

Chapter 3

Economic Renewal, Cosmology, and the Meaning of Life

Our world, so we see and hear on all sides, is drowning in materialism, commercialism, consumerism. ... The root of materialism is a poverty of ideas about the inner and outer world. ... Materialism is a disease of the mind starved for ideas.¹⁹

– Jacob Needleman, *The American Soul:
Recovering the Wisdom of the Founders*

Strange as it may sound, we can't just focus on economics to change economic systems. We have to go deeper and further.²⁰

– Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations:
Creating a Caring Economics*

First of all, get a broom and out with everything that negates the spirit in economic life. On that depends the future welfare of mankind. ... Away with everything that rejects the spirit in economic life. ... Otherwise, economic chaos will result and with it the general chaos of civilization.²¹

– Rudolf Steiner, *Spiritual Science as a
Foundation for Social Forms*

All social institutions are an expression of what we think and feel about the world and our fellow human beings, whether we are conscious of it or not. Our thoughts and feelings, in turn, are a reflection of our worldview, which includes our views on the nature of the human being, the meaning and purpose of life, and our core beliefs and values.

The modern market economy, as an example, is both a byproduct and a reinforcement of the materialistic worldview that has gripped human consciousness in recent centuries. Materialism is a perspective that recognizes physical sense-perceptible matter as the only reality and asserts that everything, including thinking, feeling, and willing can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena. It is a view that denies the reality of spirit in the human being and nature. Irrefutably, the so-called natural science that is based on materialistic assumptions has with the aid of technology helped make possible great advances in science, medicine, transportation, communication, and many other fields, for which we can be exceedingly grateful. But through the influence of materialism and economic life, our thought power and human ingenuity, which are spiritual capacities, have been employed largely in the pursuit of the limited goals of outer advancement and material rewards. Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, expressed it this way in his testimony before a House of Representatives Banking Committee in 2002: “It is not that humans have become any more greedy [sic] than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed [have] grown so enormously.” And we should note that the monetary incentives for expressing greed have also grown enormously.²²

Given this situation, people within the modern alternative economic movement have come to the highly significant realization that it will not suffice simply to change outer economic structures. As the quotation by Riane Eisler suggests, we need to go much “deeper and further” in order to transform economic life in any meaningful way.²³ For our consideration here, “deeper” means right down to the meaning and purpose of life and the origin of the universe, and “further” means into other fields of social science such as anthropology and sociology, and into the realms of culture and politics. The recognition that we need a worldview that can help us overcome unrestrained egoism in economic life has led alternative economists and businesspeople to search for a more meaningful and comprehensive cosmology or cosmic

story than is provided by materialistic natural science. The economist David Korten explains the social effect of materialistic science in this way:

As [materialistic] science tells the cosmic story, consciousness is nothing more than an illusion born of chemical reactions. It is a story without meaning or purpose that leaves us with little reason to restrain our hedonistic impulses.²⁴

Not only does a materialistic worldview offer little incentive to overcome self-interest and greed when opportunities to do so arise, it also provides little or no appreciation of the kingdoms of nature. It persuades us to view the environment abstractly, as merely a natural resource to be exploited for the satisfaction of material needs instead of a source of material and spiritual nourishment that needs to be treated with reverence.

Unlike a materialist perspective, the anthroposophical spiritual science pioneered by Rudolf Steiner provides a spiritually meaningful and powerful cosmic story.²⁵ It has the potential to help us acquire the insights and courage needed to combat the unrestrained greed and gross inequities that are so common in economic life today, to build a new economy based on care and concern for others, and to acknowledge the underlying unity of human beings and nature.²⁶

From the perspective of spiritual science, the physical or material world as we know it is the result of a spirit-to-matter condensation process that occurred over great eons of time.²⁷ All that we associate today with the material world—the laws of biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy; and all social groupings, including corporations, political parties, religions, and families—are expressions and manifestations of spirit.

Spiritual science does not contradict or deny the valid findings of natural scientific research, but rather supplements them and makes them more complete. What we can call the spiritual world consists of beings, forces, and laws of which the physical world is a manifestation. And just as we can

gain an understanding of the material world through study and research, we can likewise study the indications of spiritual science and conduct spiritual-scientific research into the same phenomena. As with natural science we can use spiritual science to support social life in ways, for example, through education, agriculture, and religion. Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, and the Christian Community Movement for Religious Renewal exemplify thriving practical initiatives in these fields that enjoy the benefit of spiritual insight into the human being and nature.²⁸ Similarly, Steiner used spiritual insight to establish a new foundation for social life, including economics.

An essential component of the spiritual-scientific (anthroposophical) worldview is the evolution of human consciousness. Only when we recognize that human consciousness was once quite different from human consciousness today can we properly evaluate societies and social structures of former and current times.

If we go back in time far enough, we find an innate spirituality as part of the consciousness of all peoples, somewhat similar to the consciousness of indigenous peoples of only a few hundred years ago.²⁹ Human beings in those earlier times perceived spirit in nature. Consciousness for them was an experience of participation and oneness with nature and with each other. With ever-deeper research into and mastery of the material world and the development of technology—a kind of sub-nature—we have come to experience an increasing separateness from our spiritual heritage. Modern consciousness has enabled us to gain mastery over the physical world but has brought with it a consequent loss of spirit-experience.

The emergence of individual self-consciousness is an important result of this descent into matter. This enhanced sense of individuality is reflected historically in the demand for democracy or political equality.³⁰ From a spiritual-scientific perspective, the development of natural science, technology, and commerce, with the attendant loss of connection to spiritual realities, is an appropriate and necessary step in the evolution of human

consciousness, at least up to a certain point. However, through the course of human evolution, we are meant to reawaken to the objective reality of spirit, but now in full consciousness. The loss of instinctive, innate (automatic) spirituality has made individual freedom a possibility, and has allowed us to develop a strengthened “I” consciousness through which we can and should become conscious co-creators of future human evolution.

However, the advancement toward freedom does not guarantee that we will always make appropriate decisions and choices; freedom also means having the opportunity to become distracted from what is important in life, to be led astray, and to make errors in judgment. We now have crucial decisions to make regarding our social life and the environment. The question is: Can we take the necessary actions soon enough to avert global economic, political, and environmental disasters?

Another important outcome of the evolution of consciousness is the arising of both social and antisocial forces in the human soul. Individualism, and consequently egoism, will grow significantly in the future as human beings progress on the path toward freedom and renewed spirituality.

We cannot eradicate antisocial forces in our souls since they are a natural corollary of growing individualism, self-awareness, and self-actualization. But we can choose to focus our efforts on nurturing and strengthening truly healthy social forces within our being with practices and forms that will be discussed in later chapters.

Steiner describes what he calls an archetypal social phenomenon that takes place in every human encounter. Whenever two or more people communicate there are two polar tendencies at work. One is a social disposition: the tendency to diminish one’s self-concerns and thoughts and rather live into the thoughts of the others. The other inclination is the antisocial tendency to remain awake exclusively to one’s own thoughts and opinions.

For the most part, there is a continual subconscious oscillation in every human exchange between self-focused attention and attentiveness to the

thoughts of others. Since antisocial forces are growing ever stronger, we need to make a continual effort to counterbalance them by developing a greater interest in the thoughts and feelings of others, even if they differ from our own. Rudolf Steiner calls the development of ever more interest in others the foundation or backbone of social life in the future.

In the next section we consider some of the outer arrangements recommended by Steiner that will foster the development of social forces in the human being.