

GOETHE'S THEORY
OF KNOWLEDGE

An Outline of the Epistemology
of His Worldview

Written 1884-1885
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RUDOLF STEINER

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A : PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. The Point of Departure

WHEN WE TRACE any one of the main streams of spiritual life today back to its source, we always arrive at a great spirit of our “classical age.” Goethe, Schiller, Herder, or Lessing gave an impulse, and from that impulse arose an intellectual movement that continues today. Many who consider themselves entirely original achieve no more than an expression of what was suggested long ago by Goethe or Schiller—to the degree that all of German culture is founded upon classical authors from that era. We have aligned ourselves so closely with what the world has created through those classical authors that anyone who veers from the path shown by them can scarcely expect to be understood. They have determined our way of viewing life and the world to such a degree that only those who seek points of reference to this foundation can arouse our sympathetic interest.

We have to acknowledge that only one branch of our intellectual life has not yet found such a point of contact—the branch of knowledge that goes beyond a mere collection of observations, beyond the cognizance of single experiences, providing a satisfyingly complete view of the world and of life. It is generally called *philosophy*, an activity which in our “classical period” actually seems nonexistent. These days, philosophy seeks its salvation in arbitrary seclusion and aristocratic isolation from all the rest of our intellectual life. This assertion does not contradict the fact that many philosophers and scientists have devoted themselves to Goethe and Schiller, despite the fact that such modern thinkers have not developed their scientific perspectives from the foundation

of the scientific works of those spiritual heroes. Rather, they arrived at their scientific standpoints independently of the worldviews of Goethe and Schiller, and only later connected them. Moreover, they did this not to find guidance in the scientific opinions of the great thinkers, but merely to test those opinions and discover whether they would hold up in the face of their own course of reasoning. We will address this point later on more thoroughly. First, however, we would like to point out how this attitude toward the highest stage of development in contemporary culture affects the field of philosophy.

Much of today's educated reading public will not read any scientific literature that makes philosophical claims. Seldom has philosophy enjoyed such little favor as it does today. Except for the writings of Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann—which, because they deal with the broadest questions of life and the world, have gained a wide circulation—it is safe to say that philosophical works are read today only by professional philosophers. Aside from them, no one bothers with such writings. Educated nonspecialists have the vague feeling that such writings contain nothing of intellectual worth and that the matters discussed in them are of no concern and are unrelated to real spiritual needs. This lack of interest in philosophy must be a result of the circumstance I mentioned; in face of such indifference, there is an ever-increasing need for a satisfying view of the world and life. Religious dogmas, which provided an adequate long-standing substitute, are increasingly losing their power to convince. Pressure is growing steadily to employ thinking to attain what humanity previously attained through faith in revelation: satisfaction of the spirit. Thus, the interest of cultured people would not be missing if this particular branch of knowledge kept pace with the evolution of culture as a whole, and if its representatives would take a position on the great questions that move humanity.

Here, we must always bear in mind that it can never be a matter of arbitrarily creating a spiritual need, but only of seeking out and satisfying the need that exists. The task of science is not to raise questions; rather, it is to give careful attention and answers to the questions presented by human nature and by the current stage of evolution. The tasks that modern philosophers take up do not flow out of the present

stage of culture, and thus they are questions to which no one is seeking answers. Science passes over the questions that our culture must ask and to which our great thinkers have led the way. Thus, we have a science that no one seeks and a scientific need that no one satisfies.

Our central branch of knowledge ought to solve the real mysteries of the world for us, and it must not be an exception in relation to all other branches of the intellectual life. It must look for its sources where the other branches of knowledge have found them. Philosophy must not only recognize the great classical thinkers, but also seek in them the foundation for its own evolution. It must breathe the same air as does the rest of our culture. This necessity is inherent in the very nature of things, notwithstanding the fact that modern researchers have tried to interpret our classical writers as we have explained. However, such interpretations reveal no more than a vague sense that it is inappropriate simply to ignore the convictions of those thinkers and proceed with the order of the day. Nonetheless, these interpretations also show that such opinions really have not been developed. This modern approach to Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller demonstrates this fact. Despite the excellence of many such endeavors, it must be understood that these writings on the scientific works of Schiller and Goethe were not developed organically from their views but have merely a retrospective relationship to them. Nothing substantiates this more strongly than the fact that diverse representatives of science have seen premonitions of their own points of view in the genius of Goethe. Representatives of worldviews that share nothing in common refer to Goethe with seemingly equal justification, especially when they feel a need to see their various views recognized as the height of human endeavor. One can scarcely imagine a sharper contrast than that between the teachings of Hegel and Schopenhauer. The latter calls Hegel a charlatan[†] and his philosophy a shallow concoction of words, mere nonsense, and barbaric combinations of words. The two men actually share nothing except their unlimited admiration for Goethe,[†] as well as their belief that Goethe professed adherence to their respective worldviews.

The case is no different for more recent scientific directions. Haeckel, who sympathetically elaborated Darwinism with an iron-clad logic, and whom we must consider by far the most significant

follower of the English investigator, sees the anticipation of his own view in that of Goethe.[†] Another contemporary scientific investigator, K.F.W. Jessen,¹ writes of Darwin's theory: "The stir created among many research specialists and nonspecialists by this theory—frequently presented and as often disproved previously by thorough investigation,² but now supported by many pretentious arguments[†]—shows, unfortunately, how little the results of scientific research are generally known and understood." Concerning Goethe, the same investigator says that he rose "to comprehensive research in both inanimate and animate nature" in that he found the fundamental law of all plant formation through a "thoughtful, deeply penetrating observation of nature."³ Each of these two investigators is able to cite a wearisome number of proofs to show the harmony between his own scientific direction and the "thoughtful observations of Goethe," but, if each of these standpoints could justly refer to Goethe's thought, this must cast a dubious light upon the consistency of each respective mode of thinking. The reason for this seeming inconsistency, however, lies in the very fact that neither of these viewpoints really grows out of Goethe's worldview; rather, each has its roots quite outside that view. This situation arises from the fact that people look for external agreement in details torn from Goethe's thought as a whole—in which case they lose their meaning—while they are at the same time unwilling to consider the whole of Goethe's thought as fit to serve as the basis for a scientific trend of thought. Scientific research has always ignored Goethe's views as points of departure, using them instead as material to make comparisons. Those who have busied themselves with such views have seldom been students who open themselves with unbiased minds to his ideas, but more often as critics who pass judgment on him.

There are even those who say that Goethe had far too little scientific sense, that he was an even worse philosopher for being such an excellent a poet, and that, because of this, it would be impossible to find in his work any foundation for a scientific perspective. This is a complete misconception of Goethe's nature. To be sure, Goethe was no philosopher in the ordinary sense of the term, but we should remember that the wonderful harmony of his personality led Schiller to declare, "The poet is the only true human being."[†] Goethe personified what Schiller

meant by a “true human being.” No element of the highest expression of the universal human was lacking in his personality; further, all of these elements came together in him to form a totality that acted as such in a powerful way. Thus, it happens that a profound philosophical sense forms the basis for his opinions about nature, even though this philosophical sense does not enter his consciousness in the form of specific scientific statements. Those who immerse themselves in this wholeness (provided they have philosophic capacities) will be able to reveal this philosophic sense and present it as Goethe’s form of knowledge. But one must work with Goethe’s works as a foundation and not approach him with a preconceived opinion. Goethe’s intellectual powers could always deal appropriately with the strictest philosophy, even though he has not left such a philosophy behind as a complete system.

Goethe’s worldview is the most multifaceted imaginable. It proceeds from a central point that lies in the unified nature of the poet, and it always brings out that aspect corresponding to the nature of the object under observation. A uniform activity of intellectual forces lies in the nature of Goethe; the given object determines the particular form of that activity. Goethe borrows his manner of observation from the external world and does not force his own upon it. The thinking of many people works only in one particular way; it serves only for a certain type of object—it is not unified, as was Goethe’s, but only unitary. Let us endeavor to express this more exactly: there are people whose intellects are especially suited to think out merely mechanical interdependencies and effects. They conceive the entire universe as a mechanism. Others have the impulse to perceive everywhere the secret mystical element of the external world—they become adherents of mysticism. All sorts of errors arise when such thinking, though entirely valid for one class of objects, is declared universal. This explains the conflicts among various worldviews. If such a lopsided view confronts that of Goethe (which is unlimited because it takes its manner of observation not from the mind of the observer, but from the nature of the thing observed), then we can easily see how this lopsided view clings to the element of thought that harmonizes with its own. Goethe’s worldview includes, in the sense just indicated, many directions of thought, though it can never be penetrated by means of a one-sided concept.

The philosophical sense, which is an essential element of Goethe's genius, is also significant for his poetry. Though it was alien to Goethe to present in clear conceptual form what was mediated to him by this sense, as Schiller did, it was nonetheless an active factor in his artistic, creative work, as it was for Schiller. The poetic productions of Goethe and Schiller are unthinkable apart from their worldviews, which stood in the background. With Schiller, this is more a matter of concretely formulated basic principles, whereas for Goethe it was inherent in the way that he observed things. However, the fact that our nation's greatest poets at the peak of their creative work needed a philosophical element proves more than anything that such an element is a necessary constituent in the history of human development. It is precisely the support of Goethe and Schiller that will enable us to tear our central science (that is, philosophy) away from its academic isolation and incorporate it into the rest of our cultural evolution. The scientific convictions of our classical authors are bound by a thousand ties to their other endeavors; such was the demand of the cultural epoch they created.

2. Goethe's Science According to Schiller's Method

IN THE PRECEDING PAGES, we determined the direction to be taken in the following inquiries. These inquiries are to constitute a development of what manifested in Goethe as a scientific sense—an interpretation of his way of observing the world. One might argue that this is not the way to present a viewpoint scientifically; that authority must never, under any circumstances replace principles as the basis for scientific opinion. Let us immediately discuss this argument. We do not accept an opinion based upon Goethe's worldview simply because we can deduce it from that view, but because we believe Goethe's worldview can be supported by tenable basic principles and can be represented as a self-sustaining view. The fact that we begin with Goethe will not prevent us from being equally concerned with showing the basis for the opinions we maintain as are the exponents of any science claiming to be free of preconceptions. We represent Goethe's worldview, but we shall base it according to the requirements of science.

The road that such inquiries must take was indicated by Schiller. No one perceived the greatness of Goethe's genius so clearly. In his letters to Goethe, he held before him an image of Goethe's own being. In his letters on the aesthetic education of humankind,[†] he develops the ideal of the artist as he had recognized it in Goethe. Moreover, in his essay on naïve and sentimental poetry, Schiller describes the nature of true art as he had come to know it in Goethe's poetic works. This is our justification for designating that our discussion is built on the foundation of the Goethe-Schiller worldview. Its purpose is to consider the scientific thought of Goethe according to the method for which Schiller provided a model. Goethe's gaze is directed toward nature and life, and his manner of observation will be the subject of

our discussion. Schiller's gaze is directed toward the mind of Goethe, and his method of observation in this process will be the ideal of our own method. In this way, we believe the scientific endeavors of Goethe and Schiller are made fruitful for the present age.

According to the customary scientific terminology, we must consider our work to be an epistemology. The questions discussed, however, will be very different from those usually posed by that branch of philosophy. We have seen why this is so; where similar inquiries appear today, they virtually always take Kant as their point of departure. It has been altogether overlooked in scientific circles that, aside from the epistemology established by the great thinker of Königsberg, there is at least the possibility of another trend of thought in this field; a trend which is no less capable than that of Kant in dealing profoundly with the facts.

At the beginning of the 1860s, Otto Liebmann stated that we must return to Kant[†] if we aspire to a worldview free of contradictions. This is why today we possess a Kantian literature almost beyond the possibility of survey. Nevertheless, this road will also fail to help elevate philosophical thinking, which will not play a role in our cultural life again until, instead of returning to Kant, it goes more deeply into the scientific views of Goethe and Schiller.

Now we will approach the basic questions of epistemology addressed in these preliminary remarks.

3. The Purpose of Our Science

GOETHE'S APT EXPRESSION is true of all knowledge: "Theory, in and of itself, is useless unless it leads us to believe in the interrelationship of phenomena."[†] Through science, we are always connecting discrete facts of experience. In inorganic nature, we perceive causes and effects as separate and look for their relationship in the appropriate particular scientific field. In the organic world we become aware of species and genera of organisms, and we endeavor to establish reciprocal relationships among them. A number of different cultural epochs of humanity appear before us in history, and we endeavor to learn the inner dependence of one evolutionary stage upon another. Thus, every branch of science has to work in some specific field of phenomena in the sense of the above quote from Goethe.

Each branch of science seeks to discover the interrelationships among the phenomena within its sphere. Nonetheless, there remains a great antithesis in our scientific endeavors: on one side is the world of ideas gained by the sciences; on the other are the objects upon which that world is based. There must be a branch of science that also clarifies the reciprocal relationships between these two realms. The rift between the ideal and the real world—the antithesis between idea and reality—constitutes the problem of this branch of science. We must also understand these contrasting elements in their reciprocal relationships.

The purpose of the discussion that follows is to seek these relationships. The facts of science, on the one hand, and nature and history, on the other, will be interrelated. What is the significance of the reflection of the external world in human consciousness? What is the relationship between our thinking about the objects of reality and these objects themselves?