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The Riddle of Humanity, GA# 170

by

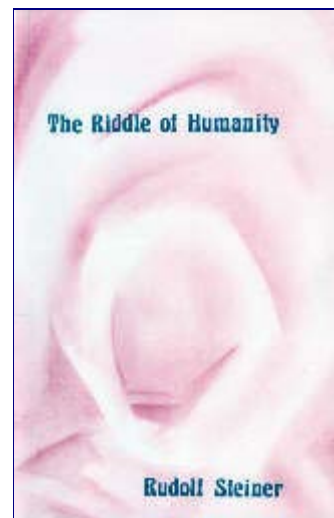
Rudolf Steiner

The Spiritual Background of Human History

Fifteen Lectures in Dornach in 1916

Published by Rudolf Steiner Press in 1990

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998



In the first lecture Steiner, after greeting the workers at the Goetheanum, talks about a decadent genius of his time, Otto Weininger, variously characterized as a genius by the literati and a madman by the psychiatrists. After publishing two books and traveling extensively, at age 23 he moved into the house where Beethoven died, and committed suicide. Steiner uses the life, books, and ideas of Weininger to illustrate what happens when one's future incarnation erupts into the present incarnation.

[page 13] Everyone carries a little bit of the future, but normally it does not come to expression in this life. The ideas for the next incarnation are already there, at work in the brain, just as the seed is within the plant. . . . A plant is killed by the seed it carries within itself; the seed is what leads it to wilt - and this more or less how we are killed by our next incarnation.

[page 14] If the next incarnation erupts into the life of this incarnation, as Weininger's did, it brings a caricature of death, suicide.

If the mere thought of the seed were to kill the plant, the seed would never have a chance to develop - thus the proper pace of life is for the actual appearance of the seed to lead to wilting and death. Rightly understood, our next incarnation should be resting quietly within the present one, and progressing in the fullness of time.

The major theme of the rest of the book involves two distinct realms of nature: one, a fixed period of daily, monthly, seasonal, and yearly cycles and two, a realm of unpredictable weather, temperature, storms, earthquakes, etc.

The first realm, the realm of fixed cycles, corresponds to the twelve senses in the human body and the second less predictable realm corresponds to the seven processes of the human body. As we shall see, the juxtaposition of twelve fixed attributes and seven movable attributes corresponds to the twelve signs of the zodiac and the seven movable planets that rove among the twelve signs.

Let's look first at the [Table of the Seven Processes](#) because these processes pervade the human organism and provide the substrate that supports, makes possible the operation of the twelve senses. Note how the seven processes are a hierarchy in that the first process is necessary for the second one, the second for the third, and so forth all the way down. These processes correspond roughly to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy

of needs. First one must be able to breathe, then to be warm, then to be nourished by food, then to be able to absorb nourishment and eliminate waste, then to maintain this homeostasis of life, then to grow, then to reproduce. It can be argued that each of the seven processes are inner processes, but the first three processes of breathing, warming, and nourishing have a special connection with the outer world: some air must be there to breathe, some warmth must exist in the outside world, and some food for nourishment also. The remaining four inner processes have the task of reforming what has been taken in by the first three.

Inner/Outer	The Seven Process of the Human Body
Outer	Breathing - Every living organism has this process
Outer	Warming - This occurs along with breathing, sustained by it
Outer	Nourishing - This provides the energy to sustain the processes below.
Inner	Secreting - Absorption of nourishment and elimination of waste
Inner	Maintaining - Whatever is Secreted must remain connected with the life processes and this process ensures that happens
Inner	Growing - Every living thing has a process of inner growth: the ability of one part to produce other parts as it increases in size
Inner	Reproducing - This process produces an entire individual including the reproductive process to continue the life form

Now let's look at the [Table of the Twelve Senses](#) as they exist in us during the Earth phase. It is important to note that Steiner details in Lecture Seven of this book that there were only seven senses during the ancient Moon phase of human development, but it is beyond the scope of this review to list those, however, we can note that our senses then "were much livelier, much more full of life." The human senses during that phase were more suited to a clairvoyant and dreamy experience of life. It was a consciousness both more imaginative and more dull than our current consciousness, one unsuited for the freedom to act on one's individual impulses - a freedom that only came with the current Earth phase of human evolution and the development of our full complement of twelve senses as shown below. [Note that the usual five senses of materialistic science are included in the table and expanded upon]

After presenting the twelve senses, Steiner explains that his intent is not to overturn the senses as understood by materialistic science, but to expand them.

[page 86] As you know, I have never spoken of materialistic science without acknowledging its truth and its greatness. I have given lectures here that were for the express purpose of appreciating materialistic science fully. But, having appreciated it, one must deepen one's knowledge of materialistic science so lovingly that one can also hold up its shadow side with a loving hand. The materialistic science of today is just beginning to bring its thoughts about the senses into some kind of order of life, of movement and of balance from one another, and they have begun to treat the senses of warmth and touch separately. The other senses about which we have been speaking are not recognized by our externally-orientated, material science. And so I ask you to carefully distinguish the ability to be aware of another *I* from the ability you could call the consciousness oneself. With respect to this distinction, my deep love of material science forces me to make an observation, for a deep love material science also enables one to see what is going on: today's material science is afflicted with stupidity. It turns

stupid when it tries to describe what happens when someone uses his ego sense. Our material science would have us believe that when one person meets another he unconsciously deduces from the other's gestures, facial expressions, and the like, that there is another *I* present - that the awareness of another *I* is really the subconscious deduction. This is utter nonsense! In truth, when we meet someone and perceive their *I* we perceive it just as directly as we perceive a colour. It really is thick-headed to believe that the presence of another *I* is deduced from bodily perception, for this obscures the truth that humans have a special, higher sense for perceiving the *I* of another.

Location	The Twelve Senses of the Human Being
Within	<i>Touch</i> - the internal response to a contact with the outside world
Within	<i>Life</i> - this sense is the internal feeling of well-being, of being alive
Within	<i>Movement</i> - being inwardly aware of the way body parts move in relationship to each other
Within	<i>Balance</i> - this sense orients us to the world with respect to up, down, right, and left
Outside	<i>Smell</i> - the sense that allows one to come in contact with the outside world via odors carried by the air
Outside	<i>Taste</i> - a deeper connection with the outside world in which flavors are directly sampled
Outside	<i>Sight</i> - the sense that takes in the exterior images of the outside world
Outside	<i>Warmth</i> - with this sense we are aware directly of the warmth of another body
Outside	<i>Hearing</i> - this sense can tell us more about the inner structure of an object than sight. When an object resonates, we learn about its deep structure from the sound we hear.
Outside	<i>Speech</i> - the sense of <i>speech</i> or <i>word</i> or <i>tone</i> - which is the hearing that involves meaningful words
Outside	<i>Thought</i> - this refers to the deeper sense of entering the being speaking through their words
Outside	<i>Ego</i> - this is the sense of <i>ego</i> or <i>I</i> which enables us to turn our thinking towards the being of another and to behold their <i>I</i> , their unique individuality directly

One of the salient points of Steiner's legacy of greatness is that he always spoke highly of the truth and greatness of material science, while always pointing out the areas in which it has fallen short of expressing the whole truth that includes both the material and the spiritual aspects of the world. This long quotation must be read in its entirety in order to appreciate this sterling attribute of Steiner's. The "stupidity of science" that he refers to is *stupidity* in its original descriptive sense of being "slow to apprehend," not in the current evaluative sense of "lacking mental acuity." Materialistic scientists are in no way slow to apprehend the reality of the physical world, but have certainly been slow to apprehend the reality of the spiritual world, up until now.

[page 94] The establishment of twelve senses, each at rest in its own proper region, provided a basis for earthly self-awareness. The fact that the senses of Old Moon were still organs of life meant that Moon man could possess an astral body, but not an *I* ; for

then the seven senses were still organs of life and only provided the basis for the astral body.

Steiner goes into detail about these particular seven senses and how they operated during the Old Moon phase of evolution. Now let's examine what Steiner says about the zodiac of our senses and the planets of our processes.

[page 99] Outside us in the spiritual world there are significant spiritual beings whose nature is reflected within us - within the bounds of the zodiac of our senses through which the planets of our life processes move. . . . This world that is accessible to imagination is reflected from beyond the constellations of the zodiac into the senses of the human organism. To picture this, imagine that the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon are reflections of what exists beyond the limits of the zodiac: they have spiritual counterparts that exist there and the astronomical bodies we can observe with the bounds of the zodiac are only reflections of these counterparts.

To Steiner the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon are connected with the four inner processes of our human body: Secreting, Maintaining, Growth, and Reproducing. Just as the world of Imagination is a reflection of the four inner processes, so also there is a world of Inspiration which is a reflection of the three outer processes of breathing, warming, and nourishing and are connected with the three planets of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars.

There is a famous quote by Kierkegaard that "Life can only be lived forward and understood backwards." I'm sure he didn't mean it in the sense of the backward spiritual world as Steiner describes in his *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* and in Lecture Eight.

[page 104] For spiritual consciousness only begins when the life processes or the sense processes are reversed and run backwards. Therefore people need to prepare for the future by getting accustomed to thinking backwards. Then they will begin to take hold of the physical world by means of thinking forwards. Our ability to imagine the physical world is a result of the direction of our thinking.

In his recent book, *Time's Arrow*, Martin Amis takes the reader through the life of a German concentration camp, where workers return from a hard day's work in the field every morning looking upward to the smoke floating into the chimneys carrying their loved ones's bodies. German soldiers go into the building and take gold from their personal stash and carefully place fillings into the cavities of the teeth of the newly arrived people. The people are clothed and their health gradually improves.

In the last year before I retired, the video game Doom was a popular pastime at work. With four people playing each other from their own cubicles, we were running all over these imaginary worlds, shooting the other three players whenever we were able to surprise them. It was the fastest half-hour of the day. We'd grab a quick bite at the beginning of the half hour lunch break and then it was break-neck speed the rest of the lunch period. At my retirement party two of my Doom buddies, Kenny and Hawk, presented me a "Doom Master" plaque. With this bit of introduction, now read my exercise in backwards thinking.

At my retirement party I present a Doom Master plaque to Kenny and Hawk who feed it into a color printer that removes the ink from it and spits out a blank page. At 12:30 a game appears on my desktop computer in which I go about reviving Kenny and Hawk by sucking bullets into my gun after which they come back to life and disappear behind a wall. As I suck more and more bullets up, I must occasionally drop cases of ammo on the floor as I run backwards through doors which always magically open for me after which I wait for a second to inspect the closed door in front of me.

When noon arrives I am extracting food from my mouth to place in a package to bring home in the morning for a restoration process which ends up with my wife Del returning the

restored food to the A&P grocery store which gives her money in exchange for it. If she uses her Discover card, she gives them a receipt which they feed into a machine to erase the amount and Discover sends a credit notice to bank each month which adds an amount to her bank statement. Each month she looks at the amounts and canceled checks in her bank statement to verify the right amounts have been added and returns the checks and statement to the bank so that the checks can be returned to the merchants where she will be returning newly restored merchandise during the month. When she arrives at each merchant to return an item, a check for the amount of the returned item will be taken from the cash register where it is magically waiting for her. She will carefully erase all the writing on the check with her pen until the check is blank and then she will re-attach it to its place in her checkbook.

In writing this, the similarity of a ticket to a show and an award presentation occurred to me. A ticket is turned into someone before you enter an event materially [forward in time] and on the other hand, an award is handed in before entering an event spiritually [backwards in time].

[page 113] But we must accustom ourselves to seeing those senses that in the Earth sphere only serve the inner being of the organism as the shadowy reflections of something that is immense and significant for the spiritual world once we have passed through death: the sense of movement, the sense of balance, the sense of smell, the sense of taste and, to a certain degree, the sense of sight. We have emphasized the fact that in the spiritual world the sense of movement enables us to move among the beings of the various hierarchies in accordance with the way they attract or repel us. After death we experience our connection with the hierarchies as spiritual sympathy or antipathy.

In Lecture Ten Steiner describes a discussion he had with scholars of the Nietzsche Archive. They were wondering how Nietzsche might have arrived at his doctrine of the eternal return. Steiner told them that it was simple to him: Nietzsche, he said, "often arrived at an idea by formulating the contradictory of some idea he encountered in another person." So Steiner suggested that the scholars examine the works of Duhring in Nietzsche's personal library, since Duhring held that "the original configuration of the earth made it impossible that anything should ever repeat itself." Here's what happened:

[page 151] We then went to his library and located the books. We found them the relevant passages - with which I was quite familiar - and found heavy markings in Nietzsche's own hand and some characteristic words - I am no longer sure exactly which word he used in this particular case - Nietzsche would write something like 'ass' or 'nonsense' or 'meaningless'. There was such a characteristic word written in the margin at this place. Thus the idea for 'the doctrine of the eternal return' was born in Nietzsche's spirit when he read this passage and formulated the contradictory idea!

Let us end this review with Steiner's detailed look at what would have happened to us if there were no Ahriman around to deceive us:

[page 163] But what would happen if he were not there? Then we certainly would be some kind of lambs. We would feel the impulse to think of things exactly in accordance with the facts before us, and we would consistently allow ourselves to speak only about the facts we observe. But we would have to do this! There could be no talk of freedom! We would have to act in this way; we never could act otherwise; and we never could become free beings. If we are able to speak the truth as free beings it must be possible for us to lie, and we are therefore obliged to develop within ourselves the power to conquer Ahriman every time we speak. He has to be there, 'provocative and active, doing his devil's work'. Those words should give you a picture of Ahriman's presence and of how error only occurs when we follow him directly instead of remembering that he is the one to be overcome as, provocative and active, he goes about his devil's work. Some speak about flight. They say, pulling long faces: 'But is this not perhaps something

ahrimanic? Oh, I must not have anything to do with this!' In many cases, the only thing all this signifies is that the person in question is moving towards the comforts of Lucifer and leaving freedom behind. . . . To a certain extent we need Ahriman on one side and Lucifer on the other in order to bring about a balance between them.

This passage reminds me of those who rail against the latest tools of Ahriman, the television and the Internet. "Oh, we never watch TV at our house!" Surely the pride they exhibit in these statements warms the heart of Lucifer.

One last insight I'd like to share which came to me near the end of the book as I pondered the unanswered question, "How is it possible that the body of our previous incarnation is embodied in our head in this incarnation?" The answer came in a very simple way which only requires a rudimentary knowledge of automobiles to understand. I have a friend, Shelby, who collects John Deere tractors from the Thirties. He has a 1933 and 1936 model. In the 1933 model, there is no ignition switch, in fact, no ignition system. Consider that for a moment. We take the presence of an ignition switch for granted, so much so that it seems impossible to have an automobile or tractor without one. Here's how it works: the 1933 John Deere tractor has a flywheel on the side of it that one can spin to start the motor. When one is finished plowing, etc, one simply shuts off the fuel supply to stop the motor, therefore no ignition switch is necessary. Probably some very early automobiles operated that way.

But in each generation of automobiles, the components that were stored in the body of the automobile move to the control center or dashboard in the front of the operator or driver of the vehicle, what we might call the brain center or "head" of the automobile. In the second generation of cars the ignition switch appeared and soon a starter switch was added so that from the brain center, the motor could be started without getting out in the weather to crank it by hand. Soon the gaslights on the fenders were replaced by electric lights and switches for these were added to the dashboard control central. In the 1990's, several generations removed, the dashboard instrument cluster now tells us if the airbags are ready, the anti-lock brakes are working, if the doors are ajar, if the battery is strong, if the fuel is sufficient, and so on, all the items that in former incarnations one had to walk to the body of the car [to check the fuel level with a dipstick, for instance] now are prominently displayed in the head of the car.

There in the design of our automobiles is displayed this cosmic principle proffered by Steiner that one would otherwise require several incarnations in a human body to observe. This shows that to develop something new requires that one builds on what exists, the old. Nowhere is this shown more pointedly than in this passage from the Fifteenth Lecture.

[page 214] The fifth post-Atlantean epoch [present day] had to develop materialism. Therefore the programme for materialism had to be introduced from out of the spiritual world. And the first stage of the programme of materialism is contained in the doctrine of the idols, which did away with the old Aristotelian doctrine that words refer to categories which have real significance. Today, humanity is already very advanced along the course of regarding anything that is not perceivable by the senses as idols. Bacon is the great inaugurator of the science of idols.

The next challenge for mankind is to build a new control center out of the body of materialism that was created by Francis Bacon and in that new head to establish the basis for a world of spiritual understanding that is as comprehensive as Bacon's world of materialistic understanding.

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