

# Matter Isn't Made of Matter

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Essay · 3 Comments · 18 min read · MARTIN ROZUMEK and HANS-CHRISTIAN ZEHNTER · February 26, 2025 · 298 views  
February 26, 2025

**Chemist Martin Rozumek and biologist Hans-Christian Zehnter have written separately on the subject of how the world can be understood without an atomistic conception of matter. They see earthly reality as an appearance specifically intended for us human beings. This has methodological and existential consequences for our relation to the world. They decided to write a joint essay for *Das Goetheanum* to accompany the publication of their recent articles in *Merkurstab* (Martin Rozumek)<sup>1</sup> and *Archivmagazin* (Hans-Christian Zehnter)<sup>2</sup>.**

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The starting point for our considerations is Rudolf Steiner's mantra-like statement in his introductions to Goethe's scientific writings: the sensory image of the world is a sum of metamorphosing perceptual content, without any underlying matter.<sup>3</sup> But, this does not apply to the "matter as a phenomenon, as an appearance" that seems to fill space,<sup>4</sup> which gives rise to the belief that the world is perceived as an appearance for the human senses and the human mind:

"If we begin with mental pictures of atoms, we become stuck in a materialism that ultimately leads to destruction. We can only cope with the world of perceptions when we understand it as phenomena, as a world of appearances. What we encounter through the senses is not matter at all. So, we must develop a feeling . . . when we look through our eyes and see the starry sky, see the formations of the clouds, see the inhabitant of the three kingdoms—the mineral, plant, and animal—and also of the fourth kingdom of human beings, we must not look for matter in all that we find approaching us through our perceptions. There is no matter there! These are all appearances, all phenomena, akin to the rainbow, for example, even though they appear much more substantial. [The human being should] perceive that which meets him through the senses as phenomena, as appearance, however substantial it may be. Even with the quartz crystal, even when we can grasp it with our hand (of course, with the rainbow, we'd go right through it) even if the sense of feeling [i.e., touch] is stimulated, we must still only speak of phenomena in regards to the quartz crystal; we mustn't fantasize that there is some material reality there, no matter how the view of nature today (so far astray from reality) imagines it. So what we find as 'material' phenomena are not material phenomena at all, they are not actually matter, in reality. They are just phenomena; they are what comes and goes from another reality; another reality that we cannot understand if we don't think about it spiritually."<sup>5</sup>

**Never Without Matter, Never Without Spirit**

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Nevertheless, Steiner's understanding of reality proceeds from the assumption that "spirit is never without matter, matter never without spirit."<sup>6</sup> But then, what is matter? How can we understand it if not as point-like atomic particles underlying all sense phenomena? We must come to understand it as sensory appearance itself, what "comes and goes from another reality that we cannot understand if we don't think about it spiritually." Matter is spirit that is revealed sensorially. It is presented in a way wholly different from spirit.

In the dual unity of spirit and matter, spirit is what we more or less consciously encounter from within as experience or activity, and matter is spirit that is presented to us as sensible perception from without. Earthly reality results from the coming together of two very different manifestations of spirit (the "other reality"): an appearance that presents itself to us as spirit and soul and an appearance that presents itself to us as sense material and substance:

From the depths of the world  
The rich, abundance of matter, full of mystery,  
Presses itself upon human sense.  
From the heights of the world,  
The clarifying word of spirit, full of content,  
Streams into the ground of souls.  
They converge in the human being  
Into a wisdom-filled reality.

Es drängt sich an den Menschensinn  
Aus Weltentiefen rätselvoll  
Des Stoffes reiche Fülle.  
Es strömt in Seelengründe  
Aus Weltenhöhen inhaltvoll  
Des Geistes klärend Wort.  
Sie treffen sich im Menscheninnern  
Zu weisheitvoller Wirklichkeit.<sup>7</sup>

It's remarkable that these two modes of appearance meet in the human being—in an inner space that also is the world. In keeping with Rainer Maria Rilke, we can speak of a "world innerspace" with regard to earthly reality as appearance.<sup>8</sup>

## **Material and Ephemeral *Physis***

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According to Steiner, matter, as a phenomenon perceived with our senses, can be regarded as the physical aspect of the world—in contrast to the spiritual aspect of the world, which is a phenomenon perceived with our spiritual faculties (Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition).

Some physical phenomena appear more "material" than others. Something tangible that can be weighed, such as a crystal, has more of a material character in the initial direct perception of the world than something that appears to the eye but cannot be touched, such as a rainbow, which seems less material and more ephemeral. To paraphrase the

philosopher George Berkeley, we can distinguish between things seen and things touched.<sup>9</sup> We can distinguish between a more material and a more ephemeral mode of physical appearance. The lower of our twelve senses, therefore, constitute more of a material-physical world, and the upper more of an ephemeral-physical one. The differentiation of physical phenomena into more or less material manifestations is helpful and far-reaching. Birds don't usually appear to us through our lower senses. Do we ever touch the birds we see every day? We rarely, if ever, experience the material physical appearance of birds through some kind of touching or holding. Birds are creatures that primarily appear to us through our sense of sight and hearing, like some kind of angel. When we catch a bird, we expose it to the danger of becoming objectified.

In the case of tangible and weighable material *physis*, there's a danger of perceiving its appearance as the "thing in itself." We say a table, as a physical object, is always there, even when we don't look at it or touch it, even when we are no longer in the room with it. A substance like sulfur has properties due to its molecular structure. Here is where Ahriman lurks, whispering in our ears this questionable conception of the world of appearances. By contrast, the view presented in this essay assumes that we humans are organized in such a way that we always manifest precisely what is relevant to us and our time. "Nature, or the being one refers to with this name, is always active and produces phenomena and events according to the needs of each moment, not, like some idle king relying on established legislation, simply folding its hands in its lap." Goethe marked this statement twice in the margin of his copy of Melchior Patrin's (1742–1815) *Zweifel gegen die Entwicklungstheorie* [Doubts about the theory of evolution].<sup>10</sup>

## The Image of Spiritual Beings

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If matter is something spiritual that appears sensorially, how can its spirituality be imagined? Our first experience of matter's spirituality is in our concepts. The other side of reality coagulates into them, and we grasp the essence of the world through concepts in our waking consciousness. If we increase this wakefulness to a seeing-thinking,<sup>11</sup> we begin to deal with specific content-filled entities. We touch them with our thinking and feeling; we're encouraged to approach them, to explore them; we can also shy away from them when we begin to suspect what they contain, what they demand, or how they may want to revolutionize our view of the world. In a way similar to how we encounter other human beings, we encounter spiritual beings, spiritual wholes, and forms that have content and a way of being—their own style of appearance. They can show us this side or that; they can pursue their own interests, impose themselves, hide themselves, and even deceive us. We can address them as spiritual beings, essences of mind.

Sensory phenomena are thus manifestations of spiritual beings. They are images or mirrors of a spiritual world of beings that reveals itself to us through sensory phenomena. This mirror can be described, using Eastern spiritual terminology, as *Maya*—a term

Rudolf Steiner used often. This doesn't diminish the significance of Maya: sense perceptions are to be experienced and inwardly pictured as the direct presence of the spiritual world within human beings.

This is also expressed in Steiner's image of the senses as cavities where the spiritual external world projects into human beings. Taking this into account, human beings restrict themselves to their inner worlds, differentiated into thinking, feeling, and willing.<sup>12</sup> Sense perceptions are not to be interpreted as a spiritual world that becomes transformed into some alien image of itself when sensed by a human being. Rather, the senses are the spiritual world itself within us. The human being "does not have the system of senses inherently connected to him. . . . It's not actually he who lives in this sense system but rather the environment. The environment has built itself and its essence into the sense organization. And the human being, through their image-beholding activity, also regards the sense organization as a piece of the external world."<sup>13</sup>

The direct encounter with spiritual beings would overwhelm an unprepared consciousness—consciousness would always fall asleep when the spiritual being revealed itself. The sensory, i.e., physical-material appearance, however, allows us to maintain our 'I'-consciousness during the encounter with the spiritual beings of the world. Sensory phenomena are a mode of appearance dissimilar to the spiritual mode that we know through spiritual comprehension, but they are phenomena that allow us to maintain our 'I'-consciousness (they even build up this 'I'-consciousness) and make possible cognition of what manifests itself to human beings. What appears as Maya is spirit through and through. It's a *spiritual*-material appearance and not a materialistic-material, atomistic appearance. It's a sensory depiction of what wants to show itself to us in it as a spiritual-soul entity.<sup>14</sup>

## Reading the Mirror of the Senses

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What is presented here in a more general way can be extended from understanding through intuition to clairvoyant experience. Our task as human beings is to turn to the world of appearances and accept it as readable—as a sensory appearance worth reading—so that by reading the inner content, we learn to find the authors of what is written, that is, the world of nature beings—from the elemental beings to the beings of the hierarchies.

Read world phenomena,  
then surmise the writers,  
then experience the being of the writers.

Die Welterscheinungen lesen,  
dann die Schreiber ahnen,  
dann die Wesenheit der Schreiber erleben.<sup>15</sup>

Maya is not to be understood as a world from which we should turn away from, as if it contains only sin and suffering. That understanding of the sense world would subject us to another whisperer, Lucifer. On the contrary, the sensory Maya, as presented in this essay, is a mode of appearance to which we turn to come into a true, awake, and

knowing encounter with the spirit. According to Rudolf Steiner, it is “self-evident that when our spirit and soul leave the sheath of the body [in order to come to knowledge of spiritual beings], [the human being] thrusts themselves outwards through the senses.”<sup>16,17</sup>

The world we reach here is no longer sensory—no longer spatial or temporal. It’s a world we experience outside of space and time. That means it is free of mental pictures. And yet, we can experience it! How? By the fact that we live through our experience of it, we direct our gaze towards these inner soul experiences when faced with sensory phenomena.<sup>18</sup> The innerspace of the world proves not to be empty at all, nor without lawfulness. It shows itself to be carried by beings. We read the sensory outer world as an inner world, as a large spiritual organism that consists of many different beings and regions of being—like a colony of bees made up of many different beings and their associated tasks.

How does this experience of spiritual beings feel in our soul space? It feels like an encounter; we encounter something defined by a specific content; we experience meaning and the creation of meaning—not in the sense of specific mental pictures, but in the sense of an experience of being filled or embraced. Our soul becomes a vessel for the presence of spiritual beings; we become a vessel for the essences of the things of which we are inwardly aware. Joseph Beuys would have characterized this inner presence with the term “directional forces” [*Richtkräfte*]. Gernot Böhme spoke of atmospheres, moods, impressions, or (with reference to Walter Benjamin) auras.<sup>19</sup> One can also speak of regions in this world innerspace, of regions that correspond more to fields of activity than to spatial territories. In terms of experience, they resemble domains, specific atmospheric moods that we wander through inwardly. In the ecclesiastical tradition of Middle Europe, the bearers of these domains are referred to as the heavenly hierarchies. Traditionally, these heavenly hosts are divided into three main groups: the highest or first hierarchy of the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; the middle or second hierarchy, of Kyriotetes, Dynamis, Exusiai; the lowest or third hierarchy of Archai, Archangels, and Angels.

The working of these three hierarchical groups can be experienced within our souls as thinking, feeling, and willing. What we call “willing” is our experience of the first hierarchy’s work upon the ground of our soul; what we call “feeling” is our experience of the working of the second Hierarchy; and what we call “thinking” is the experience of the working of the third Hierarchy upon our soul’s foundations.<sup>20</sup> The world of the divine hosts thinks, feels, and wills within us.

But, when we turn to the sense world, we notice that we experience something very similar there. For example, when looking at ruminants, we not only discover a strong emphasis on the metabolic and limb systems, we also experience it. We can have the same experience when looking at a flying bird as we do when we think independently and autonomously.<sup>21</sup> We can experience feeling in the versatile feline, who alternates smoothly between lustful predation to blissful, sleepy mildness. What is revealed as the threefolding of the animal world can also be found in the unified orientation between the human being’s above, middle, and below. Looking downwards brings the world of matter,

darkness, and heaviness before us. Looking upwards, the sun-drenched blue sky lifts us into the lightness of thought; looking around the world reveals all its soulful and multicolored variegation.<sup>22</sup>

## The End of the Paths of God

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The physical world as sensory appearance is the outermost emanation of a spiritual world innerspace consisting exclusively of spiritual entities. In the words of Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782), physical appearance is the end of the path of God,<sup>23</sup> the outer onion skin, as it were, of a spiritual world of beings. Behind this last layer, there's no further emanation; there's no atomic matter out of which physical appearance arises. This last layer is itself the material aspect of the spiritual world innerspace.

## Implications

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Today, materialism is no longer a theory about what makes up the world. Over the past hundred years, it's become an almost unquestioned attitude toward life itself. We initially perceive the world as material. New views of the world are emerging rather slowly, and new attitudes towards life are developing even more slowly. We'd like to contribute to this growth and stimulate discussion about it, especially within the anthroposophical movement. Today, we cannot remain indifferent to how we think about the world. As human beings, the further we follow the point-based understanding of atomism, the further we drive the development of the Earth into the state of a godless, illusory world. To return to the beginning of this essay: by holding onto the mental pictures of "atoms in themselves," we speak in favor of a "materialism leading to destruction." Through this way of looking at nature, we turn it into a sub-nature controlled by mechanical laws.<sup>24</sup> The Earth—along with us—is driven in a direction of development that detaches it further and further from its origin out of the divine-spiritual world of beings, and turns away from this divine-spiritual world's intentions to return the Earth and ourselves, through freedom, to their spiritual origins.<sup>25</sup>

Earth, is this not what you want:

Invisibly, to arise within us?—

Isn't it your dream

one day to be invisible?—

Earth! Invisible!

What, if not transformation,

is your urgent mission?

Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst:

Unsichtbar in uns erstehn? –

Ist es dein Traum nicht,

einmal unsichtbar zu sein? –

Erde! unsichtbar!

Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht,

ist dein drängender Auftrag?<sup>26</sup>

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**Graphics** Nina Gautier, 2025. Nina Gautier, a Swiss product designer and herbalist, is currently based in Basel, Switzerland. From 2015 to 2019, she worked as a graphic designer for the Weekly. Now, she works as a freelance designer. **More** [Nina Gautier](#)

## Footnotes

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1. Martin Rozumek, “Materie als Phänomen, Geist als selbstbewusste Aktivität: Versuch, einen unauflösbaren Gegensatz zu transformieren” [Matter as phenomenon, spirit as self-conscious activity: an attempt to transform an irresolvable contradiction] *Der Merkurstab* [The Staff of Mercury] no. 4 (2023): 248–257; “Stoffe und Prozesse: Erkundungen im Grenzgebiet zwischen dem Physischen und dem Ätherischen von Mensch und Natur” [Substances and processes: explorations at the border between the physical and etheric of human beings and nature] *Der Merkurstab* no. 5 (2023): 329–342. See articles for further references.
2. Hans-Christian Zehnter, “Durch die Brille der Subjektivität: Drei Schlüssel zu einem Verständnis von Rudolf Steiners Zwölf-Sinnes-Konzept” [Through the lens of subjectivity: three keys to an understanding of Rudolf Steiner’s concept of the twelve senses] *Archivmagazin* 12 (2023):46–73. See article for further references.
3. Rudolf Steiner, *Goethean Science: Introductions to Goethe’s Natural–Scientific Writings*, CW 1 (Tiburon, CA: Chadwick Library Editions, 2018).
4. See footnote 3.
5. Rudolf Steiner, *Polarities in the Evolution of Humanity: West and East—Materialism and Mysticism—Knowledge and Belief* (Forest Row, East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2022), lecture in Stuttgart on July 25, 1920. Omissions and additions in brackets by the authors.
6. For example, in the well-known verse “Seek the truly practical material life . . .” in Rudolf Steiner, *The Spirit of the Waldorf School*, CW 297 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995), lecture on Sept. 24, 1919 (incorrectly listed as Sept. 23 in this edition), “Supersensible Knowledge and Social Pedagogical Life.”
7. Rudolf Steiner, *Antworten der Geisteswissenschaft auf die großen Fragen des Daseins* [The answers of spiritual science to the great questions of existence], GA 60, 2nd edn. (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1983), lecture in Berlin on Oct. 20, 1910.
8. In the fourth stanza of Rilke’s poem “Es winkt zu Fühlung” [It beckons feeling] it says: “One space reaches through all beings: / world innerspace. Birds fly silently / straight through us. Oh, I who want to grow, / I look out, and within me grows the tree” [Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: / Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still / durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will, / ich seh hinaus, und in mir wächst der Baum].
9. Cf. Georg Maier, “Von der Natur der Sehdinge” [On the nature of things seen], *Das Goetheanum* no. 56 (1977): 68-69; Georg Maier, *Blicken—sehen—schauen: Beiträge zur Physik als Erscheinungswissenschaft* [Looking—seeing—beholding: Contributions to physics as a science of appearances] (Dürnau: Kooperative Dürnau, 2004).

10. Quotation from Stefan Bollmann, *Der Atem der Welt: Johann Wolfgang Goethe und die Erfahrung der Natur* [The Breath of the World: Johann Wolfgang Goethe and the Experience of Nature] (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2022).
11. See, for example, the chapter “New Perspectives” in Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Man* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1990): “Goethe speaks in his way of the awakening from ordinary consciousness and calls the soul faculty that is thereby attained ‘intuitional power of judgment’ [*anschauende Urteilskraft*]. According to Goethe’s view, this intuitional power of judgment gives the soul the ability to see what, as higher reality of things, is hidden from the cognition of ordinary consciousness. By professing such an ability in humans, Goethe placed himself in opposition to Kant, who denied human beings an ‘intuitional power of judgment.’ But, Goethe knew from the experience of his own soul life that it’s possible for ordinary consciousness to awaken to such an intuitional power of judgment.”—An example of such an intuitional power of judgment is what Goethe and Schiller called the “sensory-moral experience” of colors.
12. Cf. Rudolf Steiner, Renatus Derbidge ed., *Organisches Denken: Ausgewählte Texte* [Organic Thinking: Selected Texts] (Basel: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 2021), ch. 2, “Die Dreigliederung des menschlichen Organismus” [The Threefolding of the human Organism].
13. Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts* (Forest Row, East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2007), “The Sense- and Thought Systems of Man in Relation to the World.”
14. This world of appearances thus ceases to be *merely* a world of appearances. Rather, it’s a presentation of the spiritual world’s innerspace carried by beings and permeated by beings. “When ideas are experienced in addition to sense perceptions, then the sense world is consciously experienced in its objective beingness. Cognition is not a depiction of an entity, but the soul’s living into this entity. The progression from the unessential sense world to its essence takes place through consciousness. The sense world is only an appearance (phenomenon) as long as consciousness hasn’t yet come to terms with it. In truth, therefore, the sense world is the spiritual world; and the soul lives together with this sensed spiritual world by extending its consciousness to what it senses. The goal of the process of cognition is the conscious experience of the spiritual world, before the sight of which everything dissolves into spirit.” Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography: Chapters in the Course of My Life, 1861–1907*, CW 28 (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2006).
15. Rudolf Steiner, 1924, Notebook No. 336.
16. Rudolf Steiner, *Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms*, CW 199 (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1986), lecture in Dornach on August 8, 1920. Additions in brackets by the authors.
17. For the following statements, see also: Hans-Christian Zehnter, “Und Frieden den Menschen auf Erden, die eines guten Willens sind” [And peace on Earth to human beings, who are of good will] in *Ein neuer Mensch? Gedanken zum Menschwerden im 21. Jahrhundert* [A new human being? Thoughts on becoming human in the 21st century], edited by Peter Herrle (Birnbach, Germany: Rosenkreuz Verlag, 2023).



18. Cf. Steiner's statement that spiritual science "must be a kind of courageous science; a science that dares courageously to experience the impulses of truth not through intuition but through inner experience." Rudolf Steiner, *Menschenseele, Schicksal und Tod* [Human soul, destiny, and death], GA 70a (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 2022), lecture of Feb. 16, 1915.
19. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (New York: Routledge, 2017), part 1, ch. 2.
20. Cf. leading thought 59, 60, and 61 (see footnote 13).
21. Cf. Rudolf Steiner, *Harmony of the Creative Word: The Human Being & the Elemental, Animal, Plant, and Mineral Kingdoms* CW 230, (Forest Row, East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2002), lecture in Dornach on Oct. 27, 1923.
22. Cf. Hans-Christian Zehnter, *Anschaungen: Vom Vertrauen in die Phänomene* [Intuitions: on trust in the phenomena (Dornach: Verlag am Goetheanum, 2020).
23. Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, *Biblischen Wörterbuch* [Biblical Dictionary] under the word "Leib" [Body], "The body is the end of the works of God." The sentence was already quoted during Oetinger's lifetime as "Corporeality is the end of the path of God."
24. See footnote 13, "From Nature to Sub-Nature."
25. See footnote 13, "The World-Thoughts in the Working of Michael and in the Working of Ahriman," and all the letters of *The Michael Mystery*.
26. From "Ninth Duino Elegy"—Rainer Maria Rilke.