
Conversation Between Friends

An Inspiration for Goethe's Phenomenological Method

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Goethe was keenly aware of the traditions of thought and practice that influence science. He recognized, in ways that seem very modern to us now, that the search for truth and knowledge in science is always conditioned and shaped by what has come before it, and that traditional ways of conceiving phenomena determine what investigators think is important to study and what they value as knowledge. Goethe was particularly sensitive to the limitations put upon the pursuit of knowledge by these traditions.

Goethe thought that science should be as inclusive of different kinds of thinking as possible, and that there should be many modes of proceeding rather than a single method, no matter how fruitful that method might appear. While he believed that science, like other forms of knowledge, was bound by history, his aim was not to unmask it as ideology; principally, he wanted to show that, as a human endeavor, it was prone to all the dangers and pitfalls of any human enterprise. The best way to guard against those pitfalls was through a schooling of consciousness on the part of the scientist: first to a greater awareness of how theory-laden all seeing is, and then to the development of a sensitivity and flexibility that would allow the scientist to think along with rather than merely about nature.

Goethe regarded different approaches to phenomena as languages, each of which is symbolic and “never a direct expression of the objective world but only a reflection of it” (Goethe 1995, p. 277). We try to capture what we see in various formulations, which essentially behave like metaphors in that they organize our perception in particular ways. In the sixth section of the *Farbenlehre*, he considers the strengths and limitations of different ways of characterizing phenomena. In this passage he treats metaphysical and moral approaches as on par with mechanical, mathematical and “corpuscular” ones—each being imperfect in its own way. Since his time, of course, explicitly moral and metaphysical discourses have been banished from science altogether, perhaps, in part, because of the weaknesses in them that Goethe articulates. Mathematical and mechanical formulations have thrived despite the very real problems that Goethe points out here.

He writes:

Metaphysical formulas have great breadth and depth, but a rich content is required to fill them in a worthy way; otherwise they remain empty. Mathematical formulas are often convenient and useful, but they always have a certain stiffness and awkwardness; we soon feel their inadequacy, for even in elementary instances we quickly recognize the presence of an incommensurable quality.

Furthermore, he adds that mathematical formulas are

intelligible only to a narrow circle of specially trained minds. Mechanical formulas speak more to ordinary understanding, but are themselves ordinary and always retain a touch of crudity. They transform living things into dead ones: they kill the inner life in order to apply an inadequate substitute from without. Corpuscular formulas are similar; they have the effect of rigidifying things in motion, coarsening idea and expression. In contrast, moral formulas express more delicate relationships but take the form of simple metaphors and may finally lose themselves in a display of wit (*ibid.*).

Goethe doesn't despair over these inadequacies, seeing the various languages, instead, simply as what we have at our disposal. He ends with, “the scientist might make conscious use of *all* these modes of thought and expression to convey his views on natural phenomena in multifold language. If he could avoid becoming one-sided and give living expression to living thought, it might be possible to communicate much that would be welcome” (*ibid.*).

But, what would such a multifold language consist of? The metaphysical and the moral, he says, have a tendency to become disembodied and lose their substance unless filled with “a rich content,” whereas the mechanical, mathematical, and corpuscular, by contrast, tend to harden into crude and inadequate reifications of phenomena. If everything we investigate is itself multidimensional, then *any* reductive method that singles out particular aspects will skew our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Goethe rejected the idea that there could be two conflicting truths about a phenomenon, one poetic and one scientific, however attractive that idea may be to those who wish to avoid controversy. So the question remains whether a multifold

language would merely be a composite of our available approaches, or whether there might be a way to gain the necessary flexibility of mind and method, as he says, to “give living expression to living thought.”

By continually questioning different approaches, Goethe sustained a valuable skepticism, and challenged scientists to seek out different perspectives and make them part of themselves. He stressed the importance of developing capacities that would help avoid the twin dangers of emptiness and rigidity by cultivating an active receptivity within the observer. This kind of active receptivity shares a good deal with the qualities we bring to conversation rather than those we bring to experimentation. The ideal of conversation becomes a model for Goethe of a kind of multifold language that can overcome some of the difficulties inherent in applying a particular method to phenomena.

The Multifold Potential of Conversation

Goethe saw aspects of his own approach to nature as resembling a conversation more than a series of mechanical or mathematical steps, and he was sensitive to the decorum of a good conversation, asking “who speaks here, the object or you?” Like the phenomenological thinkers who followed him, Goethe believed that a full understanding of nature can be best achieved through an open-ended approach in which the investigator participates, rather than through the paradigm of explanation that assumes a detached observer. True conversation involves listening as well as talking, being open to the unexpected, and being willing to change direction. When nature, rather than another person, is the partner, the conversation begins with the acknowledgement that the natural world is “something in its own right” (Holdrege, 2005; Talbott 1993) rather than purely an object of scrutiny. For a conversation with nature to be possible, the observer must assume that the object or phenomenon under study possesses an “inner life” or integrity that can’t be easily summed up or explained.

Perhaps Goethe’s predilection for conversation as a model for natural investigations was inspired in part by the way his own work was furthered through its being reflected back to him by someone else in a gesture of friendship. In two famous encounters, in particular, sympathetic characterization of himself by another person opened up new vistas of thought to Goethe. In one case, the person approved of his thinking, in the other, the person, namely Schiller, remained unconvinced. But, in both cases, seeing himself mirrored in someone else’s thinking helped Goethe develop the method

that characterizes his work: the open, generous attention that friends bring to a conversation. Looking at these gestures of friendship in the context of his phenomenological method enlarges our view of what Goethe saw as an important but unacknowledged aspect of scientific study. By foregrounding the effects of friendship on the progress of his own thinking, Goethe sought to develop, by analogy, its role in coming to know the natural world. Cultivating the capacities we bring to friendship helps us to see and experience the relationships among natural phenomena and between nature and ourselves.

Goethe had never been comfortable with conventional ideas about the need for objectivity and detachment in the study of nature. But until he had his ideas fortuitously expanded by an otherwise unremembered Dr. Heinroth, Goethe hadn’t been fully conscious of his own potential solutions to the problems objectivity and detachment posed for him. In an essay entitled “Significant Help Given by an Ingenious Turn of Phrase,” Goethe writes that Heinroth had spoken favorably of his work, stressing its uniqueness (Goethe 1995, pp. 39-41). “He says my thinking works objectively. Here he means that my thinking is not separate from objects, that the elements of the object, the perceptions of the object, flow into my thinking and are fully permeated by it; that my perception itself is a thinking and my thinking a perception. He does not withhold his applause for this approach.” In using the word “objective” in this way, Heinroth sounds a little like Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* who tells Alice in rather a scornful tone “when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more or less” (Carroll 1993). But Heinroth’s recognition that Goethe tries to mold his thinking to the object, rather than imposing a conceptual framework upon it, demonstrated playfully in his recasting of the word “objective,” was just the ingenious help Goethe needed to understand exactly what he hoped to achieve in his studies of nature. One aspect of developing a multifold language is learning to express the unique qualities of each phenomenon. Goethe studied light and color, rocks and minerals, clouds and weather, and plants and animals. In each case he wanted to get to know these phenomena on their own terms.

Heinroth’s characterization became the occasion for Goethe to reflect on how best to make progress in the schooling of consciousness that would allow him to manifest a truly object-oriented thinking. He had always felt, he continues in the essay, the inadequacy of the dictum “Know thyself,” which he saw as part of a conspiracy to divorce us from the world we are an aspect of rather than separate from. Dr. Heinroth’s remarks allow him to see that “The human being knows himself only insofar as he knows the world; he per-

ceives the world only in himself, and himself only in the world. Every new object clearly seen opens up a new organ of perception in us" (Goethe 1995, p. 39). A true objectivity is one that allows the object under study to emerge into intelligibility within the consciousness of the observer. We can also add, every new object *empathetically* seen opens up new capacities in the observer, who through empathy participates in what he or she sees.

In these reflections, Goethe enlarges on Heinroth's view of his thinking, but also begins to understand how his own response as beneficiary of Heinroth's insightful attention expands his thinking as well. Being seen and known in the way that Goethe feels he has been by Heinroth has an important influence on his scientific work. He sees himself reflected back in the mirror of another mind much more clearly than he had been able to see himself alone. By contrast, he goes on to surmise, adversaries can't help him develop his thinking, because they find his existence odious, repudiate his goals and condemn his means of reaching them as "a mere waste of time." "Friends can call attention to my limitations or to the infinite in my being—in either case I listen to them and trust that they will truly instruct me." The predisposition to sympathy itself allows things to come into being that indifference makes impossible. If all our seeing is theory-laden, and all our perceptions presuppose a certain attitude toward what we see, then approaching another person or phenomenon with disinterested generosity may be the key to developing a multifold language that breaks through the limitations of any one language and begins to allow the phenomenon to manifest more fully in thought.

Goethe and Schiller

The second story of the inspiration afforded by friendship is Goethe's famous meeting with Schiller, which he called "A Fortunate Encounter" in his memory of it many years later (Goethe 1995, pp. 18-21). The meeting seems on the surface a very different event—not the unexpected gift of a stranger seeing you steadily and whole, but potentially an encounter with an adversary who thinks your arguments are a waste of time. In his essay on the encounter, Goethe sets up the anecdote by outlining the resistance he had felt to meeting Schiller at all, not having liked his play *The Robbers*, and having felt personally attacked by his essay *On Grace and Dignity*. It may not have seemed an auspicious



beginning when they finally did meet, because Schiller refused to enter into Goethe's thinking with Heinroth's empathy.

After a lecture on botany, they struck up a conversation and agreed about how bad the speaker was (always a good icebreaker), but when Goethe was drawn into expounding his ideas on the metamorphosis of plants, even making a quick sketch of what he meant by the archetypal plant, Schiller was not convinced. Goethe writes: "He heard and saw all this with great interest, with unmistakable power of comprehension. But when I stopped, he shook his head and said, "That is not an observation from experience. That is an idea." Schiller refused to grant Goethe the very capacity that Heinroth articulated—for "his perception to be a thinking and his thinking a perception." Goethe's answer shows he had his dander up. He writes, "Taken aback and somewhat annoyed, I paused; with this comment he had touched on the very point that divided us...my old resentment began to rise in me. I collected my wits, however, and replied, "Then I may rejoice that I have ideas without knowing it and can even see them with my own eyes" (Goethe 1995, p. 20).

Despite not getting support for his picture of the plant, Goethe felt buoyed up by the encounter, having gained through it a clearer sense of his own thinking. He again benefited from sincere interest and attention. Schiller's determination to become Goethe's friend despite their differences in outlook was the gift that allowed his critical remarks to work as they did. Intellectually, the two made truces rather than winning the other over, but the next ten years saw their close friendship and a most fruitful collaboration that led to, as Goethe says, "the gradual development of my aptitude for philosophy." The stimulus of their first meeting helped

Goethe recognize the degree to which his own method could be summed up as loving attention to phenomena, whether they were plants, animals, the weather, granite or color and light. Goethe found in his friendship with Schiller the experience of seeing himself in relation rather than in isolation. Through Schiller's response to him, Goethe recognized the ways in which thinking can become identical with seeing. He saw that by beginning with the conviction that nature is alive and "something in its own right" he could set about training his capacity to observe the quality of aliveness "with his own eyes."

Schiller's beam of affection, focused on Goethe, trumped his disagreement with him over the possibility of whether he actually could have the experiences he felt he'd had, and, because it did, had lasting salutary effects. The gift Goethe felt he had received was reciprocated in just the way we would expect in a friendship built on mutual exchange and respect. Soon after their fortunate encounter, Schiller wrote to Goethe, (August 23, 1794): "My recent conversations with you have put the whole store of my ideas into a state of motion....Many things upon which I could not come to a right understanding with myself have received new and unexpected light from the contemplation I have had of your mind (for so I must call the general impression of your ideas upon me). I needed the object, the body, to several of my speculative ideas and you have put me on to the track for finding it" (Schmitz 1977-79). Schiller articulates a similar phenomenon here of "new and unexpected light" shed by the process of understanding one's own ideas through their embodiment in another person's mind.

In his descriptions of both his experience with Heinroth and with Schiller, Goethe emphasizes the unexpected, unanticipated nature of the gift. The epiphany came fortuitously, as something arising within the meeting with the other. These examples of the effects of friendship suggest that gestures of openness transform the participants and consequently open up new vistas of what can be seen. The Goethean method calls for continuous self-examination and self-transformation in just the way a good friendship does. Developing a multifold language is part of the process by which we train ourselves to see from "the perspective of objects," and learn to imagine ourselves empathetically into the position of our partner in conversation.

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logical approach to understanding nature as articulated by the British Romantic poets, as well as Thoreau and Goethe.

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