

As the editor of Goethe’s scientific writings, a task Steiner took on at Schröer’s recommendation and request, he immersed himself in Goethe’s works on morphology, botany, geology, meteorology, and optics. They led him in the same direction as his own studies at the Technical College and he had, on his own account, discovered and realized how significant they were. If one knows Rudolf Steiner’s questions and approach well, one can hardly fail to recognize, however, that it was not Goethe’s science that was his actual aim but that he strove toward a real science of the spirit. “My own soul impulse was directed toward conscious experience of the spirit, and the external world’s spiritual life brought me the Goethe task,” he would write many decades later in his autobiography.²⁰³ This intention was already apparent in his book *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge*. The task of editing Goethe’s scientific writings had been “assigned” to him.²⁰⁴ The development of a future spiritual science that had as its center the true understanding of the human individuality and the idea of freedom, on the other hand, was driven by his own innermost impulse. In a way, this was why *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge* culminated in a chapter on human freedom. The thinking human being, who was connected with the thought-world of the spirit, was—as Steiner pointed out in his preceding description of cognitive processes—“the support, the goal, and the central essence of its existence.”²⁰⁵ Now he wrote about human freedom, referring to the approach of Goethe and Schiller while distancing himself from Kant and Fichte:

If the truths one acquires through science arise from an objective necessity outside of thought, then those ideals that serve as the

foundation of one's conduct will be no different. Here, one acts according to external established laws, which provide a behavioral norm prescribed externally to that person. Nevertheless, this is the character of the *commandment* that humanity must obey; dogma as a practical truth is a moral commandment.

The foundation of our theory of knowledge is entirely different. Our theory holds that the only foundation for facts is the thought-content residing within them. Therefore, when a moral ideal arises, it is the inner power in its content that governs our conduct. We do not conduct ourselves according to an ideal given as a law, but according to the ideal, by virtue of its content, that is active within us. The motive for action is not outside, but within us. If we felt controlled by a sense of duty, we would be compelled to act in a specific way, because it commands us to do so; compulsion would come before will. This is not valid according to our view. The human will is sovereign and performs only what lies in the human personality as thought-content. The human being does not accept laws from an external power; rather, the individual creates them. According to our worldview, who, in fact, should give these laws to individuals? The world-foundation has poured itself completely into the world. It did not remain outside of the world in order to control it externally; it has not withheld itself from the world, but impels everything internally. Its highest form of appearance in the reality of ordinary life is thought and, with it, the human personality. If, therefore, the ground of the world has goals, they are identical with the goals that the human spirit sets for itself in life. We are not acting according to the purposes of the guiding power of the world when we search out one of the commandments of this power; rather when we act according to our own individual insights, the guiding power of the world manifests in them. This guiding power does not live somewhere outside of humanity as will; rather it has entirely renounced its own will so that everything depends on human will.²⁰⁶

Rudolf Steiner's biographer, Christoph Lindenberg, wrote of this passage that it was "an invitation to contemplate its meaning more deeply. In the final analysis, it appears to be the expression of a philosophy based on the life of Christ that has left behind the Old Testament world of commandments. By emptying itself completely

into the world, the spiritual essence of the universe has entrusted itself to humanity and placed itself at its disposal. It no longer appears as the divine judge holding sway over his servants. There is an echo here of the Gospel of St. John that says, ‘I no longer call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master does; I call you friends, because everything that I have learned from my father I have shared with you.’ (John, 15:15)”²⁰⁷ “*To your own ‘I is granted for your free willing . . .*”²⁰⁸



The original German version of *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge*, which was entitled *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Schiller*, was only 96 pages long. But it was a remarkable volume, encompassing in a small space a life and work project that clearly went beyond Karl Julius Schröer’s intentions and horizons. While Schröer knew about the project, he was not involved in its creation in the same way as he had been with the edition of the first volume of Goethe’s scientific writings, which Steiner composed under his supervision. He was not given each chapter to peruse or the galley proofs for correction. What Rudolf Steiner ultimately wrote “in reference to” Goethe, went rather too far for Schröer’s taste and he could not see it as being wholly in line with Goethe. The concept of freedom represented by Steiner and the empowerment of the human being it implied went against Schröer’s own self-image and his view of Goethe. In a letter, Rudolf Steiner explained to Schröer:

I wanted to show that in the worldview [of Goethe and Schiller] there are no actions that do not arise from the *inner* human being. Our actions are truly *ours* only when we ignore the concept of duty entirely and when our individuality prevails. While it is true that the mind “has formed itself and its content from observation of the external world,” it is equally true that it has formed this content in harmony with the disposition that emerges from its inner being and informs its actions. I am thinking of the words Goethe wrote

Grundlinien
einer
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der
Goetheschen Weltanschauung

mit besonderer
Rücksicht auf Schiller

(Zugleich eine Zugabe zu „Goethes naturwissenschaftlichen Schriften“
in Kürschners Deutscher National-Litteratur)

Von
Rudolf Steiner



Berlin und Stuttgart
Verlag von W. Spemann
1886



*Rudolf Steiner, Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen
Weltanschauung (Berlin und Stuttgart, 1886)*

in response to Stiedenroth's psychology, "He does less than justice to the entelechy which does not assimilate without also appropriating something of its own; and genius simply does not fit into this scheme. And in thinking he can derive the ideal from experience, saying that a child does not idealize; one could reply that a child does not procreate, for becoming aware of the ideal also presupposes a form of puberty."²⁰⁹

Rudolf Steiner held to his understanding of freedom and his productive and free "appropriation" of Goethe, whose work he saw as indeed being in need of preservation but also in need of further development. He agreed with Schröer's statement of 1884 that it was time to realize that "it was not in the first instance a matter of surpassing [Goethe and Schiller] but of reaching and understanding them, and of defending the possession thus acquired."²¹⁰ His work on the Kürschner Edition was based on the same view. But the possession in need of defending was in his eyes nothing static. It involved the productive appropriation of thoughts that wanted to evolve—thoughts that the individuality and freedom could reside in and make into impulses for action.



Goethe's Theory of Knowledge appeared in print at the end of October 1886. While Karl Julius Schröer valued the work as such, he had his difficulties with some passages. It was not the first time that he struggled with thoughts and deliberations presented by Rudolf Steiner. Early in June that same year, Rudolf Steiner had written an essay (which first appeared in a journal and which he then published himself) in response to a poem on "nature" by Marie Eugénie delle Grazie, at whose salon he and Schröer had been guests. The essay with the title "Nature and our ideals"^{210a} clearly displeased Schröer.

Marie Eugénie delle Grazie, who was three years younger than Rudolf Steiner, was born in the Banat. Her mother was from Alsace and her father descended from an old Venetian family. Following her father's early demise, she came to Vienna where her Catholic religion

teacher, Professor Müllner, noticed the eleven-year-old girl's particular gift. Under his protectorate she was able to publish her first book of poems at the age of seventeen. While her poems glorified freedom, they were imbued with atheist, materialistic, and nihilist thinking. Schröer was initially impressed with her work and even read out the poems to Rudolf Steiner in the summer of 1885. Steiner then composed the first of many articles about her and spoke of her enthusiastically to Emil Schönaich. ("... The way you describe her, so precisely, as such a brilliant individuality, will let me find no peace until I have learned more about her."²¹¹)

Steiner and Schröer were invited one Saturday afternoon by the Catholic theologian Müllner, in whose house *delle Grazie* lived, to listen to her reading passages of her play *Robespierre*. *Delle Grazie*, with whom Rudolf Steiner was to have many philosophical conversations in the years to come, was an admirer of Darwinism, Ernst Haeckel, and the Austrian Darwinist and ethicist Bartholomew Carnieri. Rudolf Steiner felt that her poetry was a true example of "a taking really seriously, ... a taking at face value the materialistic worldview"—the "most convincing proof" of the way the feeling heart can behave in our time with regard to the materialistic-mechanistic view of the world, of what can be felt, sensed and experienced under its influence."²¹² He accepted her view on natural processes of decline and decay, but emphasized in his "open letter" the autonomy of the—supranatural—human spirit and its free inner essence. Picking up on the "radical philosophy of freedom" presented in *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge* he wrote:

O, we ought finally to admit that a being that knows itself cannot be unfree! By exploring nature's eternal laws we detach from it the substance that underlies its manifestations. We see the fabric of these laws prevailing over the things and this causes the *necessity*. Knowledge gives us the power to detach the laws of things in nature from them. Why then should we be will-less slaves to these laws? Things in nature are unfree because they do not know the laws and because they are dominated by these laws without knowing them.

Who could impose them on us if we penetrated them with our minds? A cognizant being cannot be unfree. It changes the laws into ideals and makes those ideals its laws. We ought to finally admit that the god a jaded humanity believed was dwelling in the clouds, resides in our hearts and minds. He has poured himself selflessly into humanity. He kept no wishes back for himself for he wanted us to be a race that guides itself in freedom. He has become part of the world. Our will is his will; our aims are his aims. In implanting his whole essence into humanity he has given up his own existence. There is no “God in history.” He ceased to be so that we can be free, so that the world can be divine. We have absorbed into us the highest potency of existence.²¹³

Schröer was taken aback when he read this essay and spoke to Rudolf Steiner about his perplexity. Goethe’s integration in the essence of “nature,” his veneration and faith in nature were all-important to him. Steiner’s essay was as alien to him as the critical spirit cultivated in the circle around *delle Grazie* that valued Dostoevsky and Modernism more highly than Goethe and was emphatically “anti-Goethean.” Schröer’s response to Steiner’s paper, while it expressed his dismay, was open and honest. On June 20, 1886, he wrote to Brunn that the essay had “confounded him”; it had “left him feeling uneasy” and even “sad.” “If it cannot be ascribed to a passing mood, we must go our separate ways and have never understood each other. You must realize how deeply such an impression must affect me.” Schröer urged Steiner to refrain from further disseminating his essay. “It will convince no one, but present the author in a most questionable light. No one will understand it and many will utterly misinterpret it. It could harm you for the rest of your life—just by being misunderstood. In my opinion, your essay shows you as someone who is bewildered by pessimism. I believe that Eugenie has bewildered you without your being aware of it!”²¹⁴

Karl Julius Schröer was wrong, but Rudolf Steiner was deeply affected by his unexpected reaction. Almost four decades later he wrote in his autobiography: “When Schröer received [my article], he wrote to me that, if this was my view of pessimism, we had never

understood each other. He said that one who could speak of nature as I did in my article proved he was unable to consider seriously enough Goethe's words, 'Know yourself, and live at peace with the world.' These words, from the very person with whom I felt so strong a kinship, hurt deeply."²¹⁵ Of his situation at the time, Rudolf Steiner added:

I was now divided between this house, which I so much liked to visit, and my teacher and fatherly friend Karl Julius Schröer, who, after his first visit, never again appeared at *delle Grazie's*. My feelings were torn; I was drawn in both directions by sincere love and esteem.²¹⁶

Unlike Schröer, Rudolf Steiner loved modern minds and entered keenly into their thoughts and points of view as long as they were presented with uprightness and consistency. He was interested and empathic, took part eagerly in discussions even if he thought differently from the others. ("I was never inclined, however, to hold back my admiration and interest in whatever I considered great, even when I absolutely opposed it."²¹⁷) But the object of Rudolf Steiner's and Schröer's disagreement went back to the time of Goethe and Schiller. In *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge*, his essay on "Nature and our ideals," and his idea of freedom in general, Steiner knew himself to be closer to Schiller than to Goethe, in that he referred to the innermost human essence that does not reside in nature but interacts with the earthly world through mental activity and the forming of ideals, by incarnating into human thinking and actions.²¹⁸

Early on, even before the friendship between him and his revered professor unfolded, Rudolf Steiner had experienced, and felt uncomfortable about, Schröer's general wariness of modern intellectuality. While he loved and revered Schröer, he had from the beginning, as he later recounted, struggled with a kind of "inner opposition" toward him.²¹⁹ He was not referring to anything emotional or psychological but to his deeply rooted knowledge that, rather than turning away from modern times and their intellectuality, one needed to transform intelligence spiritually or, in other words, *accept and develop it further*.

And this applied also to Goethe, whose work needed to be penetrated and understood at a deeper level. It was also clear to Rudolf Steiner that, while he shared Schröer's appreciation of German idealism, they had diverging views regarding the spiritual nature of ideas. In his autobiography he wrote:

Schröer was an idealist; for him, the driving force in everything created, whether by nature or human being, was the world of ideas itself. For me, on the other hand, ideas were shadows cast by a living spiritual world. I found it difficult, even for myself, to say what the difference was between Schröer's way of thinking and my own. He spoke of ideas as forces driving history. He felt that ideas had life. For me the life of the spirit was behind ideas, which were only manifestations of the spirit within the human soul. At that time I could find no other expression for my way of thinking than "objective idealism." By this I wished to express that, as I experienced it, the essential nature of ideas is not that they appear in the human subject, but that they appear on the spiritual object, similar to the way color appears on physical objects; and that the human soul—the subject—perceives them there, just as the eyes perceive color on a living being.²²⁰

Even though Rudolf Steiner found it difficult at that time (early to mid-1880s) to conceptualize where he and Schröer differed with regard to idealism, the difference was considerable and also affected the way each thought about Goethe's legacy. Despite Schröer's dream-like, imaginative relationship with the revered and eminent poet, all that counted for him was Goethe's work. Steiner, on the other hand, was interested in "the life of the spirit *behind* the ideas," that is, in Goethe's spiritual individuality and its intentions, which amounted to much more than his creations and achievements.

But despite their minor and major differences, the friendship between Karl Julius Schröer and Rudolf Steiner continued, although Steiner would now go by himself to Währing, a district in the north of Vienna, on Saturday afternoons to attend delle Grazie's "anti-Goethean" meetings and pronounce and defend his own views on

Goethe. (“When I spoke of Goethe they listened, but Laurenz Müllner thought that what I attributed to Goethe had fundamentally very little to do with the actual minister of the Grand Duke Karl August.”²²¹) Rudolf Steiner liked the spiritual atmosphere in the house and, even though his ideas were not shared, he was able to meet people “whose efforts were genuine and receptive to the spirit.”²²² He continued to review delle Grazie’s new literary works in Viennese journals, employing a kind of “productive criticism” that she greatly appreciated.²²³ The sharp letter Karl Julius Schröer had written to Steiner after reading his “open letter” included an invitation to “*come and see me. I hope we will come to an agreement.*” And to an extent, this is what happened. Their relationship continued and remained strong and essential. In 1887 Karl Julius Schröer reviewed *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge* in the chronicle of Vienna’s Goethe Society and Steiner, his former pupil, reviewed Schröer’s *Faust Commentary* in the *Deutsche Wochenschrift* (“Faust explained according to Goethe’s own method”). When the second edition of *Faust* was published in 1888, Karl Julius Schröer even thanked Rudolf Steiner in the preface—not for his review but for his important contribution to Goethe research.

Concerning Goethe’s method, and particularly its significance for the sciences, I will—so as to not repeat myself—refer to my preface to Goethe’s *Scientific Writings* edited by Rudolf Steiner . . . and to Steiner’s own deliberations. They are continuing proof, not only of the unity of Goethe’s views but also of their scientific nature, which has never been recognized by his opponents.²²⁴

From November 1888, Karl Julius Schröer addressed Steiner in his letters (to the “prospective teacher” as he always wrote on the envelope) as “*dear friend.*”²²⁵



Irrespective of Schröer’s criticism of the passages on freedom in *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge* (which he did not mention in his review), Rudolf Steiner developed these epistemological aspects

further in his introduction to the second volume of Goethe's scientific writings. After much prompting and repeated reminders by Joseph Kürschner, the second volume finally came out in the fall of 1887, three years and six months after the first. It contained Goethe texts "on science in general," on mineralogy, geology, and meteorology which Rudolf Steiner, again, carefully arranged with a commentary and a general introduction. Only a few pages of the introduction were devoted to Goethe's specific scientific considerations (regarding the themes mentioned), while, once again, Steiner wrote extensively about "Goethe's Way of Knowing," "Goethe's Theory of Knowledge," "Knowledge and Action in the Light of Goethe's Ideas" and related questions. He explained that, "What worked in Goethe's spirit as the inner driving principle in all his creations, permeating and enlivening them, could not be manifested as such. Because it permeated all of his works, it could not, at the same time, appear in his consciousness as a separate entity. If this had been the case, then it would have had to appear before his mind as something complete and at rest, instead of being actively at work, as it actually always was.

The task of Goethe's interpreter is to follow the diverse activities and manifestations of this principle in their constant flow to sketch then its ideal contours as a coherent whole. We will see Goethe's exoteric works in their true light only when we succeed in a clear and precise formulation of the scientific meaning of this principle, and develop its various aspects with scientific consistency, because we will then be able to view them as they evolve out of a common center."²²⁶ Of himself as responsible editor and his access to Goethe, Steiner wrote in his introduction:

I began with the mechanical, naturalistic worldview; then I realized that intensive thinking renders such a perspective untenable. Proceeding strictly according to scientific method, I found that objective idealism is the only satisfactory worldview. My *Theory of Knowledge* shows how thinking—when it comprehends itself and does not contradict itself—arrives at this view. Then I found that this objective idealism, in its fundamental thrust fully permeates

Goethe's worldview. Indeed, for years my own views have developed parallel with my study of Goethe, and I have never found my basic outlook to conflict in principle with Goethe's scientific work. If I have succeeded, at least in part—first in developing my point of view so that it comes to life in others as well, and second, in convincing them that this really is Goethe's position—then I consider my task fulfilled.²²⁷

Rudolf Steiner made it even clearer in this introduction than he had done in the first volume that his intention was not to just methodically expose Goethe's qualitative nature research but to develop the questions of cognition in relation with this research, which had occupied him for many years. Steiner was an unconventional, determined, and confident editor ("maybe the youngest, but certainly the most extraordinary contributor to the *Nationalliteratur*," as Kürschner wrote to him²²⁸). Despite his deep reverence for Goethe he published and advocated, candidly and also surprisingly, what struck him as substantially future-oriented in Goethe's work, and he did this in the introduction to an official, representative Goethe edition.



"One can indeed say that *the significance of a person's views today can be measured by their relationship to Goethe's worldview*," Rudolf Steiner stated in his introduction to the second volume,²²⁹ as he juxtaposed the Goethean approach with the shortcomings of materialistic science. He described the shortfalls of a reductionist concept of experience that considers only sense perceptions as a basis for scientific knowledge, and he deplored the loss of faith in thinking and the fact that the contemporary academic life was wholly devoid of spirit. Building on Goethe's scientific work, on the other hand, meant developing a kind of idealism "that attempts to apprehend the concrete idea of reality with the same certainty of experience with which today's extremely exact sciences seek facts."²³⁰

Again, Rudolf Steiner characterized the complementary relationship of perception and thinking—that is, the need to add human

ideation to sense perception—and he explained how the two are inherently related. “Sense-perceptible reality is, in fact, such a riddle to us for the very reason that we do not find its center within it. It ceases to be so enigmatic when we realize that it has the same center as the thought world, which comes to manifestation within us.”²³¹ In accordance with what he had written in *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge*, he defined thinking as one’s independent penetration to the “inner essence of the world” and outlined how the truth could be found through ideas,²³² beyond sense perception and religious revelation, while presenting such a theory of knowledge as basic anthropological science. “It clarifies our role as human beings, and shows us how we stand in relation to the world.”²³³

If we recognize the idea as “what underlies all reality, what conditions nature and is its intention,” ideal cognition becomes, through perception, the “completion of the world process,” as Goethe showed paradigmatically in his nature research. “Our knowing leads us to the point where we can apprehend the tendency of the world process, the intention of creation, in the indications contained in our natural environment.”²³⁴ If ideas are understood in this way, they are, according to Steiner, “objective world principles.” (“Ideas are present [active] not only where they are conscious, but also in other forms. Ideas are more than subjective phenomena; they are significant in and of themselves. Far from being present only in the subject, ideas are objective, world principles.”²³⁵) The idea appears in human consciousness, but objectively it constitutes the world; it is the spiritually creative, formative principle, or in Goethe’s words, the “entelechy” or “active existence.”²³⁶ In his introduction Steiner wrote about the appearance, or “lighting up,” of ideas in the sphere of human consciousness:

Whoever attributes to thinking a perceptive capacity that goes beyond the senses, must also acknowledge that this capacity directs itself towards objects that lie beyond sense-perceptible reality. The objects of thinking, however, are ideas. When our thinking comprehends an idea, it unites with the foundations of universal existence. That which is actively at work in the outer world enters the

human spirit; the human being unites with objective reality and its highest potency. *Beholding the idea in outer reality is the true communion of the human being.*

Thinking relates to ideas as the eye relates to light and the ear to sound; *it is an organ of perception.*²³⁷

Reflecting on this expression, “Beholding the idea in outer reality is the true communion of the human being” in a lecture over twenty years later, Rudolf Steiner said, “I do not know how many people understood the cultural and historical significance of this statement in one of my very first publications. It was meant to guide the materialistic orientation of the communion with God toward a spiritual orientation of the communion with God: the transubstantiation of the bread into the soul substance of knowledge.”²³⁸

In his Introduction, Rudolf Steiner also returned to the question of freedom, referring to the dimension of freedom as anthropologically essential. There he wrote about “Knowledge and Action in the Light of Goethe’s Ideas,” which he—as he had proposed in *Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge*—considered to be the realization of individual intentions out of freedom:

We recognize the infinite perfection of the world of ideas; we know that the impulses for our actions emanate from this world within us, and that, consequently, the only ethical actions are those that emanate directly from their corresponding ideas within us. According to this viewpoint, we perform an action only because we feel an inner need for its realization. We act because our own volition motivates us, not an external power. Once we have formed the concept of it, the object of our action fills us inwardly so that we actively strive to carry it out. The only motive for our actions should be the urge to realize an idea, the drive to achieve a purpose. Whatever impels us to act should first unfold its life within us as idea. We then act not out of duty or blind instinct, but *out of love for the object* toward which our action is directed. The object, when we conceive of it, evokes within us the desire to act in accordance with its nature. This, and only this, is a free deed. If there were another motive beyond interest in the object, we would

not act only for the sake of action, but achieve something else. The action would be something that we really did not want; it would be an action *against our own will*. This is true when we act egoistically. Then we are uninterested in the action itself but feel the need for what it brings us. But we then feel a sense of compulsion, because to achieve the desired benefit we must perform the action. We feel no need for the action itself and would not do it if no benefit followed. However, an action not performed for its own sake is not a free deed. *Egoistic actions are not free*. We act unfreely when we act for any reason other than the objective content of the action itself. When we perform a deed *for its own sake*, we act out of love. *Only when guided by the love of our action, by devotion to the objective world, are we truly free*. If we are incapable of such selfless devotion, we will never experience *freedom* in our actions.²³⁹

Four times seven years later (1924) Rudolf Steiner wrote in one of his last communications, shortly before he died:

Seeking freedom without inclining toward egoism means that freedom becomes pure love for the task we need to take on and brings us closer to Michael. If we strive to act freely while pursuing egoistic goals, if freedom becomes pride in realizing ourselves through our actions, we will be in danger of losing ourselves in Ahriman's realm. . . . Michael goes through the world with love, in the deep earnestness of his being, bearing and actions. In following him we nurture our love for the world around us. And love, if it is not to become self-love, must grow first in the relationship with the world around us.

Once we have achieved this Michaelic love, our love for the other can shine back into our own self, which will then be able to love without loving itself. It is on the paths of such love that we can find the Christ in our souls.

In following Michael, we nurture our love for the world around us and this will help us find a relationship to our inner soul-world that will lead us to the Christ.

The age that now dawns, needs us to look to a world which, as a spiritual world, directly adjoins the world we experience as physical and where we can find what has been described here as the Michael Being and the Michael Mission.²⁴⁰