, the rhythmic man, and the being of nerves and senses. When we now look at the latter, we have before us the most perfect part of the human being, in a sense, the most human part. In it, the external world mirrors itself (see drawing, red). I shall indicate this reflection process by the example of the perception through the eyes. I could just as well sketch the perceptions coming through the ear, and so on. The external world, therefore, reflects itself in the human being in such a way that we have here the structure of man and in him the reflection of the outer world.



As long as we consider the human being in this way, we cannot help but interpret him in a materialistic manner, even though we may go beyond the often quite coarse conceptions of materialism. For, on the one hand, we have the structure of the human being; we can trace it in all its most delicate tissue structures. The more closely we approach the head organization, the more we discover a faithful replica of the soul-spiritual element. Then we can follow up the reflection of the external world in the human being. That, however, is mere picture. We thus have the reality of man, on the one hand, traceable in all its finer structural details, and on the other hand we have the picture of the world.

Let us keep this well in mind. We have man's reality in the structure of his organs, and we have what is reflected in him. This is really all that offers itself initially to external sensory observation. Thus, for sensory observation, the following conclusion presents itself. When the human being dies, this whole human structure disintegrates in the corpse. In addition, we have the pictures of the outer world. If you shatter the mirror, nothing can mirror itself any longer; hence, the pictures, too, are gone when the human being has passed through death. Since external sense observation cannot ascertain more than what I have just mentioned, is it not natural to have to say that with death the physical structure of the human being disintegrates? Formerly, it reflected the outer world. Human beings bear but a mirror-image in their soul and it passes away. Materialism of the nineteenth century simply presented this as a fact. It could not do otherwise, for it really had no knowledge of anything else.

Now the whole matter changes when we begin to turn our attention to the soul and spirit life of man. There, we enter a region which is inaccessible to physical sensory observation. Take a fact pertaining to the soul that is near at hand, the simple fact that we confront the outer world by observing it. We observe and perceive objects; then we have them within us in the form of percepts. We also have memory, the faculty of recollection. We can bring up in images from the depths of our being what we experience in the outer world. We know how important memory is for the human being.

Let us consider this set of facts some more. Take these two inner experiences: You look through your eyes at the external world, you hear it with your ears, or in some other way you perceive it with your senses. You are then engaged in an immediately present activity of the soul. This then passes over into your conceptual life. What you have experienced today, you can raise up again a few days later out of the depths of your soul in pictures. Something enters into you in some manner and you bring it up again out of your own being. It is not difficult to recognize that what enters into the soul must originate in the external world. I do not wish to consider anything else for the moment except the fact that is clearly obvious, namely, that what we thus remember has to come from the outer world. For if you have seen some red object, you remember the red object afterwards, and what has taken place in you is merely the image of the red object which, in turn, arises again in you. It is therefore something the external world has impressed upon you more deeply than if you occupy yourself only with immediate perceptions in the outer world.

Now picture what happens: You approach some object, you observe it, that is to say, you engage in an immediate and present soul activity in regard to the observed object. Then you go away from it. A few days later, you have reason to call up again from the depths of your being the pictures of the observed object. They are present again, paler, to be sure, but still present in you. What has happened in the interval?

Let me ask you here to keep well in mind what I have just said and compare this singular play of immediate perceptual thoughts and pictures of memory with something that is quite familiar to you, the pictures appearing in dreams. You will easily be able to notice how dreaming is connected with the faculty of memory. As long as the dream images are not too confused, you can easily see how they tie in with the memory images, hence, how a relationship exists between dreams and what passes from living perceptions into memory.

Now consider something else. Human beings must be organically completely healthy if they are to tolerate dreaming properly, so to speak. Dreaming requires that a person has himself fully under control and that at any time a moment can occur when he is certain he has been dreaming. Something is out of order when a person cannot come to the point of perceiving quite clearly: This was a dream! You have met people who dreamed they were beheaded. Suppose they could not distinguish afterwards between such a dream and the actual beheading; suppose they thought they really had been beheaded and yet had to go on living! Just imagine how impossible it would be for such people to sort out the facts without becoming totally confused! They would constantly feel that they had just been beheaded, and if they presumed they had to believe this — one can just about imagine what sort of words would break from their lips!

You can see, therefore, that human beings should be able at any moment to have themselves in hand so well that they can distinguish dreams from the thought life within reality. There are people, however, who cannot do this. They experience all kinds of hallucinations and visions and consider them realities. They cannot distinguish; they do not have themselves well enough in hand. What does this signify? It means that what dwells in dream has an influence on their organization, and that the organization is adapted to the dream picture. Something in their nervous system is not fully developed that should be developed; therefore, the dream is active in them and makes its influence felt.

Thus, if someone is not able to distinguish between his dreams and experienced realities, it means that the power of the dream has an organizing effect on him. If a dream were to possess itself of our whole brain, we would see the whole world as a dream! If you can contemplate such a fact and appreciate its full value, you will gradually learn to apprehend the facts to which ordinary science today does not wish to aspire because it lacks the courage to do so. You will learn to perceive that the very same power that energizes the dream life is present in us as organizing and quickening power, as power of growth. The only reason why the dream does not have the power to tear asunder the structure of our organism is that the latter is too strongly consolidated, that it has so firm a structure as to be able to withstand the effects of the ordinary dream. Thus, the human being can distinguish between the dream experience and that of reality.

When the little child grows up, becoming taller and taller, a force is at work in it. It is the same force as the one contained in the dream; only in the case of the dream we behold it. When we do not behold it, when it is instead active inside the body, then it, the very same power that is in the dream, makes us grow. We need not even go so far as to consider growth. Every day, for example, when you eat and digest and the effects of digestion spread throughout your organism, this happens by means of the force that dwells in dreams. Therefore, when something is out of order in the organism, it is connected with dreaming that is not as it should be. The force we can, from the outside, observe working in dream life is the same as the one that then works inwardly in the human being, even in the forces of digestion.

Thus, we can say that if we only consider the life of man in the right way, we become aware of the working of the dream force in his organism. When I describe this actively working dream force, I actually enter upon the same paths in this description that I must tread when I describe the human etheric body.

Imagine that someone were able to penetrate with his vision everything that brings about growth in the human being from childhood on, everything that causes digestion in man, everything that sustains his whole organism in its state of activity. Imagine that I could take this whole system of forces, extracting it from the human being and placing it before him, then I would have placed the etheric body before the human being. This etheric body, that is, the body that reveals itself only in irregularities in a dream, was far more highly developed prior to the point in time in the nineteenth century to which I have referred. Gradually it became weaker and weaker in its structure. In turn, the structure of the physical body grew correspondingly stronger. The etheric body can conceive in pictures, it can have dreamlike imaginations, but it cannot think. As soon as this etheric body begins to be especially active in a person of our time, he becomes a bit clairvoyant, but then he can think less, because, for thinking, he particularly needs the physical body.

Therefore, it need not surprise us that when people of the nineteenth century had the feeling that they could think particularly well, they were actually driven to materialism. For what aided them in this thinking the most was the physical body. But this physical thinking was connected with the special form of memory that was developed in the nineteenth century. It is a memory that lacks the pictorial element and, wherever possible, moves in abstractions.

Such a phenomenon is interesting. I have frequently referred to the professor of criminal anthropology Moritz Benedikt. [Note 5] Today as well, I would like to mention an interesting experience he himself relates in his memoirs. He had to address a meeting of scientists, and he reports that he prepared himself for this speech for twenty-two nights, not having slept day or night. On the last day before giving the address, a journalist who was supposed to publish the speech came to see him. Benedikt dictated it to him. He says that he had not written down the address at all, having merely impressed it onto his memory. He now dictated it to the journalist in his private chamber; the following day he gave this speech at the meeting of scientists. The journalist printed what he had taken down from dictation, and the printed speech agreed word for word with the speech Benedikt delivered at the meeting.

I must confess, such a thing fills me with admiration, for one always admires what one could never find possible to accomplish oneself. This is indeed a most interesting phenomenon! For twenty-two days, the man worked to incorporate, word for word, what he had prepared into his organization, so that in the end he could not possibly have uttered a single sentence out of the sequence impressed onto his system, so firmly was it imbedded!

Such a thing is possible only when a person is able to imprint the whole speech into his physical organism purely out of the gradually developing wording. It is actually a fact that what one thinks out in this way stamps itself onto one's organization as firmly as the force of nature firmly builds up the bone system of man. Then, the whole speech rests like a skeleton in the physical organism. As a rule, memory is tied to the etheric body, but in this case the latter has imbedded itself completely in the physical organism. The entire physical system then contains something in the way it contains the bones, something that stands there like the skeleton of the speech. Then it is possible to do what Professor Benedikt did. But this is only possible when the nerve structure of the physical organism is developed in such a way that it receives without resistance into its plasticity what is brought into it; gradually, of course, for twenty-two days, even nights, it had to be worked in.

It is not surprising that somebody who relies so much on his body acquires the feeling that this physical body is the only thing working in the human being. Human life had indeed taken such a turn that it worked its way completely into the physical body; people therefore arrived at the belief that the physical body is everything in the human organization. I do not think that any other age but ours, which has attached this high value on the physical

body, could have come to such a grotesque invention — forgive the expression — as stenography. Obviously, when people did not rely as yet on stenography, they did not attach so great a value to preserving and accurately recording words and the sequence of words such as is the aim in stenography. After all, only the imprint in the physical body can make so fast and firm a record. It is therefore the predilection for imprinting something in the physical body that has brought about the other preference for preserving this imprinted word, but by no means for retaining anything that stands one level higher. For stenography could play no part if we wished to preserve those forms that express themselves in the etheric body. It takes the materialistic tendency to invent something as grotesque as shorthand.

All this, of course, is added only by way of explanation of what I wish to contribute to the problem of understanding the appearance of materialism in the nineteenth century. Humanity had arrived at a certain condition that tended to engrain the soul-spiritual into the physical organism. You must take what I have said as an interpretation, not as a criticism of stenography. I do not favor the immediate abolition of stenography. This is never the tendency underlying such characterizations. We must clearly understand that just because one understands something, this does not imply that one wishes to abolish it right away! There are many things in the world that are necessary for life and that yet cannot serve all purposes — I do not want to go further into this subject — and the need for which still has to be comprehended. But we live in an age, and I have to emphasize this again and again, when it is absolutely necessary to penetrate more deeply into the development of nature as well as into that of culture, to be able to ask ourselves: Where does this or that phenomenon come from? For mere carping and criticizing accomplish nothing. We really have to understand all the things that go on in the world.

I would like to sum up what I presented today in the following way. The evolution of mankind shows that in the middle of the nineteenth century a certain culmination was reached in the process of the structural completion of the physical body. Already now, a decadence has set in. Further, this perfection of the physical body is connected with the rise of theoretical materialism. In the next few days, I shall have to say more about these matters from one or another viewpoint. I wished to place before you today what I have just summed up.