

Anthroposophy and the Riddle of the Soul

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Human beings confront the riddles of existence only once we have developed a certain level of consciousness about life, when we feel the urge to formulate representations, sentiments, and feelings about their relationship with the world. But once we get there, these riddles truly represent what one might call a vital question, for they are not just the expression of theoretical longings, purely external cultural questions. Indeed, they affect our entire stance in the world, the manner in which we find our way in life, the level of inner security and steadiness with which we go through life. Everything depends on the solution to these riddles.

Furthermore, there is a substantial difference between various kinds of existential riddles.

When human beings face nature, we need to form representations and feelings about our relationship with nature. To make a comparison: when people attain consciousness in the fashion I have described, unless they can familiarize themselves with particular phenomena presenting them with mysteries of nature, their existence feels like a night of the spirit; they feel adrift in a dark world with no way to orient themselves. At the same time, this relationship with the cosmic secrets of natural existence remains, to some extent, external; it concerns their external relationship with existence.

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We feel very differently about these riddles when they are the riddles of our own soul. We live in these riddles; they constitute what may be the immediate source of the soul’s health or illness, and can become the source of physical health or illness. For soul life is extremely complex, no matter how simple it may at first appear. Science has accepted without question that what inhabits our consciousness throughout our waking days, from morning to night, is only one part of our soul life. A major part of our soul life lies dormant in unconscious (or, I might also say, subconscious) layers or depths; it rises from the depths in the form of vague sensations, ill-defined moods and other soul-contents, forming what is an incomplete condition of our soul.

The perceived happiness or unhappiness of our life is related to what is thus sunk in the obscure underground of our soul life. And those who attempt, through the anthroposophical path, to fathom the life of the soul will soon learn that every-

thing which thus dimly emerges from the depths of the soul is connected with the physical body. We realize the extent to which, silently at first, then more and more strongly, our entire state of health, what makes us competent or ill-fitted for life, can depend on these subconscious soul moods.

I do not intend to speak to you today in the way people frequently speak about this unconscious state of soul in which everything that glimmers obscurely in consciousness gets stuffed into the large vessel of this unconscious, and people form more or less vague notions about the way

this unconscious, or this subconscious, works. I have been speaking for many years about matters of anthroposophical research and will not start out from the most elementary aspects of this research, but rather will examine how, in their primordial sense, these matters of soul life are connected with happiness or unhappiness. In this respect, I would like to consider today many things that affect the human soul, flooded as it is by all kinds of initially unknown forces, with appeasing or disquieting effects, causing us happiness or suffering.

Even a superficial consideration of our soul life shows us two clearly distinguishable poles: on one side, the life of representations, with everything that plays out clearly, luminously, in our consciousness; on the other side, our will life, which to some extent rises up from the soul's dark and obscure underlayers.

As I have told you often, in the ordinary course of human life we distinguish two conditions of consciousness: the waking state and the sleeping state, of which only one is an articulate conscious state. In the sleeping state, the conscious life of representations stops, and the entire soul life sinks into more or less opaque darkness. But if we are completely objective about our waking soul life, we are bound to say that we are only really awake when we are thinking in representations. When awake, to the extent that our consciousness is full of clear representations and luminous thoughts, we are more or less in charge. Our will impulses, our actions, are also accompanied by thoughts. But even when dealing with the simplest bodily movements, we are completely in the dark about the manner in which conscious thinking is connected with what actually takes place within a will impulse, an activity. I know very little, I am really groping in the dark, about what actually happens inside my limb when I as much as raise my arm, or when the thought aimed at raising my arm wants to realize itself, shoots in, as it were, and willfully sets the arm in motion.

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What takes place in my physical organism is just as remote from wakeful daytime consciousness as what takes place in the human soul between falling asleep and waking. We really must state quite unambiguously: when it comes to human soul life, the sleeping state is ever pervasive; even in our physical waking state we experience the impact of sleep. And only in our representations, only in the experience of clear, light-

filled thoughts, are we ever fully awake. Between these two states, the fully wakeful state of representations and the life of the will sunk in shadows, there lies, partaking of both, the life of feelings and moods. Our feelings permeate our representations. Out of our feelings, we bring particular sympathies and antipathies to the life of representations, and thereby connect or separate our representations. Whatever flows into our will impulses is accompanied by emotional judgments—when perceiving

some activities as dutiful, for instance, and others as lapses in our duty. To the extent that we experience a certain feeling of satisfaction about our “dutiful” activities, or a sense of dissatisfaction about deeds that are unsuccessful or in some other way misguided, our feeling life flows back and forth between our representations and our will life.

But actual soul riddles do not arise for the dull or insensitive person who surrenders at one moment to representations and at another to feelings and the will. These riddles appear to a person as he becomes increasingly conscious. Yet even then, the riddles never fully rise to the conscious level, but belong to a domain of more or less subconscious experiences. We are never entirely clear just how deeply our day-to-day happiness or sadness is affected by our moods, the composition of our soul-life. We still need to investigate and clearly express what lives dimly in our consciousness. And please remember the following as you listen to the explanations that follow: I will put into clearly defined terms things that are

never that clear-cut in our consciousness, yet are present in the soul, things we sense, things we feel, without being able to bring them up to consciousness, things that contribute to our good or ill health. Soul-riddles are never purely theoretical, which is precisely why they are truly existential.

When we surrender to our representations—again I am spelling out what we really feel, something that is never completely conscious—we experience something like the vanity of our existence. The life of representations is a life in images. During our waking hours, this life is filled with impressions and perceptions received from the outer world. Experiences in nature create the content of our representations, they live within us; these we draw upon as our memories. Yet we are always aware of the fact that we are active, to the extent that we process these representations. When we separate and connect them, we are inwardly active, but the activity is never completely present in our mind. What is present is, to some extent, a mirroring of the external world. We know that, for our representations, we are dependent on the outer world, that what we have is merely an image of this outer world. Insofar as we live in representations, we live in images; in our representation-life, we do not experience any full-fledged content. No matter how paradoxical it may seem, this feeling is expressed subconsciously. And no matter how dim its presence in our consciousness, it lives in the subconscious and expresses itself in fearful, anxious feelings about our representations.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this subterranean stream of the human soul life is real. Most people do not know anything about it, yet most people—all people, actually—are constantly under its influence. And this stream is a fearful, anxious one. It feels as if we could lose ourselves in the world, as if we were standing on the edge of a precipice, because our world of representations is a world of mere images. And a vague longing then arises in the soul: where, in this barren world of images, shall I find existence?

It is possible to compare this unconscious feeling in the subterranean stream of the soul with

the feeling we experience in the physical realm when we run out of air, when we experience air-deprivation and conscious feelings of anxiety or panic. Actually, the life of representations is always accompanied by perceptions akin to those experienced consciously as a result of this physical condition. And, thus, one way to look at the riddles of the soul is to picture something rising from the abysses of the soul, germinating or slumbering in the soul, rather than engaging in theoretical considerations.

On the other hand, when we surrender to the will element, we experience the opposite condition. There is another subconscious stream in the soul. Here we feel exposed to our desires, our emotions, our instincts; we experience that something nature-like plays into the human soul, something that does not lead to clear thinking. It is to some extent plunged in a reality, a concrete reality, that we cannot permeate with light, something that creates darkness in us. And when we direct our observation to the subterranean

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streams of the soul, we must again admit: attempting to characterize what lives in the soul's depths always means dealing in contradictions—we must admit that what lives there is felt unconsciously. One can characterize it by saying: in our consciousness, we experience anger in the same way we feel the inability to breathe out, for instance when the circulation of

the blood is disturbed so that the air we breathe is not properly transformed in the body, leading to a kind of asphyxia. Something like an angry mood always results from such absorption in the will element of the human soul.

These are forces deep in the human unconscious, forces whose surges constitute the really puzzling element in human soul life. If we merely take the pictorial quality of representations, or the will in its compelling force, as they present themselves to consciousness, we merely experience these riddles of the soul as imprecise, vague moods, yet gain no clarity about the soul's riddles. At bottom, we are unclear about what is working in us, what has such a deep influence over our feeling of happiness or unhappiness in life.

We must always repeat: the riddles of nature differ from the riddles of the soul in that the latter are experienced inwardly. They flood over from

deep subterranean streams of the soul and must first be articulated.

