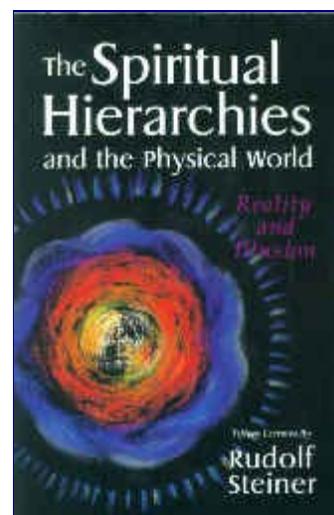


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A READER'S JOURNAL
The Spiritual Hierarchies and the Physical World,
GA# 110
by
Rudolf Steiner
Reality and Illusion
Fifteen Lectures in Düsseldorf in 1909, Berlin in 1911
Published by Anthroposophic Press in 1996
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



With the advent of the Copernican way of viewing the solar system and the Baconian way of viewing the world from our senses, something was lost by humankind, and Christopher Bamford states it so well in the Introduction of this volume:

[page 7] All emanation — any prolonging of the creative act through angelic "extensions" or Intelligences — became suspect. Religion grew deistic; God became the sole creator; and humanity's relation to meaning was reduced to what reason could manufacture on the basis of inferences from the senses alone.

What Steiner does in this book is to re-introduce to the modern reader the *layers of God*: the Spiritual Hierarchies and how they are interwoven with the external physical world that we experience with our senses. How is it possible for Steiner to know these things?

[page 15] All that arises in time originates in the eternal.

We have access to what arises in time through our senses, and to what originates in the eternal through super-sensible sight of what is called the Akashic Record or Chronicle. There is no electronic viewing screen for studying the Akashic Record. The only instrument delicate enough is the human being, one who is trained in the initiatory methods of super-sensible sight. Steiner was such a human being and he reports on his viewing of the Akashic Record in these lectures that are reproduced for us in this book. Steiner spent forty years preparing for his "spiritual mission of marrying initiation wisdom and modern scientific consciousness."

By means of his "initiation wisdom" Steiner is able to research the Akashic Record, and by means of his "modern scientific consciousness" he is able to cogently report on his findings in a way that speaks to the modern scientific reader.

As an aid to such readers I have constructed a [Table of Evolution](#) that is similar to Mendeleev's Periodic Table of the Elements, which organized the elements of the atomic realm in a useful way for the study of chemistry and physics. The [Table of Evolution](#) organizes the Stages of Evolution based on the material in *Spiritual Hierarchies* and other Steiner material. [See [Table of Evolution](#) Note: best way to view is in a separate window, so you can view the Table as you read the review.]

Across the top of the Table is the Epochs of Evolution that we as humans are concerned about. Down the left edge of the Table is the Stages of Evolution as indicated by the name of a particular being. Each position in the Table can be designated by a number for convenience, e. g., [4,1] is the Physical Body, which the Mineral Stage of Evolution has during the Earth Epoch. The word in *italics* indicates the

condition of the various bodies during a particular Epoch. Thus the Physical Body of the Mineral exists in a *solid* form during the Earth Epoch. [4,2] is the Etheric Body, which the Plant Stage of Evolution has during its Earth Epoch. [4,4] represents the challenge for Humans during the Earth Epoch — the development of their "I" or Ego Body.

By inspecting the Table we can see immediately that the Physical Body is the oldest body of Human Beings, as it originated during the *fire* or *warmth condition* of the Old Saturn Epoch. During that same Epoch Angels had already developed an Etheric Body, being one stage of evolution ahead of humans. During the next Epoch, Jupiter, the challenge for Humans will be to develop their Angelic Body.

With the help of this Table it is now possible to explain quickly and comprehensively, in a short presentation to modern researchers into consciousness and scientists from all fields of exoteric study, the process of evolution from a Steiner perspective. What helped me to understand the process I will explain below was a bumper sticker I saw on a car yesterday that caught my attention. The bumper sticker said simply: **Being Safe is No Accident.**

What this said to me is that, in any work place, some folks will pay careful attention to the safety rules, and by applying themselves industriously, will work their entire careers there without an accident. Call these folks **A**. The **B**, **C**, and **D** folks are not paying attention at the same level and they have accidents. They are not being safe. This thought helped me to understand how the beings at each Epoch progress at different rates and sort themselves into various stages of evolution.

First, note that each Epoch offers a challenge to the entire class of beings, and each class of beings has a different challenge. As we know from our individual experiences of life, not everyone applies themselves with equal diligence to the challenges that life presents to them, like in the case of the workers above. We are in a position now to see how Steiner applies this simple principle. He shows us that the evolution of the species proceeds in the opposite way to that presented by the Darwinian point of view: it is not the case that humans evolve from animals, but that animals *devolve* from humans, in a special sense that will be explained later.

In the [1,4] position of the chart is the earliest form of the Physical Body on Old Saturn. These Humans exist as individuals, some of which are more attentive to their challenge than others. Consider a scale of attentiveness and industry of application which goes from **A**, the highest level, to **D**, the lowest level. During the Old Saturn stage of evolution, all of the Humans receive the same amount of help from the [1,5] Angelic Beings but the **A**'s pay the most attention and, with their high level of application, apply what they learn so that at the end of the Old Saturn epoch, the **A**'s have the beginning of an Etheric Body. We show their progress by placing the **A**'s in [2,4] of the [Table of Evolution](#). The remainder of the Humans, with their various lesser degrees of attention and industry, have not acquired the beginnings of an Etheric Body, so they have managed to enter the Old Sun epoch with only a developed Physical Body. We show these Beings in Stage [2,3] of the [Table of Evolution](#).

Let us follow the **A**'s as they progress during the Old Sun stage. Again there are four categories of attention and industry that may be distinguished. Call these **A**, **E**, **F**, **G**. The **A**'s by the end of the Old Sun stage have developed the beginnings of an Astral Body by attending to the inputs from [2,5] and applying what they learn with vigorous industry. We show their accomplishment by placing these **A**'s [a subset of the previous **A**'s] into [3,4] in the [Table of Evolution](#).

The **E**, **F**, **G**'s with their lesser accomplishments have not managed to create an Astral Body by the end of the Old Sun epoch and we show that condition by placing them into [3,3] of the [Table of Evolution](#).

Again we follow the **A**'s through the Old Moon stage of development and by the end of that epoch, a subset of the **A**'s will have created the beginnings of an Ego Body, and the rest of the **A**'s (some subset of the **A**'s), call them **J**, **K**, **L**'s will have worked on an Ego Body but are not finished creating one. The **A**'s who created an Ego Body we place in [4,4], and the rest of the **A**'s (the ones that didn't) we place in [4,3]. Those **J**, **K**, **L**'s will be the higher mammals by virtue of their having bogged down at the Ego Body

creation stage. The **J's** will be the primates: the chimps, apes, and gorillas that share so many characteristics with humans. The **K's** and **L's** will be the higher mammals just below the primates, such as dogs, cats, and horses.

Let us go back and inspect what happened to the **B, C, D's** that we placed into [2,3] of the [Table of Evolution](#). They continue working on creating an Etheric Body during the Old Sun stage of evolution. By the end of the Old Sun epoch, let us call **B** those who succeeded in creating an Etheric Body, again through attentiveness and industry. These were the same **B's** who almost created an Etheric Body during the Old Saturn stage. As the Old Sun epoch ends, we show their progression by placing them in [3,3] in the [Table of Evolution](#). **C's** and **D's**, with their lower application, do not quite create an Etheric Body for themselves and we show this condition by placing them in [3,2] in the [Table of Evolution](#). These **B's** will continue to work on an Astral Body for themselves during the Old Moon epoch and arrive at the Earth stage with the beginnings of an Astral Body. These will be the lower animals by virtue of their having bogged down at the Etheric Body creation stage. There is a stage of animal development which takes the path [2,4] to [3,3] and these will be the intermediate animals, having bogged down at the Astral Body creation stage. The highest animals will be those who bogged down at the highest stage, the Ego Body creation stage of evolution.

Look at [3,2] of the [Table of Evolution](#) and follow the **D's** that were the least attentive and industrious of the original beings in the [1,4] stage on Old Saturn. These **D's** are still not able to create an Etheric Body during the Old Moon stage [3,2], therefore, at the beginning of the Earth epoch, they still have only a Physical Body. We show this condition by placing them into [4,1] of the [Table of Evolution](#).

This is a sketch of the process that goes on at every level of evolution, in every box of the [Table of Evolution](#). The four levels of attentiveness and industry by which the beings at each stage sort themselves out may be considered arbitrary, simply for the purposes of discussion, but they illustrate the sorting out that occurs in each class of beings at every stage of evolution.

To summarize: a being at each stage of evolution receives help from beings at a higher stage of evolution, and, to the extent that this help is freely received and utilized, the lower beings are able to progress to the next step in evolution. Rightly understood, this process will allow one to understand the deepest secrets of evolution.

A process is on-going, without beginning or end, it does not change, only the content on which it operates changes. Content is what arises in time, the process is eternal.

Observe a growing plant. In time it will add leaf after leaf as it reaches for the sky. The essence of the plant is minerals organized by its etheric or life body. With its etheric body, the plant can create roots, stem, and leaves, but leaves alone will not help the plant to reproduce itself. Something that is *not* in the plant is required for that to happen.

Sure, the plant can change the color of some of its leaves, it can organize these colorful leaves into a corolla, create a calyx of sepals, some male stamens, some female pistils. All this the plant can do alone with just its mineral and etheric bodies. What the plant cannot do alone is to create a seed with the potential for creating a new life. For that purpose the plant requires help from higher beings. Any being that possesses an astral body, which the plant is lacking, will do. [Remember from the [Table of Evolution](#) that plants at [2,4] are beings that were not able to create an astral body during the previous Epochs.]

Imagine a plant all abloom with flowers and no higher beings observe or visit its flowers. Lacking an infusion of astrality from higher beings, the flowers will wilt, and its seeds will fall to the ground to return to their mineral condition [die].

Imagine the same plant in full colorful bloom with bees buzzing in and out of the flowers, crawling all over the pollen covered stamens and dropping pollen from their legs onto the waiting pistils. As the bees thus carry pollen from the stamens to the pistils, some of the bee's astrality attaches to the pollen and

becomes attached to the seed that results when the pollen impregnates the ovule inside the pistil.

Now a miracle happens! The mineral and etheric plant takes on an astral glow surrounding its flowers, and the seeds have the potential to create a new plant. It is as though the bee, or the bird, or the human gardener, or the angelic garden spirit has created a copy of the final plant in astral form and has attached this astral blueprint to the seed, as a holographic image for it to grow into as the seed begins to sprout in the earth. New life has been created from the plant with the help of beings higher than itself.

Where are you, dear Reader? Are you producing leaves in your life? Are you like the plant producing leaf after leaf and wondering whether life is just about producing more and more leaves? Or are you producing flowers that will fall to the ground seedless? Where are you in your stage of evolution? Would you prefer to go it alone, to do it all yourself, using only your Mineral, Etheric, Astral, and Ego bodies? Or are you open to the energies and assistance from beings whose relation to you is similar to the relationship of bees to flowers? Is there an angelic glow that surrounds you even now?

In the world of spiritual activity we are as free as the flowers: we can choose whether to open ourselves to an infusion of energy from higher beings or not. Each one of us is a free agent of evolution, and it is our openness, our attentiveness, and our industry of application that will determine whether we finish our class with the **A's** or the **D's**.

And what is the task of Human Beings in this Earth epoch? It is to proceed to the next higher level of development at [5,4]. On page 67 and 68 Steiner explains what has to happen. To summarize: he says that our I or Ego Body has to work on Astral Body to attain mastery over it to create a Spirit Self or *Manas*. Then the **I** can work on the Etheric Body to create a Life Spirit or *Buddhi*. In the next phase the I works to overcome the powerful opposing forces of the Physical Body to create a Spiritual Body or *Atman*. Once we Humans have complete mastery of our Physical Body, what is next?

[page 68] The process continues higher and higher. We can look up to sublime beings who, dwelling in exalted spiritual heights become ever mightier. How do such beings become greater? At first, they need something, require something from the world. Later, they develop so that they can give something. *The fundamental spirit and purpose of development is that one proceeds from taking to giving.* We find an analogy in human development between birth and death. Children are helpless and must accept help from individuals in their surroundings. But, gradually, they outgrow this helplessness and become helpers in their own circle. The same is true of the grand span of human development in the universe.

To demonstrate that our world began with the process of giving, let us look at where the fire or warmth that permeated the Old Saturn Epoch came from. To do so, it will be necessary to create an [Extended Table of Evolution](#) by shifting the previous table three rows down and adding four more rows at the bottom to include the Powers, Might, Dominions, and Thrones. The rest of the Spiritual Hierarchy continues to the Cherubim, Seraphim, and then the Godhead of the Holy Trinity. The Cherubim and Seraphim have the same relationship to the Thrones or Spirits of Will that the Angels and Archangels have to us: they carry the messages of God's plan for the universe to the Thrones. The Thrones at the beginning of the Old Saturn Epoch poured forth their substance in an act of giving that generated the fire or warmth that permeated Old Saturn. As Steiner says it on page 123, "They cause their own warmth substance to seep into the mass of Saturn." (This sounds to me like the universe began in a whimper more than a bang.) What was this warmth substance?

[page 123] Did a warmth substance already exist? What existed before can only be described as a neutral cosmic fire that was fundamentally one with universal space. *In other words, to begin with there was only space.*

Steiner seems very much like a modern day physicist talking about *zero point energy*, that loophole in quantum physics through which all of the energy of the world could flow.

Once this warmth began to trickle into Saturn, the spiritual beings began to work from two sides. From within the Powers, Might, and Dominions, and from without the Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim. The Thrones "were able to trickle forth physical and warmth substantiality, were able, out of their own bodies, to bring forth the substance of Saturn.(page 127). The Thrones (Spirits of Will) created the warmth and the substance of our first physical body on Old Saturn [1,4] by an act of will. This sacrifice of the Thrones, originated in eternity, arises in each of us today when we feel permeated by warmth we do a good deed for someone else.

In the next Old Sun Epoch the Dominions (Spirits of Wisdom) work to add an etheric body which completely permeates the gaseous or *air* condition of the Sun [2,4], creating an inwardly alive being and causing *light* to appear. The light appears as the gifts bestowed by the Spirits of Wisdom are radiated back to its source.

[page 192] Where light occurs, the gifts of the Spirits of Wisdom are radiating back to us.

In the next stage of the Old Moon, the Might (Spirits of Movements) step in to "lead the beings, who would otherwise have had to depend upon themselves, into relationship with all of the other beings"(page 223). The origin of the need of a new relationship begins in the rejected sacrifices of the Cherubim. Thus the *water* condition of the Old Moon has its spiritual foundation in renunciation or resignation. From this stage of evolution came our Astral Body.

[page 207] Wherever there is water in the world, there is divine renunciation!

In our current Earth Epoch the Powers (Spirits of Form) bring into being our I or Ego Body and our *solid* form, and with the *solid* element (*earth*) comes death.

[page 240] Being separated from one's purpose and meaning is what we call death, and death presents and fulfills itself in the element of earth.

Now we are ready to read how Steiner summarizes the four elements of *fire*, *air*, *water*, and *earth* for us:

[page 240]With this, we come to the spiritual nature of what we call the fourth element in the universe. If fire is in the purest sense sacrifice — and wherever fire or warmth occurs sacrifice lies spiritually behind it; if, behind everything that is spread out around our Earth as air, we discover gift-granting or bestowing virtue; if we can characterize flowing water, that is, the fluid element, as spiritual resignations or renunciation; then we must characterize the element of earth as the only bearer of death, as that which has been alienated from its meaning through rejection. Death would not exist if there were no element of earth.

It seems to me that Steiner is saying that when we fell into the solid state of matter in this Earth epoch as human beings, we became the most alienated from our spiritual origins that it is possible to be, and that alienation comes with the necessary concomitant of death. By this point in the lectures Steiner has reached completion on a promise he made early on: to show us the only thing that shows itself as reality in the whole world of illusion. The subtitle of *Reality and Illusion* hints at this revelation.

[page 241] Here we have nothing less than the great truth that, *within the world of maya* [illusion] *the only thing that shows itself in reality is death!*

What is true lies behind all other appearances which are only illusions or *maya*. Only in death is our separation from the spiritual reality made real once again. Rightly understood, "death is the only reality" (page 241). In addition death is only possible for Human Beings, all other beings, both higher and lower, are only capable of experiencing transformation, metamorphosis, and reordering, not death. Minerals

experience no death; plants return to the living being Earth and sprout back out; animals return to their Group Soul that lives in the astral plane. Only Humans with their quadripartite bodies, having completed their descent into the *earth* or *solid* condition, can experience death. All events in the realm of appearances or maya have their origins in the spiritual world, all except one. That one exception is the deed of Christ in the Mystery of Golgotha. It has no prototype in the spiritual world.

[page 245, 246] It is an event that encompasses a death confined entirely within the physical realm. Therefore, it can only be understood within the context of the physical plane. Yes, it is one of the tasks of the human being on Earth to achieve this understanding in one of his or her incarnations.

I conclude this review of *Spiritual Hierarchies* with regret that I was not able to cover all the parts of the book. The entire section on how the realm of the zodiac is created by the prototypical animal nature of the hovering Cherubim is worth an entire review of its own. Lacking such a review, I would suggest a full reading of the book. "When learning something new, it's always best to know all about it before you start" is my way of approaching a new subject. It is a bootstrap approach, where we must know all about it before the first sentence makes full sense, so we read without meaning and slowly meaning begins to weave itself into our reading. I hope that reading this overview provided by this review, you will have had a chance to learn "all about it" before you start the book itself.

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