

LECTURE I

The Mystery of Birth and Death

Berlin, October 28, 1903

IF A SNAIL were to crawl through a hall in which Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was being performed, it would perceive nothing of what causes the human beings in the same hall to be filled with beautiful feelings. The tones created by the symphony are expressed in the sound waves that fill the hall; these sound waves spread out in all directions; they are the external expression of the magnificent tonal harmonies. These tonal harmonies pass through the organism of the snail as well as through the organism of the people present. In people the harmonies call forth sensations and feelings of the noblest kind, but the snail is untouched. The snail is in the same medium, the same vibrating waves of sound, as the human beings, but knows nothing of what is going on around it. The snail is surrounded by this world and is actually in it, but has no sense at all for its existence. Nevertheless, this world of vibrating sound waves is not in a location different from where the snail is itself located; rather, the snail is located in the same place, where it can find everything it needs. The space in which the snail is to be found is thus filled with facts that it *can* perceive; but this space is also filled with a sum of facts that the snail *cannot* perceive.

Thus we have established that a being can be surrounded by phenomena without that being's having any suspicion of their existence. We can ask whether perhaps we human beings might also be living in a world that is filled with facts and phenomena concerning which we at first perceive nothing; facts and phenomena that are related to our world the same way the sounds from the *Ninth Symphony* are related to the perceptions of a snail. When we find ourselves in a room we must also be concerned with the question of whether what we feel

and perceive is everything that is actually happening in our spatial environment. There could be facts in our surroundings that are simply not there for us because we have not developed the organs necessary for the perception of these facts. There could be beings in our world (or we ourselves could develop ourselves to become such beings) that are in a position to perceive altogether a great deal more than what is around us in our world. In comparison with the concertgoers and the snail, there could be a similar relationship between more and less highly developed human beings.

That is the question that must awaken us to suspect and assume much concerning the unknown worlds surrounding us; it is also the question that should be answered by the theosophical movement. In essence it is the task of the theosophical movement to make us aware of the worlds that surround us daily, hourly; of the worlds within which we live, and concerning which we know nothing in ordinary life. Theosophy does not want to introduce us to worlds that are located somewhere else than our world here, worlds that are located someplace we cannot reach; but rather to those worlds that constantly are extending into our world; worlds that always surround us but remain unknown because the organs to perceive them have not yet opened. At first we can only speak of these worlds. We can only point to them and invite you to participate in the work through which the senses open to these higher worlds. Then you will be able to perceive these higher worlds just as you are able to perceive our ordinary world. In the next lectures I would like to speak to you concerning such worlds.

First I would like to speak to you about the world that we in theosophy call the astral world. It will show itself to be a world not far from us. It is located everywhere we are. In the room in which we presently find ourselves it is just as real as the world that we see with our physical eyes. The astral world is a higher world that, with its movements and appearances, permeates and penetrates the world in which you are located, just as the symphonic waves of sound permeate the world of the snail, which is unable to perceive them. Thus we are not speaking of something that can be found only outside our world; rather we are speaking of something that permeates our world at every point of

its existence. The theosophical worldview teaches us to recognize several such worlds. First it teaches us to know the world that is known to us from our everyday life: the physical world—the world that everyone is in a position to perceive with his or her sense organs. This is the world that we see, hear, smell, and touch; the world in which we find the objects of nature, the minerals, the plants, and the animals.

This physical world is permeated with spirit by a higher world, by the so-called astral world, which we now wish to get to know. Just as one fluid can be mixed together with a finer, thinner fluid so that the one fluid permeates the other in all its parts, so too the astral world permeates our world of the physical. Then again this astral world is permeated by a yet higher world, which we call the mental world, that is the actual spiritual world. Thus the three worlds are intertwined, one always permeating the other. Of these three worlds human beings can presently see only the physical with the organs of perception presently at their disposal. The task of theosophy is to gradually open the senses for the invisible and (under ordinary circumstances) inaudible worlds.

What is the astral world? If we speak of the astral world we arrive at an understanding in the quickest way if we seek among the worldviews that recognize something aside from the physical. We must look at those in which the astral world and its relationship to human beings is mentioned. The Christian worldview also knows this astral world. In the first centuries of Christianity, people did not distinguish merely between body and spirit, between two natures in the human being, as happened later in a more superficial age. Rather, in those early centuries a distinction was made between body, soul, and spirit. Since ancient times all deeper worldviews have seen soul and spirit as the constituent parts of a human being. Go back to those peoples who lived in our geographic area long before the Germanic tribes. Look at the temples of those ancient Celtic peoples and you will find that they had an altar in the middle that was surrounded by three circles of pillars. These three circles of pillars signified nothing other than the threefold nature of the human being: body, soul, spirit. The bodily nature is known. The soul nature was understood in all deeper religions and worldviews as what we in the theosophical worldview

call the astral. The expression "spirit" was understood to be what is actually eternal in human nature. Body, soul, and spirit constitute the threefold nature of the human being.

Modern natural science has studied the physical body relatively accurately. We are connected to everything around us through the body. We could not live in our bodies if our environment were other than what it is. Consider the temperature of the physical world around us: ten to twenty degrees higher than the current temperature of our atmosphere, and human beings could not live within it. Our life depends not only upon what goes on within the borders of our skin; it depends also upon the phenomena in nature around us. In a certain sense we are only the result of what is going on all around us. We are not individual, closed-off beings. If there were no plants in the world we could no longer nourish ourselves. Only because we are able to support our physical metabolism are we in a position to live in bodies. We are completely dependent upon our physical surroundings; that is, we are physical beings within the entirety of the natural, physical world; we belong to the world of physical nature. The materialists of the nineteenth century saw things this way, and properly so. We live in and with the physical world.

Now you know that there is a very specific moment for this physical body when it no longer obeys the laws that it had obeyed during the ordinary conditions of life: this is the moment of death. At the moment of death, the body that belongs to us no longer obeys the same laws that it had obeyed all through life; nevertheless, the laws that it obeys are the laws of nature. When we have died our bodily organism returns to the natural substances that were at work in our body during life. During our life, chemical and physical forces are at work in our physical body. Our digestion is a physical process; our breathing is a physical process. Even what takes place in our eyes when we are seeing is a physical process; it is something similar to the process that takes place on a photographic plate when we are photographed. Our body is a flowing together of physical and chemical forces; but we cease to be a flowing together of chemical and physical forces when we fall prey to death. This body no longer holds together; it flows over into the stream of general physical appearances.

However, it is impossible for the human body as such to be only a chemical and physical composition, for in the very moment when the physical and chemical forces are left to themselves, they go in an entirely different direction; they are joined with the stream of general chemical and physical processes. They no longer produce the visual, auditory, and thought processes; rather, they unite with entirely different processes. Thus there must have been something else present that caused them to create an organism during our lifetime. An hour before death this organism was composed of no other substances than it is composed of an hour after death. The physical composition is exactly the same. However, the life element is no longer present. What caused these physical substances to work so powerfully, in a way they would otherwise never have worked if they were left to themselves, is no longer present.

This observation leads us to understand that this body, made up of physical and chemical substances, would be an impossibility if only physical and chemical forces worked in it; therefore it must be enlivened by, and filled with, a higher principle that organizes, ensouls, and enlivens what is lower. The next principle that ensouls and enlivens our body is what ensures that our body during our lifetime does not fall apart. That which brings this about, we call the astral element in the human being.

We can say precisely what the astral element is in the human being. It is what causes to happen in every human being who has such an element within, something that we characterize as pain and pleasure in the widest sense. Pain and pleasure are something that appear in our bodies (and in bodies that are similar to ours in terms of astrality) and that cannot be caused by chemical and physical matter. Consider a crystal or any other physical substance composed of chemical substances. Any process that occurs in the physical world could happen to such a crystal, but not pleasure or pain. These can be found only in human beings and in other beings that are organized in the same way as human beings. These beings are permeated by an element that can feel pain and pleasure. If you kick a stone, it will fly off somewhere, or fall and make an impression. If you influence such a natural object in a specific way, you can observe what happens to it. You can even

do something to it that destroys it, but it will never feel pleasure or pain. Pleasure and pain extend only as far as the astral world extends.

And just as I belong to the external physical world through the chemical and physical processes taking place within me, so too do I have the various and real nuances of pleasure and pain in me. Through these various nuances and appearances of pain and pleasure I belong to a world that permeates our bodily world and ensouls it, and that exists outside me as well as in me. Within space we find not only the air that sustains our bodily existence through life, but also an astral world that permeates it; we human beings participate also in this astral world just as we participate in the physical world. And so just as we could not live as physical beings without physical forces flowing through our organism, just as little could we live as pain and pleasure beings, as astral beings, without our participation in the astral world and in what lives and weaves in that world, which constantly permeates and spiritualizes us. Just as our skin delineates us from the physical world and thereby individualizes us, so too we are closed off from the astral world in general. Within this world we are individualized as single astral beings and participate in this astral world around us.

We have pointed to a world that permeates and weaves through our physical world just as a world of sound from the *Ninth Symphony* weaves through the world in which a snail also lives. In ordinary life we perceive the world through our senses, but we are not in a position to perceive the world of weaving spirit that penetrates us and forms our own astral organism. The fact that we do not perceive a world is no reason to say that this world does not exist. Why can you perceive every other person as a physical being sitting here in this room? Because you are designed to perceive the physical rays of light through your eyes, you see the physical bodies of the people around you. These physical bodies are real for you. They would not be there for you if your eyes were not there to see them. So too, pain and pleasure are present in each of these people in countless nuances. There is a world in each one of them that is just as rich as the world you see with your eyes; it is a rich world of pain and pleasure. And there is a second body just as real as your physical body, which permeates

the physical body completely. You cannot say that only what you see is real, only what you perceive physically. Each of you knows that a world of pain and pleasure lives in you, really lives in you just as much as muscle and nerve live in you. Only because your spiritual eyes are not yet opened do you not see these realities. If your eyes were opened to this, then just as you see their skin color and clothing, you would see that all those around you are permeated by forces and beings that are real, and that we can identify as pain or pleasure. For those whose sense is opened to these realities, this world is just as real as the physical world.

In addition to the physical body there is also the astral body in every human being. It is called that because it shimmers in a bright light for the clairvoyant. This light is the expression of an individual's entire life of pain and pleasure, of everything that lives in him or her as feeling. Not only do you know that you consist of flesh and blood, but other people can see it as well; but your feelings of pain and pleasure are present only for you as long as another does not perceive them. Your astral organism is somewhat larger than your physical body, extending a bit beyond it. Think of a hall in which a gathering of people is taking place and in which various lecturers are speaking. If a clairvoyant looks into the room with seer's eyes, he or she perceives not only the spoken words, not only the sparkling eyes and the speaker's physiognomy, but also something else. A clairvoyant would see how passions play over from the speaker to the other people; how the sensations and feelings in the speaker glow; and for example, whether the speaker is speaking out of anger or enthusiasm. A clairvoyant would see that someone speaking out of enthusiasm has the fire of the astral body streaming forth to the listeners; and with a large audience, a clairvoyant would see a multitude of rays calling forth pain or pleasure in the speaker. There is an interplay of temperaments that unfolds openly and clearly in front of the seer. This astral world, of which we are a part, is just as real as the external world in which we live.

It was not for nothing, not without a purpose, that the theosophical movement has pointed out the existence of these invisible worlds of which human beings are a part, and into which we are constantly

sending our actions. You cannot speak even one word or grasp one idea with your mind without feelings streaming out into space and having an effect there. Just as our physical actions influence things in physical space, so too do our feelings permeate space and influence people and the entire astral world. People are usually not aware that a stream of effects goes forth from them; that they are a cause, the effects of which can be perceived everywhere in the world. They are not usually aware that they can thereby cause damage; and that they thereby send streams of pain and pleasure, of passions and drives into the world that can influence other people in a most injurious way. They are not aware of what they are actually doing with their feeling life.

Our ability to know is not destined for a purposeless existence; it exists not merely for us to know things; it exists not merely for itself. It has become a beautiful cliché in the scholarly world of the West to say that knowledge exists for the sake of itself. Those who immerse themselves in western wisdom will find something other than knowledge for its own sake. They know that when it comes to knowledge it is important to use this knowledge to be active in the world. We get to know the physical world so that we are not acting chaotically in physical nature. And we get to know higher nature in order to work in this higher nature in a conscious way. Those who know and master this higher nature learn to work in it consciously; they learn how to master and control their thoughts, and not allow them to work arbitrarily or accidentally. They do not accidentally allow them loose, but rather hold them under control. They learn to control their inner life, to regulate their inner life so that it influences the surrounding world in the most ideal way, ennobling it. In this way the higher worlds, which (allow me to stress this) are just as real as our physical world, indeed even more real, achieve an enormous significance for the physical world. Those who know that what happens in the astral world is much more important for world evolution than what they see and are able to do in the physical world will properly appreciate this world and its significance.

If you ascend even higher, you would find worlds that are even more important than the astral world. The Christian religion also

speaks of such worlds. What it designates as “soul” is the astral world, what it designates as “spirit” is what you know in theosophy as the “mental plane.” Why is the higher, the astral world so infinitely more important than the physical world? Because the physical world is nothing more than an expression of this astral world, an effect of the astral world. I would like to cite a phenomenon as an explanation that will show you that what happens in the astral world is infinitely more significant than what happens in the physical world. What I will now say is designated in the teachings of mysticism and in theosophy as the mystery of birth and death. This is one of the greatest mysteries or secrets of the world. We are speaking of seven secrets of the world.[†] Those who think superficially (and the world today is all too inclined to think superficially) will readily accuse us of unclarity and fanaticism. But we theosophists know what the three words, *perceiving, thinking, and presuming*, mean. They were frequently mentioned in the first centuries of Christianity, in which Christianity still belonged to the deepest religions of the world. These three words were named next to each other. The fact that *presuming* was mentioned along with perceiving and thinking shows us that, with respect to knowledge, people were not as immodest as they are today. Yes, today people are immodest with respect to knowledge; they are immodest because they are disinclined toward everything that their senses and their understanding cannot grasp. Just imagine if a snail were to say, “There is nothing here in this room other than what I perceive.” Would we not have to say that this snail is displaying great immodesty with respect to knowledge? Do not be deceived. The situation is, in the worst sense of the word, exactly the same with people who say, “There is nothing in this world that my reasoning cannot perceive and understand.” There are two things in the world, perceiving and thinking, that convey to us beauty, greatness, and number. But there is yet a third principle, which always causes us to be modest, which causes us to strive, which always drives us deeper into the world: that is presumption. By this is meant the presumption that there could be something else in the world other than what we know.

In this the theosophical movement is distinguished from all other movements seeking knowledge. What do ordinary scientists want,

scientists who are proud of their culture and immodest with respect to their ordinary, acquired knowledge? They want to follow up on everything that they can perceive and know, and they want to expand their knowledge to countless other things. This is the same as a snail wanting to crawl around in every direction to perceive what it can; it would not perceive anything other than what its snail organs could perceive. It is the same with people. For this reason, presuming (that there could be more than what can already be perceived and thought) was added to perceiving and thinking. For if we develop ourselves further, higher organs of perception will unfold in us that allow us to see what is usually closed off to us in the world. Thus the attitude of theosophists is different from ordinary scientists; theosophists want to develop themselves, and they honestly believe in the development of their abilities and make the effort to work on themselves. This, my friends, is the theosophical attitude: we work on ourselves so that organs for higher perception are developed; so that we are in a position to perceive what is significant and important in what surrounds us. This must increasingly become the western attitude if western humanity is not to be entirely dissolved in the flow of materialism. If this theosophical attitude spreads more and more, then people will understand that everything that is external—physical facts and appearances—are the consequences, the effects, of deeper-lying causes that lie in the astral or even higher worlds.

Western science is usually satisfied to research the physical body in all its component parts. But the theosophical attitude asks: did this body put itself together? Where could the reason for this composition lie? Can we believe that the forces out there in nature felt the need to fit themselves together to form a human being? No. Those who are able to look into higher worlds know that human beings, before they live in a physical organism, before they are born, live an astral existence. It is just as true that we had an astral existence before our physical existence, before our birth, as it is true that we have an astral existence also after our birth, and this extends further than our physical body. All of this is included in what we call the mystery of birth and death.

Theosophy understands the importance of the third word:

presuming. What I presume today will perhaps tomorrow already be knowledge; and what I presumed only yesterday becomes a certainty for me today. Those who trust in the depths of this presuming do not believe in limits to knowledge. They say to themselves, "I do not believe that my knowledge at any point in time is the most profound." Thus we are clear about the fact that the laws, the essence, of even the most important phenomena in nature are deeply concealed. "Full of secrets in full daylight, nature does not allow her veil to be removed." Nature, all of life, is mysterious; and humanity's task is to penetrate therein. For it is the task of the human being to work with the mysteries.

We speak of seven great mysteries of life. There are seven great secrets that reveal the seven great phases of life. They are called "the unspeakable." The fourth of these great secrets, to which you will be gradually introduced through these lectures, is the secret of birth and death. It is not the case that we need to lift a veil in order to understand the mystery of birth and death. The body that lives between birth and death is sought out by another body that lives only in the astral world. Our astral body is present before our physical body. It is the keynote, so to speak, of our feeling life, the basic tone of our temperament and our passions. This is what the clairvoyant sees in the astral world. Before a human being is born this keynote, which is carried by everyone, forms the physical body. Our physical body does not create our passions, desires, and temperament; rather, these come from another world and seek out a corresponding body. Therefore every human being is equipped with an entirely unique soul. Those who are in a position to really study humanity know that people are different one from another; that there are no two people who are the same with respect to passions, desires, and bodily nature. Perhaps with respect to their physical bodily nature they may not be so very different, but people are incredibly different in regard to their astral body.

Before a human being is born, a clairvoyant can see, streaming toward the place of birth, the astral body of the person, the sum of his or her desires, drives, and passions, which will develop later in the physical body and begin to interact with the external world. And

within this astral body, as the innermost being of the incarnating person, is the actual higher spiritual being of the individual. This higher spiritual being descends from an even higher world. Within the astral world this higher spiritual being is surrounded by what we call the substance of desire, of astrality. It moves through the astral world with the speed of the wind. A clairvoyant can see it in the astral world long before its birth. It is present in a luminous bell-shaped form and descends upon the human body in order to spiritualize the body. What we say today concerning such astral matter easily attracts the charge of fanaticism; it is natural that when we speak of such things in the world of today we can be so criticized. Therefore we must be all the more careful. We must not allow ourselves to speak of these things; that is, we should not speak of them unless we are just as solid and certain in the astral world as we are in the physical world.

I regard it as a requirement of all teachers of theosophy that they represent only as much of the teaching as they can be responsible for according to their best conscience; this means that I demand of all theosophical teachers that they report only what they themselves have directly experienced and therefore know as direct knowledge. Theosophical teachers should not say a word concerning these higher worlds unless they are in a position to do research themselves; exactly with the same law that says that no one can speak concerning chemistry who has not studied it. For this reason in lectures I will say only what I am in a position to say with absolute certainty. No one is in a position to describe the astral world in its entirety; it is richer and more comprehensive than the physical world. I admit that even a spiritual researcher can make mistakes in the details, just as one can err in the physical world if, for example, one wishes to determine the height of a mountain. But just as little as such an error in the details would be a reason to deny the physical world, just as little should a person be tempted to deny the reality of the astral world because of an error in details.

Before human beings are born they live as beings of desire with their "body of longing" in the astral world. Birth and death do not exist in the astral world in the same sense as in the physical world. The mystery of the so-called elective affinities (attraction through choice)

holds sway in the astral world. Here the same principle prevails as in the physical world with our desires and wishes. Just as one desire unfolds out of another, so too do things happen in the astral world. One being is unfolded out of another through an eternal propagation, without our being able to designate anything as death or birth. The beings are subject to attraction through choice, not birth and death. Why is it that physical beings are subject to birth and death? This is the question I wished to address today in particular. Where do birth and death come from? As I have said, before human beings live in the physical world, they live in the astral world and are subject there to attraction by choice; birth and death do not exist there. But here there is birth and death because the astral world forms the midpoint between two other worlds.

Human beings are citizens of two worlds. We point downward toward the physical world and upward toward the highest, the spiritual world. Through our astral nature we unite the spiritual world and its eternity to the physical world. For a long, long time, through several cosmic epochs, we were merely astral beings. We now stand in the fifth root race[†] [epoch], the post-Atlantean age that was preceded by the fourth and the third. Only in the third root race, in the Lemurian age, did the human being become a physical being. Before that we were closer to the astral world. Back then, however, when we were still astral beings we did not have the power of the spirit. Our higher, spiritual soul united with our astral being in the moment in which the spiritual united with the physical. And this united physical-spiritual being then required physical birth and death. For this reason, because human beings are the arena for the highest spiritual beings, they must be born and die within the physical world. Our astral being is neither born nor does it die. Our spiritual being preserves its eternal nature in this way: over time our physical being is destroyed in order to ascend again into the spiritual world and then descend again into the physical world. Goethe hinted at this in his prose hymn “Nature”: Life is her most beautiful invention, and death is her trick in order to have an abundance of life.

This cooperation between birth and death, the mystery of all of life, will occupy us further in these lectures; also we will get to know

the astral world, concerning which I have not said very much until now, in order to understand that there are more beings than human beings can dream of in our present-day materialistic attitude.