

Dialogical Knowing

Excerpts from Goethe's Writings

In this 50th issue of *In Context*, which also celebrates *The Nature Institute's* 25th year of activity, we want to acknowledge our indebtedness to Goethe, whose work has inspired our efforts since our founding. We do so by letting him speak for himself through the following excerpts from Goethe's work that highlight his approach. These are texts that we have also studied often with participants in our courses. CH

from On Morphology (1807)

The Undertaking Justified

When we human beings confront nature, we may at first experience a tremendous urge to bring the objects of observation under our control. Before long, however, these objects will thrust themselves upon us with such force that, in turn, we will feel the need to acknowledge their power and revere their effects. When we are convinced of this mutual interaction, we can perceive a two-fold limitlessness: among the objects, manifold ways of being and becoming in all their living interactions; in ourselves, the potential for infinite growth of our sensibilities and judgments by cultivating ever new forms of receptivity and counteraction.

These conditions provide much enjoyment and would bring the last touch of happiness in life if not for certain inner and outer obstacles on this beautiful pathway to perfection. The years, providers at first, now begin to take. To a degree we are satisfied with what we have gained and enjoy it all the more quietly, since it seldom meets with any genuine, open and vital expression of interest from without.

How few are those who feel themselves inspired by what is visible to the spirit alone! Our senses, our feelings, our disposition exercise far greater power over us, and rightly so, since we are dependent on life and not on reflection.

Unfortunately, even among individuals devoted to cognition and knowledge do we seldom find the desired degree of interest. For people of practical mind — who note details, observe precisely, and draw distinctions — what arises from an idea and leads back to it is viewed as an encumbrance. They feel in their own way at home in this labyrinth and have no interest in a thread that might more quickly lead through it. A metal that has not become a coin and remains uncounted is a burdensome possession. In contrast, someone with a higher vantage point easily disdains the particular and makes a lethal generality out of a concrete life.



The Intent Introduced

When we observe objects of nature, especially those that are alive, and desire to gain insight into the relation between their inner nature and their doings, we may believe that the best way to gain knowledge is to divide things into their constituent parts. Such an approach may, in fact, lead us far. A few words suffice to acknowledge the contributions of chemistry and anatomy toward an understanding and overview of nature.

But these attempts to analyze, carried to an extreme, also produce many adverse effects. To be sure, what is alive can

be dissected into its parts, but from these parts it is impossible to restore it and bring it back to life. This is true even of many inorganic substances, not to mention organic bodies.

Scientific minds of every epoch have, therefore, also exhibited an urge to understand living formations as such, to grasp their outer, visible, and tangible parts in context, to see these parts as an indication of what lies within and thereby to take hold of and behold the whole. It is no doubt unnecessary to describe in detail the close relationship between this scientific desire and our need for art and imitation.

The history of art, knowledge, and science has produced many attempts to establish and develop a discipline that we will call "morphology." The historical part of our discourse will deal with the different forms in which these attempts have appeared.

The Germans have a word for a real being's complex of existence: *Gestalt* [structured form]. With this expression they abstract from what is dynamic and assume that an interconnected whole, when identified, is self-contained and fixed in character. But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or self-contained — everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* [formation] to describe what has been brought forth and what is in the process of becoming as well.

When introducing morphology, therefore, we should not speak of *Gestalt*. If we do use the term, we should at least refer only to an idea, concept, or experience held fast for a moment in time. What is formed will be re-formed again. If we want to behold nature in a living way, we must follow her example and become as mobile and malleable as nature herself.

from Toward a General Comparative Approach (1790–94)

The statement “The fish exists for the water” seems to me to say far less than “The fish exists in the water and by means of the water.” The latter statement expresses more clearly what the former obscures: namely, the existence of a creature we call “fish” is only possible under the conditions of an element we call “water” — it not only exists in that element, but also develops there.

The same holds true for all other creatures. The initial and very general observation on what works from within outward and what works from without inward would be as follows: The culminating *Gestalt* is, as it were, the inner core that has been molded in various ways by the characteristics of the outer element. Thereby the animal retains purposefulness in relation to the outer world since it is shaped from without as well as from within. And this is all the more natural because the outer element can shape the external form more easily than the internal core. We can see this most clearly in the various species of seals in which the exterior has taken on a fishlike form even though the skeleton still retains all the features of a quadruped....

We raise our deliberation to a higher level when we consider the structured world itself as an interrelationship of many elements. The entire plant world, for example, will appear to us as a vast sea that is as necessary to the existence of individual insects as the oceans and rivers are to the existence of individual fish. And we will see that an enormous number of living creatures are born and nourished in this ocean of plants. Ultimately we will see the whole world of animals as a great element in which one species is created, or at least sustained, by and through another. We will no longer think of connections and relationships in terms of providence or purpose. Rather, we progress in understanding only by discovering how formative nature expresses itself from all sides and in all directions. We will find through experience and through the advance of science that the most concrete and far-reaching benefits for humanity come from an intense and selfless effort that neither demands its reward at the end of a week’s labor, nor needs to produce some useful result for humanity after a year, a decade, or even a century.

from Significant Help Given by an Ingenious Turn of Phrase (1823)

In his *Anthropology*, Dr. Heinroth ... speaks favorably of my work; in fact, he calls my approach unique and says that my thinking works *objectively*. Here he means that my thinking does not separate itself from objects; that the elements of the objects, the perceptions of the objects, flow into my thinking and are fully permeated by it; that my perception itself is a thinking, and my thinking a perception....

I must admit that I have long been suspicious of the great and significant-sounding task: “know thyself.” It has always seemed to me a deception of a secret order of priests who wished to confuse human beings with unreachable demands, and to divert attention from activity in the outer world to some inner and false contemplation. As human beings, we know ourselves only insofar as we know the world; we perceive the world only in ourselves, and ourselves only in the world. Every new object, clearly beheld, opens up a new organ in us.

Those fellow humans can be most helpful who have the advantage to compare us with the world as they see it from their point of view. They thereby attain a closer knowledge of us than we ourselves are in a position to gain....

Stimulated by these very considerations, I continued in my self-examination, and found that my whole method relies on derivation. I persist until I have discovered a pregnant point from which much may be derived, or rather — since I am careful in my work and observations — one that yields much freely of its own accord. If I discover in experience some phenomenon that I cannot derive, I let it stand as a problem. This approach has proven quite advantageous during my long life. When after a long time I could still not decipher the origin and connections of some phenomena, and I had to put the problem aside, years later at one moment the relationships became clear in the most wonderful way.

Epirrhema (published 1827)

When considering nature
Attend always to the one and to the many;
Nothing is inside, nothing is outside:
Since what is inside is also outside.
So behold without delay
The holy open secret!
Enjoy the true appearance [semblance]
And the serious game;
Nothing alive is a one,
Always it’s a many.

Translations by Craig Holdrege. To translate the prose texts, in addition to working carefully with the German essays, Douglas Miller’s translations in Goethe: The Scientific Studies (Princeton U. Press, 1995) were consulted for wording and phrasing.