



Rudolf Steiner Occult Science (GA 13)

Chapter II. The Essential Nature of Mankind

In the observation of the human being from the point of view of a supersensible mode of cognition, the general principles of this method become immediately applicable. This observation rests upon the recognition of the “revealed mystery” within the individual human being. Only a part of what supersensible cognition apprehends as the human being is accessible to the senses and to the intellect dependent upon them, namely the physical body.

In order to elucidate the concept of this physical body, our attention must first be turned to the phenomenon, the great riddle which lies at the center of our observation of life, that is to death. And in connection with death to the so-called lifeless nature, the mineral kingdom, which always bears death within it. We have referred to facts that are only fully explainable through supersensible knowledge and to which a large part of this volume must be devoted. Here however, a few thoughts must first be offered for the sake of orientation.

Within the manifest world, the physical body is the part of the human being having the same nature as the mineral world. On the other hand, what differentiates man from the mineral, cannot be considered as physical body. Especially important in an unbiased consideration is the fact that death lays bare the part of man which after death is of the same nature as the mineral world. We can point to the corpse as the part of man subject to the processes of the mineral realm. It can be emphasized that in this part of man's being which we now call the corpse, the same substances and forces are active as in the mineral realm. Equal stress must however be laid upon the fact that for the physical body disintegration sets in the moment death occurs. Yet we are also justified in saying that while it is true that the same substances and forces are active in both the human physical



body and the mineral, during man's life their activity is dedicated to a higher purpose. It is only when death occurs that they work identically with the mineral world. They then appear as they must appear according to their own nature, namely, as the dissolver of the physical bodily form.

Thus, we can differentiate between the visible and what is concealed in the human being. For during life, the concealed must wage constant battle against the substances and forces of the mineral element in the physical body. The moment this battle ceases, the mineral activity comes to the fore. This is the point where the science of the supersensible must enter--as it must discover what it is that maintains this battle. For this is hidden from sense-observation and is only accessible to supersensible observation. In a later chapter of this work, we shall consider how the human being is able to reach the point where this hidden something becomes manifest to him just as the phenomena of the senses are manifest to the ordinary eye. Here the result of supersensible observation must first be described.

It has already been indicated that the description of the path on which man attains to a higher perception, can be of value only after he has become acquainted in simple narrative form with what supersensible research reveals. In this regard it is indeed possible to comprehend what one cannot yet observe. Indeed, the right path toward perception takes its start from this comprehension.

Although the hidden something which battles against the disintegration of the physical body can be observed only through higher perception, its effect is clearly evident to reasoning that limits itself to the outwardly manifest. These effects express themselves in the form or shape into which the mineral substances and forces of the physical body are fashioned during life. After death, this form disappears by degrees and the physical body becomes a part of the rest of the mineral world. Supersensible perception can observe as an independent member of the human being, what prevents the physical substances and



forces during life from taking their own path, which would otherwise lead to the dissolution of the physical body. Let us call the independent member the Etheric Body or Life Body.

In order to prevent misunderstandings from the very beginning, two things should be borne in mind when these terms are used. In the first place, the word 'ether' is here used in a different sense from that of modern physics, where ether is used to describe the supposed carrier of light, the 'luminiferous ether'¹. Here however, the word will be limited to the meaning given above. It will be used to describe what is accessible to higher perception and for what is recognizable to sense-observation only in its effects, that is through its ability to give a definite form and shape to the mineral substances and forces existing in the physical body. The word 'body' also must not be misunderstood. In designating the higher things of existence, it is necessary to use the words of ordinary language, and for sense-observation these words express only the sensory. From the standpoint of the senses, the ether body is naturally nothing of a bodily nature, however refined we may picture it.

With the mention of the etheric body or life-body, our description of supersensible realities is already bound to come into conflict with contemporary opinions. The evolution of human thought has led to the point where in our age the discussion of such a member of the human organism is considered as something unscientific. Materialistic thought sees in the living body nothing but a combination of physical substances and forces like those found in the so-called lifeless body or in the mineral. The combinations in the living body are only supposed to be more complex.

Not long ago ordinary science still held other points of view. If we study the writings of many serious thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century, we realize how at that time even 'genuine scientists' were aware that something more is present in the living body than in the mineral. They spoke of a 'life force' or 'vital force'. True, they did not conceive it as a 'life-body' in the sense we have described it above, but there was in their



minds a dim underlying feeling that something of the sort exists. To their way of thinking, it was as though the life-force were present over and above the physical substances and forces in much the same way as in the magnet the magnetic force is present over and above the mere iron. Then came the time when this 'life force' idea was eliminated from accepted scientific thinking. Purely physical and chemical causes alone were deemed sufficient explanation for everything. Latterly a reaction has set in today among many modern scientific thinkers. It is admitted on many sides that the assumption of something similar to 'life force' is not after all pure nonsense. The scientist who admits this, however, will not be inclined to make common cause with the point of view presented here concerning the life body.

As a rule, it is useless to enter into a discussion from the standpoint of supersensible knowledge, with people holding such views. Rather it should be recognized that the materialistic conception is an inevitable aspect of the great progress of Natural Science in our time. This progress rests upon enormous refinements in the means of sense observation, as it is a characteristic of human nature through evolution to bring to a certain degree of perfection particular faculties at the cost of others. Precise sense-observation which has developed so significantly through natural science, caused the cultivation of those human capacities that lead into 'hidden worlds' to retreat into the background; but the time has come again when this cultivation is necessary. However, recognition of the hidden worlds will not be furthered by combating judgements which are only the logical outcome of its denial; rather by putting forward the hidden reality itself in a true light. Then those for whom the time has come will acknowledge it.

It was necessary to speak of this here in order to keep people from assuming the author is ignorant of the viewpoint of natural science when he speaks of an 'ether body' which in many circles is considered as something purely fantastic.



This etheric body then, is a second member of the human entity. For supersensible cognition it possesses a higher degree of reality than the physical body. A description of its appearance to supersensible perception can only be given in a subsequent chapter of this book after the sense in which such descriptions are to be taken has become clear. For the present it may suffice to say that the ether body penetrates the physical completely and that it is to be looked upon as a kind of architect of the latter. All organs are preserved in their form and shape by means of the currents and movements of the ether body. The physical heart is based upon an 'etheric heart', the physical brain upon an 'etheric brain', and so forth. The etheric body is organized like the physical body, only with greater complexity. And whereas in the physical body there are relatively separated parts, in the etheric all is in living interflow and movement.

The human being possesses this etheric body in common with the plants, just as he possesses the physical body in common with the mineral element. Everything living has its ether body.

Reference:

An Outline of Occult Science, Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York, 1972, 388 pp., translated from the German by Maud and Henry Monges and revised by Lisa D. Monges ISBN 0-88010-368-X.