Goethe’s World View

Goethe’s Place in the Development of Western Thought

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Goethe and Schiller

Goethe tells of a conversation that once unfolded between Schiller and himself after both had attended a meeting of the society of natural research in Jena. Schiller showed himself little satisfied with what had been presented in the meeting. A fragmented way of looking at nature had met him there. And he remarked that such a way could not appeal at all to laymen. Goethe replied that it would perhaps remain strange even to the initiated themselves and that there could be still another way of presenting nature, not as something separated and isolated but rather as working and alive, as striving from the whole into the parts. And now Goethe developed the great ideas which had arisen in him about the nature of the plants. He sketched “with many a characteristic pen-stroke, a symbolic plant” before Schiller’s eyes. This symbolic plant was meant to express the being that lives in every individual plant no matter what particular forms the plant might assume. It was meant to show the successive becoming of the individual plant parts, their emerging from each other, and their relatedness to each other. About this symbolic plant shape Goethe, on April 17, 1787 in Palermo, wrote down the words, “There must after all be such a one! How would I otherwise know that this or that formation is a plant, if they were not all formed according to the same model.” Goethe had developed within him the mental picture of a malleable-ideal form which reveals itself to the spirit when it looks out over the manifoldness of plant shapes and is attentive to what they have in common. Schiller contemplated this formation, which supposedly lived not in one single plant but rather in all plants, and said, shaking his head, “That is not an experience, that is an idea.” These words appeared to Goethe as though coming from a foreign world. He was conscious of the fact that he had arrived at his symbolic shape through the same kind of naive perception as the mental picture of a thing which one can see with one’s eyes and grasp with one’s hands. Like the individual plant, the symbolic or archetypal plant was for him an objective being. He believed he had not arbitrary speculation but rather unbiased observation to thank for the archetypal plant. He could not respond with anything other than, “I can be very glad, then, when I have ideas without knowing it, and in fact even see them with my eyes.” And he was extremely unhappy as Schiller rejoined with the words, “How can an experience ever be given that could be considered to correspond to an idea. For the characteristic nature of the idea consists in the fact that no experience could
Two opposing world views confront each other in this conversation. Goethe sees in the idea of a thing an element that is immediately present within the thing, working and creating in it. In his view an individual thing takes on particular forms because the idea must, in a given case, live itself out in a specific way. It makes no sense to Goethe to say that a thing does not correspond to the idea. For the thing cannot be anything else than that into which the idea has made it. Schiller thinks otherwise. For him the world of ideas and the world of experience are two separate realms. To experience belong the manifold things and events which fill space and time. Confronting it there stands the realm of ideas as a differently constituted reality of which reason takes possession. Because man’s knowledge flows to him from two sides, from without through observation and from within through thinking, Schiller distinguishes two sources of knowledge. For Goethe there is only one source of knowledge, the world of experience, in which the world of ideas is included. For him it is impossible to say, “experience and idea,” because to him the idea lies, through spiritual experience, before the spiritual eye in the same way that the sense world lies before the physical eye.

Schiller’s view came from the philosophy of his time. One must seek in Greek antiquity for the underlying mental pictures which have given this philosophy its stamp, and which have become driving forces of our entire Western spiritual development. One can gain a picture of the particular nature of the Goethean world view if one tries in a certain way, with ideas which one borrows solely from it, to characterize this world view entirely out of it itself. This is to be striven for in the later parts of this book. Such a characterization can be aided, however, by taking a preliminary look at the fact that Goethe expressed himself about certain things in this or that way because he felt himself to be in agreement with, or in opposition to, what others thought about some region of natural or spiritual life. Many a statement of Goethe’s becomes comprehensible only when one looks at the ways of picturing things which he found confronting him and with which he came to terms in order to gain his own point of view. How he thought and felt about this or that gives insight at the same time into the nature of his own world view. If one wants to speak about this region of Goethe’s being, one must bring to expression much that for him remained only unconscious feeling. In the conversation with Schiller described here, there stood before Goethe’s spiritual eye a world view antithetical to his own. And this antithesis shows how he felt about that way of picturing things which, originating from one aspect of Hellenism, sees an abyss between sense experience and spiritual experience, and how he, without any such abyss, saw the experience of the senses and the experience of the spirit unite in a world picture which communicated reality to him. If one wants to bring to life consciously within oneself as thought what Goethe
carried within him more or less unconsciously as his view about the form of Western world views, then these thoughts would be the following ones. In a fateful moment, a mistrust of the human sense organs took possession of a Greek thinker. He began to believe that these organs do not transmit the truth but rather that they deceive him. He lost his trust in what naive, unbiased observation offers. He found that thinking makes different statements about the true being of things than experience does. It would be difficult to say in whose head this mistrust first established itself. One encounters it in the eleatic school of philosophers whose first representative was Xenophanes, born about 570 B.C. in Kolophon. Parmenides appears as the most important personality of this school, for he has maintained, with a keenness like none before him, that there are two sources of human knowledge. He declared that our sense impressions are delusion and error, and that man can attain knowledge of what is true only through pure thinking which takes no account of experience. Through the way this conception of thinking and, of sense experience arose with Parmenides, there was instilled into many following philosophies a developmental illness from which scientific endeavors still suffer today. To discuss the origin in Oriental views of this way of picturing things is out of place within the framework of the Goethean world view.
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With the admirable boldness characteristic of him, Plato expresses this mistrust of experience: the things of this world, which our senses perceive, have no true being at all; they are always becoming but never are. They have only a relative existence, they are, in their totality, only in and through their relationship to each other; one can therefore just as well call their whole existence a non-existence. They are consequently also not objects of any actual knowledge. For, only about what is, in and for itself and always in the same way, can there be such knowledge; they, on the other hand, are only the object of what we, through sensation, take them to be. As long as we are limited only to our perception of them, we are like people who sit in a dark cave so firmly bound that they cannot even turn their heads and who see nothing except, on the wall facing them, by the light of a fire burning behind them, the shadow images of real things which are led across between them and the fire, and who in fact also see of each other, yes each of himself, only the shadows on that wall. Their wisdom, however, would be to predict the sequence of those shadows which they have learned to know from experience.

The Platonic view tears the picture of the world-whole into two parts, into the mental picture of a seeming world and into a world of ideas to which alone true eternal reality is thought to correspond. “What alone can be called truly existing, because they always are, but never become nor pass away are the ideal archetypal images of those shadow images, are the eternal ideas, the archetypal forms of all things. To them no multiplicity can be ascribed; for each is by its very nature only one, insofar as it is the archetypal picture itself, whose copies or shadows are all the single transitory things which bear the same name and are of the same kind. To them can also be ascribed no arising and passing away; for they are truly existing, never becoming, however, nor’ perishing like their copies which vanish away. Of them alone, therefore, is there actual knowledge, since only that can be the object of such knowledge which always and in every respect is, not that which is, but then again is not, depending on how one looks at it.”

The separation of idea and perception is justified only when one speaks of how human knowledge comes about. The human being must allow things to speak to him in a twofold way. They tell him one part of their being of their own free will.
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He need only listen to them. This is the part of reality that is free of ideas. The other pan, however, he must coax from them. He must bring his thinking into movement, and then his inner life fills with the ideas of things. Within the inner life of the personality is the stage upon which things also reveal their ideal inner life. There they speak out what remains eternally hidden to outer perception. The being of nature breaks here into speech. But it is only due to our human organization that things must become known through the sounding together of two tones. In nature one stimulator is there that brings forth both tones. The unbiased person listens to their consonance. He recognizes in the ideal language of his own inner life the statements which things allow to come to him. Only someone who has lost his impartiality will interpret the matter differently. He believes that the language of his inner life comes out of a different realm from the language of outer perception. Plato became conscious of what weight the fact has for man’s world view that the world reveals itself to the human being from two sides. Out of his insightful valuation of this fact, he recognized that reality cannot be attributed to the sense world, regarded only by itself. Only when the world of ideas lights up out of his soul life, and man, in looking at the world, can place before his spirit idea and sense observation as a unified knowledge experience does he have true reality before him. What sense observation has before itself, without its being shone through by the light of ideas, is a world of semblance. Regarded in this way light is also shed by Plato’s insight upon the view of Parmenides as to the deceptive nature of sense-perceptible things. And one can say that the philosophy of Plato is one of the most sublime edifices of thought that has ever sprung from the spirit of mankind. Platonism is the conviction that the goal of all striving for knowledge must be to acquire the ideas which carry the world and which constitute its foundation. Whoever cannot awaken this conviction within himself does not understand the Platonic world view. — Insofar as Platonism has taken hold in the evolution of Western thought, however, it shows still another side. Plato did not stop short at emphasizing the knowledge that, in human perception the sense world becomes a mere semblance if the light of the world of ideas is not shone upon it, but rather, through the way he presented this fact, he furthered the belief that the sense world, in and for itself, irrespective of man, is a world of semblance, and that true reality is to be found only in ideas. Out of this belief there arises the question: how do idea and sense world (nature) come together outside the human being? For someone who, outside of man, can acknowledge no sense world devoid of ideas, the question about the relationship of idea and sense world is one which must be sought and solved within the being of man. And this is how the matter stands for the Goethean world view. For it, the question, “What relationship exists outside of man between idea and sense world?” is an unhealthy one, because for it there is no sense world (nature) without idea outside of man. Only man
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can detach the idea from the sense world for himself and thus picture nature to be devoid of idea. Therefore one can say: for the Goethean world view the question, “How do idea and sense-perceptible things come together?”, which has occupied the evolution of Western thought for centuries, is an entirely superfluous question. And the results of this stream of Platonism, running through the evolution of Western thought, which confronted Goethe, for example, in the above conversation with Schiller, but also in other cases, worked upon his feelings like an unhealthy element in man’s way of picturing things. Something he did not express clearly in words but which lived in his feelings and became an impulse that helped shape his own world view is the view that what healthy human feeling teaches us at every moment — namely how the language of observation and that of thinking unite in order to reveal full reality — was not heeded by the thinkers sunk in their reflections. Instead of looking at how nature speaks to man, they fashioned artificial concepts about the relationship of the world of ideas and experience. In order to see the full extent of the deep significance of this direction of thought, which Goethe felt to be unhealthy, within the world views confronting him and by which he wanted to orient himself, one must consider how the stream of Platonism just indicated, which evaporates the sense world into a mere semblance and which thereby brings the world of ideas into a distorted relationship to it, one must consider how this Platonism has grown stronger through a one-sided philosophical apprehension of Christian truth in the course of the evolution of Western thought. Because the Christian view confronted Goethe as connected with the stream of Platonism which he felt to be unhealthy, he could only with difficulty develop a relationship with Christianity. Goethe did not follow in detail how the stream of Platonism which he rejected worked on in the evolution of Christian thought, but he did feel the results of it working on within the ways of thinking which confronted him. Therefore a study of how these results came to be in these ways of thinking which developed through the centuries before Goethe came on the scene will shed light on how his way of picturing things took shape. The Christian evolution of thought, in many of its representatives, sought to come to terms with belief in the beyond and with the value that sense existence has in the face of the spiritual world. If one surrendered oneself to the view that the relationship of the sense world to the world of ideas has a significance apart from man, then, with the question arising from this, one came into the view of a divine world order. And the church fathers, to whom this question came, had to form thoughts for themselves as to the role played by the Platonic world of ideas within this divine world order. One not only stood in danger thereby of thinking that what unite in human knowing through direct perception, namely idea and sense world, are separated off by themselves outside of man, but one also stood in danger of separating them from each other, so that ideas, outside of what is given to man
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as nature, now also lead an existence for themselves within a spirituality separated from nature. If one joined this mental picture, which rested on an untrue view of the world of ideas and of the sense world, with the justified view that the divine can never be present in the human soul in full consciousness, then a total tearing apart of the world of ideas and nature resulted. Then one seeks what always should be sought within the human spirit, outside it, within the created world. The archetypal images of all things begin to be thought of as contained within the divine spirit. The world becomes the imperfect reflection of the perfect world of ideas resting in God. The human soul then, as the result of a one-sided apprehension of Platonism, becomes separated from the relationship of idea and “reality.” The soul extends what it justifiably thinks to be its relationship to the divine world order out over the relationship which lives in it between the world of ideas and the seeming world of the senses. Augustine comes, through a way of looking at things such as this, to views like the following: “Without wavering we want to believe that the thinking soul is not of the same nature as God, for He allows no community but that the soul can, however, become enlightened through taking part in the nature of God.”

In this way, then, when this way of picturing things is one-sidedly overdone, the possibility is taken away from the human soul of experiencing, in its contemplation of nature, also the world of ideas as the being of reality. And experiencing the ideas is also interpreted as unchristian. The one-sided view of Platonism is extended over Christianity itself. Platonism as a philosophical world view stays more in the element of thinking; religious sentiment immerses thinking into the life of feeling and establishes it in this way within man’s nature. Anchored this way within man’s soul life, the unhealthy element of one-sided Platonism could gain a deeper significance in the evolution of Western thought than if it had remained mere philosophy. For centuries this development of thought stood before questions like these: how does what man forms as ideas stand with respect to the things of reality? Are the concepts that live in the human soul through the world of ideas only mental pictures, names, which have nothing to do with reality? Are they themselves something real which man receives through perceiving reality and through grasping it with his intellect? Such questions, for the Goethean world view, are not intellectual questions about something or other lying outside of man’s being. Within human contemplation of reality these questions solve themselves with inexhaustible liveliness through true human knowing. And this Goethean world view must not only find that within Christian thoughts there live the results of a one-sided Platonism, but it feels itself estranged from genuine Christianity when the latter confronts him permeated with such Platonism. — What lives in many of the thoughts which Goethe developed within himself in order to make the world comprehensible to himself was rejection of that stream of Platonism which he experienced as unhealthy. The fact that besides
this he had an open sense for the Platonic lifting of the human soul up to the world of ideas is attested to by many a statement made in this direction. He felt within himself the active working of the reality of ideas when, in his way, he approached nature through contemplation and research; he felt that nature itself spoke in the language of ideas, when the soul opens itself to such language. But he could not agree that one regard the world of ideas as something isolated and thus create for oneself the possibility, with respect to an idea about the nature of plants, of saying: that is no experience, that is an idea. He felt there that his spiritual eye beheld the idea as a reality, just as the physical eye sees the physical part of the plant being. Thus that Platonism which is directed into the world of ideas established itself in all its purity in Goethe’s world view, and the stream of Platonism that leads away from reality is overcome in it. Because his world view took this form, Goethe had also to reject what presented itself to him as Christian views in such a way that it could only appear to him to be transformed one-sided Platonism. And he had to feel that in the forms of many a world view which confronted him and with which he wanted to come to terms, one had not succeeded in overcoming within Western culture the Christian-Platonic view of reality which was not in accordance with nature nor with ideas.
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In vain did Aristotle protest against the Platonic splitting of the world picture. He saw in nature a unified being, which contains ideas just as much as it does the things and phenomena perceptible to the senses. Only within the human spirit can the ideas have an independent existence. But in this independent state they cannot be credited with any reality. Only the soul can separate them from the perceptible things with which, together, they constitute reality. If Western philosophy had linked onto the rightly understood views of Aristotle, then it would have been preserved from much of what must appear to the Goethean world view as aberration.

But Aristotle, rightly understood, to begin with made uncomfortable many a person who wanted to gain a foundation in thought for the Christian picture of things. Many a person who considered himself to be a genuinely “Christian” thinker did not know what to do with a conception of nature which places the highest active principle into the world of our experience. Many Christian philosophers and theologians therefore gave a new interpretation to Aristotle. They attached a meaning to his views which, in their opinion, was able to serve as a logical support for Christian dogma. Man’s spirit should not seek within things for their creative ideas. The truth is, indeed, imparted to human beings by God in the form of revelation. Reason is only meant to confirm what God has revealed. Aristotelian principles were interpreted by the Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages in such a way that the religious truth of salvation received its philosophical reinforcement through these principles. It is the conception of Thomas Aquinas, the most significant Christian thinker, which first seeks to weave the Aristotelian thoughts as far and as deeply into the Christian evolution of ideas as was possible at the time of this thinker. According to this conception, revelation contains the highest truths, the Bible’s teachings of salvation; it is possible, however, for reason to penetrate deeply into things, in the Aristotelian way, and to bring forth from them their content of ideas. Revelation can descend far enough, and reason can lift itself high enough, that the teaching of salvation and human knowledge merge with one another at a certain boundary. Aristotle’s way of penetrating into things serves Thomas, therefore, as a way of coming to the realm of revelation.
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When, with Bacon of Verulam and Descartes, an era began in which there asserted itself the will to seek the truth through the human personality’s own power, then habits of thought tended to lead one to strive only to set up views which, in spite of their seeming independence from the preceding Western world picture, were nevertheless nothing but new forms of it. Bacon and Descartes had also acquired, as heritage of a degenerate thought world, the pernicious way of looking at the relationship of experience and idea. Bacon had a sense and an understanding only for the particulars of nature. By collecting that which, extending through the manifoldness of space and time, is alike or similar, he believed he arrived at general rules about the processes of nature. By collecting that which, extending through the manifoldness of space and time, is alike or similar, he believed he arrived at general rules about the processes of nature. Goethe aptly says of him, “For, though he himself always indicates that one should collect the particulars only in order to be able to choose from them, to order them, and finally to arrive at universals, nevertheless, he grants too many rights to the individual cases, and before one can achieve through induction — even the induction which he extols — this simplification and conclusion, the life is gone and the forces consume themselves.” For Bacon these general rules are a means by which it is possible for reason to have a comfortable overview of the region of particularities. But he does not believe that these rules are founded in the ideal content of things and that they are really creative forces of nature. Therefore he also does not seek the idea directly within the particular but rather abstracts it out of a multiplicity of particulars. Someone who does not believe that the idea lives within the individual thing also can have no inclination to seek it there. He accepts the thing the way it presents itself to mere outer perception. Bacon’s significance is to be sought in the fact that he drew attention to that outer way of looking at things which had been denigrated by the one-sided Platonism characterized above, that he emphasized that in it lies a source of truth. He was not, however, in a position to help the world of ideas in the same way to establish its rights over against the perceptible world. He declared what is ideal to be a subjective element within the human spirit. His way of thinking is Platonism in reverse. Plato sees reality only in the world of ideas, Bacon only in the world of perception without ideas. Within Bacon’s conception there lies the starting point for that attitude of thinkers by which natural scientists are governed right into the present-day. Bacon’s conception suffers from an incorrect view about the ideal element of the world of experience. It could not deal rightly with that medieval view, produced by a one-sided way of posing the I question, to the effect that ideas are only names, not realities lying within things.

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From other points of view, but no less influenced by one-sidedly Platonizing modes of thought, Descartes began his contemplations three decades after Bacon. He is
also afflicted with the Original Sin of Western thought, with mistrust toward the unbiased observation of nature. Doubt in the existence and knowability of things is the starting point of his research. He does not direct his gaze upon the things in order to gain access to certainty, but rather he seeks out a very little door, a way, in the fullest sense of the word, of sneaking in. He withdraws into the most intimate region of thinking. Everything that I have believed up to now as truth might be false, he says to himself. What I have thought might rest upon delusion. But the one fact does remain nevertheless: that I think about things. Even if I think lies and illusion, I am thinking nevertheless. And if I think, then I also exist. I think, therefore I am. With this Descartes believes that he has gained a sound starting point for all further thinking about things. He asks himself further: is there not still something else in the content of my thinking that points to a true existence? And there he finds the idea of God as the most perfect of all beings. Given that man himself is imperfect, how does the idea of a most perfect being come into his world of thoughts? An imperfect being cannot possibly produce such an idea out of himself. For the most perfect thing that he can think is in fact an imperfect thing. This idea of the most perfect being must itself therefore have been placed into man. Therefore God must also exist. Why, however, should I, a perfect being delude us with an illusion? The outer world, which presents itself to us as real, must therefore also be real. Otherwise it would be an illusory picture that the godhead imposes upon us. In this way Descartes seeks to win the trust in reality which, because of inherited feelings, he lacked at first. He seeks truth in an extremely artificial way. He takes his start one-sidedly from thinking. He credits thinking alone with the power to produce conviction. A conviction about observation can only be won if it is provided by thinking. The consequence of this view was that it became the striving of Descartes’ successors to determine the whole compass of the truths which thinking can develop out of itself and prove. One wanted to find the sum total of all knowledge out of pure reason. One wanted to take one’s start from the simplest immediately clear insights, and proceeding from there to travel through the entire sphere of pure thinking. This system was meant to be built up according to the model of Euclidean geometry. For one was of the view that this also starts from simple, true principles and evolves its entire content through mere deduction, without recourse to observation. In his Ethics Spinoza attempted to provide such a system of the pure truths of reason. He takes a number of mental pictures: substance, attribute, mode, thinking, extension, etc., and investigates in a purely intellectual way the relationships and content of these mental pictures. The being of reality supposedly expresses itself in an edifice of thought. Spinoza regards only the knowledge arising through this activity, foreign to reality, as one that corresponds to the true being of the world, as one that provides adequate ideas.
The ideas which spring from sense perception are for him inadequate, confused, and mutilated. It is easy to see that also in this world conception there persists the one-sided Platonic way of conceiving an antithesis between perceptions and ideas. The thoughts which are formed independently of perception are alone of value for knowledge. Spinoza goes still further. He extends the antithesis also to the moral feeling and actions of human beings. Feelings of pain can only spring from ideas that stem from perception; such ideas produce desires and passions in man, whose slave he can become if he gives himself over to them. Only what springs from reason produces feelings of unqualified pleasure. The highest bliss of man is therefore his life in the ideas of reason, his devotion to knowledge of the pure world of ideas. Whoever has overcome what stems from the world of perception and lives on only within pure knowledge experiences the highest blessedness.

Not quite a century after Spinoza there appears the Scotsman, David Hume, with a way of thinking that again lets knowledge spring from perception alone. Only individual things in space and time are given. Thinking connects the individual perceptions, not, however because something lies within these perceptions themselves which corresponds to this connecting, but rather because the intellect has habituated itself to bringing things into relationship. The human being is habituated to seeing that one thing follows another in time. He forms for himself the mental picture that it must follow. He makes the first thing into the cause, the second into the effect. The human being is habituated further to seeing that a movement of his body follows upon a thought of his spirit. He explains this to himself by saying that his spirit has caused the movement of his body. Human ideas are habits of thought, nothing more. Only perceptions have reality.

The uniting of the most diverse trends of thought which have come into existence through the centuries is the Kantian world view. Kant also lacks the natural feeling for the relationship between perception and idea. He lives in philosophical preconceptions which he took up into himself through study of his predecessors. One of these preconceptions is that there are necessary truths which are produced by pure thinking free of any experience. The proof of this, in his view, is given by the existence of mathematics and of pure physics which contain such truths. Another of his preconceptions consists of the fact that he denies to experience the ability of attaining equally necessary truths. Mistrust toward the world of perception is also present in Kant. To these habits of thinking there is added the influence of Hume. Kant agrees with Hume with respect to his assertion that the ideas into which thinking combines the individual perceptions do not stem from experience, but rather that thinking adds them to experience. These three preconceptions are the roots of the
Kantian thought structure. Man possesses necessary truths. They cannot stem from experience, because it has nothing like them to offer. In spite of this, man applies them to experience. He connects the individual perceptions in accordance with these truths. They stem from man himself. It lies in his nature to bring the things into the kind of relationship which corresponds to the truths gained by pure thinking. Kant goes still further now. He credits the senses also with the ability to bring what is given them from outside into a definite order. This order also does not flow in from outside with the impressions of things. The impressions first receive their order in space and time, through sense perception. Space and time do not belong to the things. The human being is organized in such a way that, when the things make impressions on his senses, he then brings these impressions into spatial or temporal relationships. Man receives from outside only impressions, sensations. The ordering of these in space and in time, the combining of them into ideas, is his own work. But the sensations are also not something that stems from the things. It is not the things that man perceives but only the impressions they make on him. I know nothing about a thing when I have a sensation. I can only say that I notice the arising of a sensation in me. What the characteristics are by which the thing is able to call forth sensations in me, about them I can experience nothing. The human being, in Kant’s opinion, does not have to do with the things-in-themselves but only with the impressions which they make upon him and with the relationships into which he himself brings these impressions. The world of experience is not taken up objectively from outside but only, in response to outer causes, subjectively produced from within. It is not the things which give the world of experience the stamp it bears but rather the human organization which does so. That world as such, consequently, is not present at all independently of man. From this standpoint the assumption of necessary truths independent of experience is possible. For these truths relate merely to the way man, of himself, determines his world of experience. They contain the laws of his organization. They have no connection to the things-in-themselves. Kant has therefore found a way out, which permits him to remain in his preconception that there are necessary truths which hold good for the content of the world of experience, without, however, stemming from it. In order to find this way out, he had, to be sure, to commit himself to the view that the human spirit is incapable of knowing anything at all about the things-in-themselves. He had to restrict all knowledge to the world of appearances which the human organization spins out of itself as a result of impressions caused by the things. But why should Kant worry about the being of the things-in-themselves so long as he was able to rescue the eternal, necessarily valid truths in the form in which he pictured them. One-sided Platonism brought forth in Kant a fruit that paralyzes knowledge. Plato turned away from perception and directed his gaze upon the eternal ideas, because
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perception did not seem to him to express the being of things. Kant, however, renounces the notion that ideas open any real insight into the being of the world, just so they retain the quality of the eternal and necessary. Plato holds to the world of ideas, because he believes that the true being of the world must be eternal, indestructible, unchangeable, and he can ascribe these qualities only to ideas. Kant is content if only he can maintain these qualities for the ideas. Ideas then no longer need to express the being of the world at all.

Kant’s philosophical way of picturing things was in addition particularly nourished by the direction of his religious feelings. He did not take as his starting point to look, within the being of man, at the living harmony of the world of ideas and of sense perception but rather posed himself the question: can, through man’s experience of the world of ideas, anything be known by him which can never enter the realm of sense perception? Whoever thinks in the sense of the Goethean world view seeks to know the character of the world of ideas as reality, by grasping the being of the idea through his insight into how the Idea allows him to behold reality in the sense-perceptible world of semblance. Then he can ask himself: to what extent, through the character experienced in this way of the world of ideas as reality, can I penetrate into those regions within which the supersensible truths of freedom, of immortality, of the divine world order, find their relationship to human knowledge? Kant negated the possibility of our being able to know anything about the reality of the world of ideas from its relationship to sense perception. From this presupposition he arrived at the scientific result, which, unknown to him, was demanded by the direction of his religious feeling: that scientific knowledge must come to a halt before the kind of questions which relate to freedom, immortality, and the divine world order. There resulted for him the view that human knowledge could only go as far as the boundaries which enclose the sense realm, and that for everything which lies beyond them only faith is possible. He wanted to limit knowing in order to preserve a place for faith. It lies in the sense of the Goethean world view first of all to provide knowing with a firm basis through the fact that the world of ideas, in its essential being, is seen connected with nature, in order then, within the world of ideas thus consolidated, to advance to an experience lying beyond the sense world. Even then, when regions are known which do not lie in the realm of the sense world, one’s gaze is still directed toward the living harmony of idea and experience, and certainty of knowledge is sought thereby. Kant could not find any such certainty. Therefore he set out to find, outside of knowledge, a basis for the mental pictures of freedom, immortality, and divine order. It lies in the sense of the Goethean world view to want to know as much about the things-in-themselves as the being of the
The world of ideas, grasped in connection with nature, allows. It lies in the sense of the Kantian world view to deny to knowledge the right of shining into the world of the things-in-themselves. Goethe wants, within knowledge, to kindle a light which illuminates the being of things. It is also clear to him that the being of the things thus illuminated does not lie within the light itself; but he nevertheless does not want to give up having this being become revealed through the illumination by this light. Kant holds fast to the view that the being of the things illuminated does not lie in the light itself; therefore the light can reveal nothing about this being.

The world view of Kant can stand before that of Goethe only in the sense of the following mental pictures: Kant’s world view has not arisen through any clearing away of old errors, nor through any free, original descending into the depths of reality but rather through a fusing together of acquired and inherited philosophical and religious preconceptions. This world view could only spring from an individual in whom the sense for the living creativity within nature has remained undeveloped. And it could only affect the kind of individuals who suffered from the same lack. From the far-reaching influence which Kant’s way of thinking exercised upon his contemporaries, one can see how strongly they stood under the spell of one-sided Platonism.
Goethe and the Platonic World View

I have described the development of thought from Plato’s time to Kant’s in order to be able to show what impressions Goethe had to receive when he turned to the results of the philosophical thoughts to which he had recourse in order to satisfy his powerful need for knowledge. For the innumerable questions to which his nature urged him, he found no answers in the philosophies. In fact, every time he delved into the world view of some philosopher, an antithesis manifested itself between the direction his questions took and the thought world from which he sought counsel. The reason for this lies in the fact that the one-sided Platonic separation of idea and experience was repugnant to his nature. When he observed nature, it then brought ideas to meet him. He therefore could only think it to be filled with ideas. A world of ideas, which does not permeate the things of nature, which does not bring forth their appearing and disappearing, their becoming and growing, is for him a powerless web of thoughts. The logical spinning out of lines of thought, without descending into the real life and creative activity of nature seems to him unfruitful. For he feels himself intimately intertwined with nature. He regards himself as a living pan of nature. What arises within his spirit, according to his view, nature has allowed to arise within him. Man should not place himself in some corner and believe that he could there spin out of himself a web of thoughts which explains the being of things. He should continuously let the stream of world happening flow through himself. Then he will feel that the world of ideas is nothing other than the creative and active power of nature. He will not want to stand above the things in order to think about them, but rather he will delve into their depths and raise out of them what lives and works within them.

Goethe’s artistic nature led him to this way of thinking. He felt his poetic creations grow forth out of his personality with the same necessity with which a flower blossoms. The way the spirit brought forth a work of art in him seemed to him to be no different than the way nature produces its creations. And as in the work of art the spiritual element is inseparable from its spiritless material, so also it was impossible for him, with a thing of nature, to picture the perception without the idea. A view therefore seemed foreign to him which saw in a perception only something unclear, confused, and which wanted to regard the world of ideas as separate and cleansed of all experience. He felt, in every world view in which the elements of one-sidedly
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understood Platonism lived, something contrary to nature. Therefore he could not find in the philosophers what he sought from them. He sought the ideas which live in the things and which let all the single things of experience appear as though growing forth out of a living whole, and the philosophers provided him with thought hulls which they had tied together into systems according to logical principles. Again and again he found himself thrown back upon himself when he sought from others the explanations to the riddles with which nature presented him.

Among the things which caused Goethe suffering before his Italian journey was the fact that his need for knowledge could find no satisfaction. In Italy he was able to form a view for himself about the driving forces out of which works of art come. He recognized that in perfect works of art is contained that which human beings revere as something divine, as something eternal. After looking at artistic creations which particularly interest him, he writes the words, “The great works of art have at the same time been brought forth by human beings according to true and natural laws, as the greatest works of nature. Everything that is arbitrary, thought up, falls away; there is necessity, there is God.” The art of the Greeks drew forth this statement from him: “I suspect that the Greeks proceeded according to precisely those laws by which nature itself proceeds and whose tracks I am pursuing.” What Plato believed he found in the world of ideas, what the philosophers were never able to bring home to Goethe, this looked out at him from the works of art of Italy. In art there reveals itself to Goethe for the first time in a perfect form what he can regard as the basis of knowledge. He sees in artistic production one kind, and a higher level, of the working of nature; artistic creating is for him a heightened creating of nature. He later expressed this in his characterization of Winckelmann: “… inasmuch as man is placed at the pinnacle of nature, he then regards himself again as an entire nature, which yet again has to bring forth within itself a pinnacle. To this end he enhances himself, by imbuing himself with every perfection and virtue, summons choice, order, harmony, and meaning, and finally lifts himself to the production of works of art …” Goethe attains his world view not on a path of logical deduction but rather through contemplation of the being of art. And what he found in art, this he seeks also in nature.

The activity by which Goethe takes possession of a knowledge about something in nature is not essentially different from artistic activity. Both merge into one another and extend over one another. The artist must, in Goethe’s view, become greater and more decisive when, in addition to having “talent he is a trained botanist as well, when, starting with the roots, he knows what influence the various parts have upon the growth and development of the plant, what they do and how they mutually affect each other, when he has insight into, and reflects upon, the successive development of flowers, leaves, pollination, fruit and new seed. He will thereupon not merely
reveal, through what he selects from the phenomena, his own tastes, but rather through a correct presentation of individual characteristics, he will also make us feel wonder and teach us at the same time.” According to this, a work of art is all the more perfect the more there comes to expression in it the same lawfulness that is contained in the work of nature to which it corresponds. There is only one unified realm of truth, and this comprises art and nature. Therefore the capacity for artistic creativity can also not be essentially different from the capacity to know nature. Goethe says about the style of the artist that it “rests upon the deepest foundations of knowledge, upon the being of things, insofar as we are permitted to know it in forms we can see and grasp.” The way of looking at things which comes from Platonic conceptions taken up in a one-sided way draws a sharp line between science and art. It lets artistic activity rest upon fantasy, upon feeling; scientific findings should be the result of the development of concepts free of any fantasy. Goethe pictures the matter differently. When he turns his eye upon nature, there results for him a number of ideas; but he finds that, within the individual object of experience, its ideal component is not closed off; the idea points beyond the individual object to related objects, in which it comes to manifestation in a similar way. The philosophizing observer holds fast to this ideal component and brings it to expression directly in his thought creations. This ideal element also works upon the artist. But it moves him to shape a work, in which the idea does not merely work as it does within a work of nature but rather comes to direct manifestation. That which, in the work of nature, is merely ideal and reveals itself to the spiritual eye of the observer, becomes real in the work of art, it becomes perceptible reality. The artist realizes the ideas of nature. But he does not need to bring these to consciousness for himself in the form of ideas. When he contemplates a thing or an event, there then takes shape immediately within his spirit something else, which contains in real manifestation what the thing or event contains only as idea. The artist gives us pictures of the works of nature which transform the idea content of these works into a content of perception. The philosopher shows how nature presents itself to thinking contemplation; the artist shows how nature would look if it openly brought the forces working in it not merely to meet thinking but also to meet perception. It is one and the same truth which the philosopher presents in the form of thought, the artist in the form of a picture. The two differ only in their means of expression. The insight into the true relationship of idea and experience which Goethe acquired in Italy is only the fruit from the seed which lay hidden in his natural predisposition. His Italian journey brought him that warmth of sun which was able to bring the seed to maturity. In the essay “Nature,” which in 1782 appeared in the Tiefurt Journal, and whose author was Goethe (see my indication of Goethe’s authorship in Volume 7 of the publications of the Goethe Society), there
are already to be found the seeds of the later Goethean world view. What is here
dim feeling later becomes clear definite thought. “Nature! We are surrounded and
embraced by her — unable to take ourselves out of her, and unable to enter more
deeply into her. She takes us up, unasked and unwarned, into the orbit of her dance
and drives herself on with us, until we are exhausted and fall from her arms ... she
(nature) has thought and muses continuously; but not as a human being, rather
as nature ... She has no language nor speech, but she creates tongues and hearts,
through which she feels and speaks ... I did not speak of her. No, what is true
and false, everything, she has spoken. Everything is her fault, everything is to her
credit!” As Goethe wrote down these sentences, it was still not yet clear to him how
nature expresses her ideal being through man; but he did feel that it is the voice of
the spirit of nature which sounds in the spirit of man.

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In Italy, Goethe found the spiritual atmosphere in which his organs of knowledge
could develop themselves, as they, in accordance with their predisposition, would
have to if he were to become fully satisfied. In Rome he “discussed art and its
theoretical demands a great deal with Moritz”; as he traveled and observed the
metamorphosis of plants, a method, in accordance with nature, took shape within
him which later proved itself to be fruitful for gaining knowledge of all organic
nature. “For as the vegetation presented its behavior to me step by step, I could
not go wrong, but, while letting it be, I had to recognize the ways and means by
which it can gradually help even the most hidden condition to develop to perfection.”
Only a few years after his return from Italy he succeeded in finding a way of looking
at inorganic nature also, born of his spiritual needs. “During physical research the
conviction forced itself on me that, in any contemplation of objects, our highest
duty is to search out exactly every determining factor under which a phenomenon
appears and to aim for the greatest possible completeness of phenomena, because
the phenomena are ultimately constrained to connect themselves to each other, or
rather to reach over into each other, and they do form, as the researcher looks at
them, a kind of organization; they must manifest their whole inner life.”

Goethe did not find enlightenment anywhere. He had to enlighten himself. He
sought the reason for this and believed to have found it in his lack of an organ
for philosophy in the real sense. The reason, however, is to be sought in the fact
that the Platonic way of thinking, grasped one-sidedly, which held sway in all the
philosophies accessible to him, was contrary to his healthy natural disposition. In his
youth he had repeatedly turned to Spinoza. He admits, in fact, that this philosopher
had always had a “peaceful effect” upon him. This is based on the fact that Spinoza
regards the universe as a great unity and thinks of everything individual as going
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forth necessarily out of the whole. But when Goethe let himself into the content of Spinoza's philosophy, he felt nevertheless that this content remained alien to him. “But do not think that I would have liked to subscribe to his writings and profess them literally. For, I had already all too clearly recognized that no one understands another, that no one, in relation to the same words, thinks the same thing that another does, that a conversation or a reading stimulate different trains of thought in different people; and one will certainly tryst the author of Werther and Faust, deeply aware as he is of such misunderstandings, not to harbor the presumption of perfectly understanding as a man who, as student of Descartes, has raised himself through mathematical and rabbinical training to the pinnacle of thinking; who, right up to the present day, still seems to be the goal of all speculative efforts.”

But what made him for Goethe a philosopher to whom he still could not surrender himself completely was not the fact that Spinoza was schooled by Descartes, and also not the fact that he had raised himself through mathematical and rabbinical training to the pinnacle of thinking but rather his purely logical way, estranged from reality, of dealing with knowledge. Goethe could not surrender to pure thinking free of experience, because he was not able to separate it from the totality of what is real. He did not want, merely logically, to join one thought onto another. Rather, such an activity of thought seemed to him to lead away from true reality. He had to immerse his spirit into experience in order to come to the idea. The reciprocal working of idea and perception was for him a spiritual breathing. “Time is ruled by swings of the pendulum, the moral and scientific world by the reciprocal movement of idea and experience.” To regard the world and its phenomena in the sense of this statement seemed natural to Goethe, because for him there was no doubt about the fact that nature follows the same procedure: that it “is a development from a living mysterious whole” to the manifold particular phenomena which fill space and time. The mysterious whole is the world of the idea. “The idea is eternal and single; that we also use the plural is not appropriate. Everything of which we become aware and about which we are able to speak is only a manifestation of the idea; concepts are what we speak, and to this extent the idea itself is a concept.” Nature’s creating goes from the whole, which is ideal in character, into the particular given to perception as something real. Therefore the observer should “recognize what is ideal within the real and allay his momentary discontent with what is finite by raising himself to the infinite.” Goethe is convinced that “nature proceeds according to ideas in the same way that man, in everything he undertakes, pursues an idea.” When a person really succeeds in raising himself to the idea and, taking his start from the idea, succeeds in grasping the particulars of perception, he then accomplishes the same thing that nature does when it lets its creations go forth out of the mysterious whole. As long as a person does not feel the working and creating of the idea, his thinking
remains separated from living nature. He must then regard his thinking as a merely subjective activity, which can sketch an abstract picture of nature. As soon as he feels, however, how the idea lives and is active within his inner life, he looks upon himself and nature as one whole, and what appears as something subjective in his inner life has objective validity for him as well; he knows that he no longer confronts nature as a stranger but rather feels himself grown together with the whole of it. The subjective has become objective; the objective has become entirely permeated with spirit. Goethe is of the opinion that Kant’s basic error consists of the fact that he “regards the subjective ability to know as an object itself and, sharply indeed but not entirely correctly, he distinguishes the point where subjective and objective meet.” The ability to know appears subjective to a person only so long as he does not heed the fact that it is nature itself that speaks through this ability. Subjective and objective meet when the objective world of ideas arises within the subject and when there lives in the spirit of man that which is active in nature itself. When that is the case, then all antithesis between subjective and objective ceases. This antithesis has significance only so long a person maintains it artificially, only so long as he regards ideas as his thoughts, through which the being of nature is mirrored but in which this being itself is not at work. Kant and the Kantians had no inkling of the fact that, in the ideas of our reason the being, the “in-itself” of things is experienced directly. For them everything of an ideal nature is merely something subjective. They therefore came to the opinion that what is ideal could be necessarily valid only when that to which it relates, the world of experience, is also only subjective. The Kantian way of thinking stands in sharp opposition to Goethe’s views. There are, it is true, isolated statements of Goethe’s in which he speaks approvingly of Kant’s views. He tells of having been present at many conversations on these views. “With a certain amount of attentiveness I was able to notice that the old cardinal question was being revived as to how much our self and how much the outer world contributes to our spiritual existence. I had never separated the two, and when, in my way, I philosophized about things, I did so with unconscious naivety and really believed that I saw my conclusions before my very eyes. But as soon as that dispute arose in the discussion, I liked to range myself on the side which does man the most honor, and fully applauded all the friends who maintained, with Kant, that even though all our knowledge begins with experience, still it does not for that reason all spring from experience.” In Goethe’s view the idea also does not stem from that part of experience which presents itself to mere perception through the senses of man. Reason, fantasy, must be active, must penetrate into the inner life of beings in order to take possession of the ideal elements of existence. To that extent the spirit of man partakes in the coming about of knowledge. Goethe believes it does man honor that within his spirit the higher reality which is not accessible to his senses
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comes to manifestation; Kant, on the other hand, denies the world of experience any character of higher reality, because it contains parts which stem from our spirit. Only when he first reinterpreted Kant’s principles in the light of his world view could Goethe relate himself favorably to them. The basic elements of Kant’s way of thinking are in sharpest opposition to Goethe’s nature. If he did not emphasize this opposition sharply enough, that is certainly only due to the fact that he did not involve himself with these basic elements because they were too alien to him.

“It was the opening part (of the Critique of Pure Reason) which appealed to me; I dared not venture into the labyrinth itself: sometimes my poetic gift hindered me, sometimes my common sense, and nowhere did I feel myself changed for the better.” About his conversations with the Kantians Goethe had to confess, “They certainly heard me but had no answer for me nor could be in any way helpful. It happened to me more than once that one or another of them, with smiling wonderment, admitted that what I said was analogous to the Kantian way of picturing things, but strange.” It was, as I have shown, in fact not analogous but rather most emphatically opposite to the Kantian way of picturing things.

* It is interesting to see how Schiller seeks to shed light for himself upon the antithesis between the Goethean way of thinking and his own. He feels what is original and free in the Goethean world view, but he cannot rid his own spirit of its one-sidedly grasped Platonic elements of thought. He cannot raise himself to the insight that idea and perception are not present within reality in a state of separation from each other but rather are only artificially thought to be separated by an intellect which has been led astray by ideas steered in a false direction. Therefore in contrast to the Goethean way of thinking, which Schiller calls an intuitive one, he sets up his own way, as a speculative one, and declares that both ways, if they only work strongly enough, must lead to one and the same goal. Schiller supposes of the intuitive spirit that he holds to the empirical, to the individual, and from there ascends to the law, to the idea In the case where such a spirit is a genius, he will recognize what is necessary within the empirical, the species within the individual. The speculative spirit, on the other hand, supposedly goes in the opposite direction. The law, the idea, is supposedly given to him first, and from it he descends to the empirical and the individual. If such a spirit is a genius, then he will, in fact, always have only species in view, but with the possibility of life and with a well-founded connection to real objects. The supposition that there is a particular way of thinking, the speculative in contrast to the intuitive, rests upon the belief that the world of ideas is thought to have an isolated existence separate from the world of perception. Were this the case, then there could be a way for the content of ideas about perceptible
things to come into the spirit, even if the spirit did not seek it within experience. If, however, the world of ideas is inseparably bound up with the reality of experience, if both are present only as one whole, then there can only be an intuitive knowledge which seeks the idea within experience and which also grasps the species along with the individual. In truth there is also no purely speculative spirit in Schiller’s sense. For the species exist only within the sphere to which the individuals also belong; and the spirit absolutely cannot find them anywhere else. If a so-called speculative spirit really has ideas of species, then these stem from observation of the real world. If one’s living feeling for this origin, for the necessary connection of species with the individual is lost, then there arises the opinion that such ideas can arise in our reason even without experience. The adherents of this opinion label a number of abstract ideas of species as content of pure reason because they do not see the threads by which these ideas are bound to experience. Such a delusion is most easily possible with respect to the most general most comprehensive ideas. Since such ideas encompass wide areas of reality, much in them is eradicated or dimmed which is attributable to the individuals belonging to this or that area. A number of such general ideas can be taken up from other people and then believed to be innate in man or to be spun out of pure reason. An individual succumbing to such a belief may consider himself to be speculative. But he will never be able to draw from his world of ideas anything more than what those people have put there, from whom he has received these ideas. When Schiller maintains that the speculative spirit, if he is a genius, always creates “only species, but with the possibility of life and with a well-founded connection to real objects” (see Schiller’s letter to Goethe of August 23, 1794), he is in error. A really speculative spirit, who lived only in concepts of species, could not find in his world of ideas any well-founded connection to reality other than the one which already lies within it. A spirit who has connections to the reality of nature and who in spite of this calls himself speculative, is caught up in a delusion about his own being. This delusion can mislead him into neglecting his connections with reality, with his immediate life. He will believe himself able to dispense with immediate observation, because he believes himself to have other sources of truth. The result of this is always that the world of ideas of such a spirit has a dull and faded character. The fresh colors of life will be lacking in his thoughts. Whoever wants to live in association with reality will not be able to gain much from such a world of thoughts. The speculative way cannot be regarded as a way of thinking which can stand with equal validity beside the intuitive one but rather as an atrophied way of thinking, impoverished of life. The intuitive spirit does not have to do merely with individuals; he does not seek within the empirical for the character of necessity. But rather, when he turns to nature, perception and Idea join themselves together directly into a unity for him. Both are seen as existing within one another and
are felt to be a whole. While he can ascend to the most general truths, to the artiest abstractions, immediate real life will always be recognizable in his world of thoughts. Goethe’s thinking was of this kind. Heinroth made an apt statement in his anthropology about this thinking which pleased Goethe mightily, because it gave him insight into his own nature. “Dr. Heinroth ... speaks favorably about my being and working; he even describes my way of going about things as an original one: that my ability to think, namely, is active objectively, by which he means that my thinking does not separate itself from the objects; that the elements of the objects, one’s perceptions, go into thinking and become most inwardly permeated by it; that my perceiving is itself a thinking, my thinking a perceiving.” Basically Heinroth is describing nothing other than the way any healthy thinking relates itself to objects. Any other way of going about things is an aberration from the natural way. If perception predominates in a person, then he gets stuck at what is individual; he cannot penetrate into the deeper foundations of reality; if abstract thinking predominates in him, then his concepts seem insufficient to understand the living fullness of what is real. The raw empiricist, who contents himself with the individual facts, represents the extreme of the first aberration; the other extreme is given in the philosopher who worships pure reason and who only thinks, without having any feeling for the fact that thoughts, by their very nature, are bound to perception. Goethe describes, in a beautiful picture, the feeling of the thinker who ascends to the highest truths without losing his feeling for living experience. At the beginning of 1784 he writes an essay on granite. He goes out upon a mountaintop of this stone, where he can say to himself, “You rest here directly upon a ground that reaches into the deepest places of the earth; no newer layers, no ruins, heaped or swept together, have laid themselves between you and the solid ground of the primeval world; you do not walk here, as in those fruitful valleys, upon a continuous grave; these peaks have brought forth no living thing and have devoured no living thing; they are before all life and above all life. In this moment, when the inner attracting and moving powers of the earth are working as though directly upon me, when the influences of the heavens are hovering around me more closely, I become attuned to higher contemplations of nature, and just as the human spirit enlivens all, so there stirs in me also a parable, whose sublimity I cannot withstand. So lonely, I say to myself as I look down this completely bare peak and scarcely make out in the distance at the foot a meager moss growing, so lonely, I say, does the mood of a man become, who wants to open his soul only to the oldest, first, and deepest feelings of truth. Yes, he can say to himself: here, upon the most ancient, eternal altar, which is built directly upon the deeps of creation, I bring an offering to the being of all beings. I feel the primal and most solid beginnings of our existence; I look out over the world, upon its more rugged and more gentle valleys and upon its
distant fruitful meadows; my soul rises above itself and above all, and longs for the heavens nearer it. But soon the burning sun calls back thirst and hunger, his human needs. He looks back upon those valleys from which his spirit had already soared.” Only that person can develop within himself such an enthusiasm of knowledge, such feelings for the oldest sound truths, who again and again finds his way out of the regions of the world of ideas back into direct perceptions.
Personality and World View

Man learns to know the outer side of nature through perception; its deeper-lying driving powers reveal themselves within his own inner life as subjective experiences. In philosophical contemplation of the world and in artistic feeling and creating, his subjective experiences permeate his objective perceptions. What had to split itself into two parts in order to penetrate into the human spirit becomes again one whole. The human being satisfies his highest spiritual needs when he incorporates into the objectively perceived world what the world manifests to him within his inner life as its deeper mysteries. Knowledge and artistic creations are nothing other than perceptions filled with man's inner experiences. In the simplest judgment about a thing or event of the outer world, there can be found a human soul experience and an outer perception in inner association with one another. When I say that one body strikes another, I have already brought an inner experience into the outer world. I see a body in motion; it hits another one; this one also comes into motion as a consequence. The content of the perception cannot tell me more than this. I am not satisfied by this, however. For I feel that still more is present in the whole phenomenon than what mere perception gives me. I reach for an inner experience that will enlighten me about the perception. I know that I myself can set a body into motion by applying force, by striking it. I carry this experience over into the phenomenon and say that the one body strikes the other. “The human being never realizes just how anthropomorphic he is” (Goethe, Aphorisms in Prose, Kuerschner edition, Vol. 36, 2, p. 353). There are people who, from the presence of this subjective component in every judgment about the outer world, draw the conclusion that reality’s objective core of being is inaccessible to man. They believe that man falsifies the immediate and objective factual state of reality when he lays his subjective experiences into reality. They say that because man can picture the world to himself only through the lens of his subjective life, all his knowledge is only a subjective, limitedly human one. Someone, however, who comes to consciousness about what manifests itself within the inner life of man will want to have nothing to do with such unfruitful assertions. He knows that truth comes about precisely through the fact that perception and idea permeate each other in the human process of knowledge. It is clear to him that in the subjective there lives what is most archetypically and most profoundly objective. “When the healthy nature of man...
works as a whole, when he feels himself in the world as though in a great, beautiful, worthy, and precious whole, when his harmonious sense of well-being imparts to him a pure free delight, then the universe, if it could experience itself, would; as having achieved its goal, exult with joy and marvel at the pinnacle of its own becoming and being.” The reality accessible to mere perception is only one half of complete reality; the content of the human spirit is the other half. If no human being ever confronted the world, then this second half would never come to living manifestation, to full existence. It would work, it is true, as a hidden world of forces; but the possibility would be taken from it of revealing itself in its own form. One would like to say that, without man, the world would reveal an untrue countenance. The world would be as it is, through its deeper forces, but these deeper forces would themselves remain cloaked by what they bring about. Within man’s spirit they are delivered from their enchantment. Man is not there in order merely to make a picture for himself of a completed world; no, he himself works along with the coming into being of this world.

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The subjective experiences of different people take different forms. For those who do not believe in the objective nature of the inner world, that is one more reason to deny man the ability to penetrate into the being of things. For how can something be the being of things which appears to one person one way and to another person another way. For the person who recognizes the true nature of the inner world, there follows from the differences of inner experiences only that nature can express its rich content in different ways. The truth appears to each individual person in an individual garb. It adapts itself to the particularities of his personality. This is especially the case with the highest truths that are most important to man. In order to attain them, man carries over into the perceptible world his most intimate spiritual experiences, and along with them what is most individual in his personality. There are also generally accepted truths that every human being takes up without giving them an individual coloring. These are, however, the most superficial and trivial ones. They correspond to the general characteristics of man as a species which are the same for everyone. Certain qualities that are the same in all human beings also produce the same judgments about things. The way people regard things according to measurement and number is the same for everyone. Therefore everyone finds the same mathematical truths. But within the particular qualities by which the individual personality lifts himself from the general characteristics of his species, there also lies the basis for the individual forms which he gives to truth. The point is not whether the truth appears differently in one person than in another but rather whether all the individual forms coming into view belong to one single
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whole, to the one unified ideal world. The truth speaks different languages and
dialects within the inner life of individual people; in every great human being it
speaks an individual language which belongs only to this one personality. But it
is always one truth which speaks there. If I know my relationship to myself and
to the outer world, then I call it truth. And in this way each person can have his
own truth, and it is after all always the same one.” This is Goethe’s view. The
truth is not some petrified, dead system of concepts, capable of assuming only one
form; it is a living sea, within which the spirit of man lives, and which can show
on its surface waves of the most varied form. “Theory, in and for itself, is of no
use, but only inasmuch as it makes us believe in the connections of phenomena,”
says Goethe. He values no theory that claims completeness once and for all and is
supposed to represent in this form an eternal truth. He wants living concepts by
which the spirit of the individual person, according to his individual nature, draws
his perceptions together. To know the truth means for him to live in the truth. And
to live in the truth is nothing other than, when looking at each individual thing, to
watch what inner experience occurs when one stands in front of this thing. Such a
view of human knowledge cannot speak of limits of knowing, nor of a restriction
of knowing imposed by man’s nature. For the questions which knowledge, according
to this view, poses itself do not spring from the things; they are also not imposed
upon man by any other power lying outside of his personality. They spring from the
nature of his personality itself. When man directs his gaze upon a thing, there then
arises in him the urge to see more than what approaches him in his perception. And
as far as this urge reaches, so far does his need for knowledge also reach. Where does
this urge originate? Actually only from the fact that an inner experience feels itself
stimulated within the soul to enter into a connection with the perception. As soon
as the connection is accomplished, the need for knowledge is also satisfied. Wanting
to know is a demand of human nature and not of the things. These can tell man
no more about their being than he demands from them. Someone who speaks of a
limitation of knowledge’s capabilities does not know where the need for knowledge
originates. He believes that the content of truth lies stored up somewhere, and that
in man there lives only the indistinct wish to find access to the place where it is
stored. But it is the very being of the things that works itself out of the inner life
of man and strives to where it belongs: to the perception. It is not after something
hidden that man strives in the knowledge process but rather after the balancing out
of two forces which work upon him from two sides. One can well say that without
man there would be no knowledge of the inner life of things, for without him there
would be nothing there through which this inner life could express itself. But one
cannot say that there is something in the inner life of things which is inaccessible
to man. The fact that still something else is present in things than what perception
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gives him, this man knows only because this something else lives within his own inner life. To speak of a further unknown something in things means to make up words about something which is not present.

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Those who are not able to recognize that it is the language of the things which is spoken in the inner life of man are of the view that all truth must penetrate into man from outside. Such persons hold fast either to mere perception and believe they can know the truth only through seeing, hearing, touching, through gathering together historical events, and through comparing, counting, calculating, weighing what is taken up out of the world of facts; or they are of the view that the truth can come to man only when it is revealed to him in a way set apart from knowledge; or, finally, they want through forces of a particular kind, through ecstasy or mystical vision, to come into possession of the highest insights which, in their view, the world of ideas accessible to thinking cannot offer them. In addition, metaphysicians of a particular sort connect themselves to those who think in the Kantian sense and to the one-sided mystics. To be sure, these seek through thinking to form concepts of the truth for themselves. But they seek the content for these concepts not in the human world of ideas but rather in a second reality lying behind the things. They believe themselves able, through pure concepts, either to determine something certain about a content of this kind or, at least, through hypotheses, to be able to form mental pictures of it. I am speaking here, to begin with, about the kind of people mentioned first, the fact fanatics. Every now and then they become conscious of the fact that, in counting and calculating, there already takes place with the help of thinking a working through of the content of perception. Then, however, they say that this thought work is merely the means by which man struggles to know the relationship of the facts. What flows from thinking in the act of working upon the outer world represents to them something merely subjective; they consider to be the objective content of truth, the valid content of knowledge, only what approaches them from outside with the help of thinking. They catch the facts, to be sure, in the net of their thoughts but allow objective validity only to what is caught. They overlook the fact that what is thus caught by thinking undergoes an exposition, an ordering, an interpretation, which it does not have in mere perception. Mathematics is a result of pure thought processes; its content is a spiritual, subjective one. And the mechanic, who pictures the processes of nature in mathematical relationships, can do this only under the presupposition that these relationships are founded in the nature of these processes. But this means nothing other than that within perception a mathematical order is hidden which only that person sees who has developed the mathematical laws within his spirit. Between the mathematical and mechanical perceptions and
the most intimate spiritual experiences, however, there is no difference in kind but only in degree. And man can carry other inner experiences, other areas of his world of ideas over into his perceptions with the same justification as he does the results of mathematical research. The fact fanatic only seems to ascertain purely outer processes. He usually does not reflect upon his world of ideas and its character as subjective experience. His inner experiences are also bloodless abstractions, poor in content, which are obscured by the powerful content of facts. The illusion to which he surrenders himself can last only as long as he remains at the lowest level of interpreting nature, as long as he merely counts, weighs, and calculates. At the higher levels the true nature of knowledge is soon borne in upon him. But one can observe about the fact fanatics that they stick primarily to the lower levels. They are therefore like an aesthetician who wants to judge a piece of music only by what can be calculated and counted in it. They want to separate the phenomena of nature from man. Nothing subjective must flow into observation. Goethe condemns this approach with the words, “Man in himself, insofar as he uses his healthy senses, is the greatest and most accurate physical apparatus that there can be, and that is precisely what is of the greatest harm to modern physics, that one has, as it were, separated experiments from man and wants to know nature merely through what manmade instruments show, yes wants to limit and prove thereby what nature can do.” It is fear of the subjective which leads to such a way of doing things and which comes from a misapprehension of the true nature of the subjective. “But man stands so high precisely through the fact that what otherwise could not manifest itself does manifest itself in him. For what is a string and all its mechanical divisions compared to the ear of the musician? Yes, one can say, what are the elemental phenomena of nature themselves compared to man who must first tame and modify them all in order to be able to assimilate them to some extent?” In Goethe’s view the natural scientist should be attentive not only to how things appear but rather to how they would appear if everything that works in them as ideal driving forces were also actually to come to outer manifestation. Only when the bodily and spiritual organism of man places itself before the phenomena do they then reveal their inner being.

Whoever approaches the phenomena in a spirit of observing them freely and openly, and with a developed inner life in which the ideas of things manifest themselves, to him the phenomena, it is Goethe’s view, reveal everything about themselves. There stands in opposition to Goethe’s world view, therefore, the one which does not seek the being of things within experienceable reality but rather within a second reality lying behind this one. In Fr. H. Jacobi Goethe encountered an adherent of such a world view. Goethe gives vent to his displeasure in a remark in the Tag- und Jahresheft (1811): “Jacobi’s Of Divine Things made me unhappy; how could the
book of such a beloved friend be welcome to me when I had to see developed in it
the thesis that nature conceals God. With my pure, deep, inborn, and trained way
of looking at things, which had taught me absolutely to see God in nature, nature
in God, such that the way of picturing things constituted the foundation of my
whole existence, would not such a peculiar, one-sidedly limited statement estrange
me forever in spirit from this most noble man whose heart I revered and loved?”
Goethe’s way of looking at things gives him the certainty that he experiences an
eternal lawfulness in his permeation of nature with ideas, and this eternal lawfulness
is for him identical with the divine. If the divine did conceal itself behind the things
of nature and yet constituted the creative element in them, it could not then be seen;
man would have to believe in it. In a letter to Jacobi, Goethe defends his seeing
in contrast to faith: “God has punished you with metaphysics and set a thorn in
your flesh but has blessed me with physics. I will stick to the reverence for God of
the atheist (Spinoza) and leave to you everything you call, and would like to call,
religion. You are for faith in God; I am for seeing.” Where this seeing ends, the
human spirit then has nothing to seek. We read in his Aphorisms in Prose: “Man is
really set into the midst of a real world and endowed with such organs that he can
know and bring forth what is real and what is possible along with it. All healthy
people are convinced of their existence and of something existing around them. For
all that, there is a hollow spot in the brain, which means a place where no object
is mirrored, just as in the eye itself there is a little spot that does not see. If a
person becomes particularly attentive to this place, becomes absorbed with it, he
then succumbs to an illness of the spirit, has inklings here of things of another world,
which, however, are actually non-things and have neither shape nor limitations but
rather, as empty night-spaces, cause fear and pursue in a more than ghost-like way
the person who does not tear himself free,” Out of this same mood there is the
aphorism, “The highest would be to grasp that everything factual is already theory;
The blue of the heavens reveals to us the basic law of the science of colors. Only do
not seek anything behind the phenomena; they are themselves the teaching.”

Kant denies to man the ability to penetrate into the region of nature in which its
creative forces become directly visible. In his opinion concepts are abstract units
into which the human intellect draws together the manifold particulars of nature
but which have nothing to do with the living unity, with the creative wholeness of
nature from which these particulars really proceed. The human being experiences
in this drawing together only a subjective operation. He can relate his general
concepts to his empirical perception; but these concepts in themselves are no alive,
productive, in such a way that man could see what is individual proceed out of
them. For Kant concepts are dead units present only in man. “Our intellect is
a capacity for concepts, i.e., it is a discursive intellect, for which, to be sure, it
must be a matter of chance what and how different the particular thing might be which is given to it in nature and what can be brought under its concepts.” This is how Kant characterizes the intellect (¶ 77 of Critique of Judgment). The following necessarily results from this: “It is a matter of infinite concern to our reason not to let go of the mechanism of nature in its creations and not to pass it by in explaining them, because without this mechanism no insight into the nature of things can be attained. If one right away concedes to us that a supreme architect has directly created the forms of nature just as they have been from the very beginning, or has predetermined them in such a way that they, in nature’s course, continually shape themselves upon the very same model, then even so our knowledge of nature has not thereby been furthered in the least; because we do not at all know that architect’s way of doing things, nor his ideas which supposedly contain the principles of the possibilities of the beings of nature, and we are not able by him to explain nature from above downward, as it were (a priori)” (¶ 78 of the Critique of Judgment).

Goethe is convinced that man, in his world of ideas, experiences directly how the creative being of nature does things. “When we, in fact, lift ourselves in the moral sphere into a higher region through belief in God, virtue, and immortality and mean to draw near to the primal being, so likewise, in the intellectual realm, it could very well be the case that we would make ourselves worthy, through beholding an ever-creating nature, of participating spiritually in its productions.” Man’s knowledge is for Goethe a real living into nature’s creating and working. It is given to his knowledge ‘to investigate, to experience how nature lives in creating.”

It conflicts with the spirit of the Goethean world view to speak of beings that lie outside the world of experience and ideas accessible to the human spirit and that nevertheless are supposed to contain the foundations of this world. All metaphysics are rejected by this world view. There are no questions of knowledge which, rightly posed, cannot also be answered. If science at any given time can make nothing of a certain area of phenomena, then the reason for this does not lie with the nature of the human spirit but rather with the incidental fact that experience of this region is not yet complete at this time. Hypotheses cannot be set up about things which lie outside the region of possible experience but rather only about things which can sometime enter this region. A hypothesis can always state only that it is likely that within a given region of phenomena one will have this or that experience. In this way of thinking one cannot speak at all about things and processes which do not lie within man’s sensible or spiritual view. The, assumption of a “thing-in-itself,” which causes perceptions in man but which itself can never be perceived, is an inadmissible hypothesis. “Hypotheses are scaffolding which one erects before the building and which one removes when the building is finished; they are indispensable to the workman; only he must, not consider the scaffolding to be the building.”
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confronted by a region of phenomena, for which all perceptions are; present and which has been permeated with ideas, the human spirit declares itself satisfied. It feels that within the spirit a living harmony of idea and perception is playing itself out.

The satisfying basic mood which Goethe’s world view has for him is similar to that which one can observe with the mystics. Mysticism sets out to find, within the human soul, the primal ground of things, the divinity. The mystic, just like Goethe, is convinced that the being of the world becomes manifest to him in inner experiences. Only many a mystic does not regard immersion in the world of ideas to be the inner experience which matters the most to him. Many a one-sided mystic has approximately the same view as Kant about the clear ideas of reason. For him they stand outside the creative wholeness of nature and belong only to the human intellect. A mystic of this sort seeks, therefore, by developing unusual states, for example, through ecstasy, to attain the highest knowledge, a vision of a higher kind. He deadens in himself sense observation and the thinking based on reason and seeks to intensify his life of feeling. Then he believes he has a direct feeling of spirituality working in him, as divinity, in fact. He believes that in the moments when he succeeds in this God is living in him. The Goethean world view also arouses a similar feeling in the person who adheres to it. But the Goethean world view does not draw its knowledge from experiences that occur after observation and thinking have been deadened but rather draws them precisely from these two activities. It does not flee to abnormal states of human spiritual life but rather is of the view that the spirit’s usual, naive ways of going about things are capable of such perfecting, that man can experience within himself nature’s creating. “There are, after all, in the long run, I think, only the practical and self-rectifying operations of man’s ordinary intellect that dares to exercise itself in a higher sphere.” Many a mystic immerses himself in a world of unclear sensations and feelings; Goethe immerses himself in the clear world of ideas. The one-sided mystics disdain the clarity of ideas. They regard this clarity as superficial. They have no inkling of what those persons sense who have the gift of immersing themselves in the living world of ideas. Such a mystic is chilled when he surrenders himself to the world of ideas. He seeks a world content that radiates warmth. But the content which he finds does not explain the world, It consists only of subjective excitements, in confused mental pictures, Whoever speaks of the coldness of the world of ideas can only think ideas, not experience them. Whoever lives the true life in the world of ideas, feels in himself the being of the world working in a warmth that cannot be compared to anything else. He feels the fire of the world mystery flame up in him. This is how Goethe felt as there opened up for him in Italy the view of nature at work, Then he knew how that longing is to be stilled which in Frankfurt he has his Faust express with
the words:

Where shall I, endless nature, seize on thee?
Thy breasts are — where? Ye, of all life the spring,
To whom both Earth and Heaven cling,
Toward which the withering breast doth strain —

(Priest’s translation)
The Metamorphosis of World Phenomena

Goethe’s world view attained its highest level of maturity when there arose for him the view of the two great driving wheels of nature: the significance of the concepts of polarity and of enhancement (Steigerung). (See the essay, “Commentary to the Essay Nature.”) Polarity is characteristic of the phenomena of nature insofar as we think of them as material. It consists of the fact that everything material manifests itself in two opposite states, as the magnet does in a north and a south pole. These states of matter either lie open to view or they slumber in what is material and are able to be wakened by suitable means within it. Enhancement belongs to the phenomena insofar as we think them to be spiritual. It can be observed in processes of nature that fall under the idea of development. At the various levels of development these processes show more or less distinctly in their outer manifestation the idea that underlies them. In the fruit, the idea of the plant, the law of vegetation, is only indistinctly manifest. The idea which the spirit recognizes and the perception are not similar to one another. “In the blossoms the law of vegetation comes into its highest manifestation, and the rose would again be but the pinnacle of the manifestation.” What Goethe calls enhancement consists of the bringing forth of the spiritual out of the material by creative nature. That nature is engaged “in an ever-striving ascent” means that it seeks to create forms which, in ascending order, increasingly represent the ideas of things even in outer manifestation. Goethe is of the view that “nature has no secret that it does not somewhere place naked before the eyes of the attentive observer.” Nature can bring forth phenomena from which there can be read directly the ideas applicable to a large area of related processes. It is those phenomena in which enhancement has reached its goal, in which the idea becomes immediate truth. The creative spirit of nature comes to the surface of things here; that which, in coarsely material phenomena, can only be grasped by thinking, that which can only be seen with spiritual eyes, becomes, in enhanced phenomena, visible to the physical eye. Everything sense-perceptible is here also spiritual, and everything spiritual is sense-perceptible. Goethe thinks of the whole of nature as permeated by spirit. Its forms are different through the fact that the spirit in them becomes also more or less outwardly visible. Goethe knows no dead, spiritless mat-
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ter. Those things appear to be so in which the spirit of nature gives an outer form which is not similar to its ideal being. Because one spirit works both in nature and in man's inner life, man can lift himself to participation in the productions of nature. "... from the tile that falls from the roof, to the radiant lightning of the spirit which arises in you and which you communicate," everything in the universe is for Goethe an effect, a manifestation of one creative spirit. "All the workings we take note of in experience, no matter what their nature, are interconnected in the most consistent way, pass over into one another; they undulate from the first ones to the last." A tile works loose from the roof: we ordinarily say this happens by chance; the tile, after all, certainly strikes the shoulders of a passerby mechanically; only, not altogether mechanically: it follows the laws of gravity and thus works physically. Ruptured bodily organs cease functioning; at that moment the fluids work chemically, the qualities of the elements emerge. But, the interrupted organic life reasserts itself just as quickly and seeks to re-establish itself; meanwhile the human entity is more or less unconscious and psychically disorganized. The person, regaining consciousness, feels himself ethically wounded to the depths; he laments his interrupted activity, no matter of what kind it might be, for no one wants to endure this patiently. Religiously, on the other hand, he can easily attribute this case to a higher destiny and regard it as saving him from far greater harm, as leading him to a higher good. This suffices for the sufferer; but the convalescent rises to his feet highly gifted, trusts God and himself and feels himself saved, really takes up also what happens by chance, turns it to, his advantage, in order to begin an eternally fresh life's cycle." All things working in the world appear to Goethe as modifications of the spirit, and a person who immerses himself in them and observes them, from the level of chance happenings up to that of genius, lives through the metamorphosis of the spirit, from the form in which this spirit presents itself in an outer manifestation not resembling itself, up to the form in which the spirit appears in its own most archetypal form. In the sense of the Goethean world view all creative forces work in a unified way. They are a totality manifesting in successive levels of related manifoldnesses. But Goethe was never inclined to picture the unity of the world to himself as uniform. Adherents of the idea of unity often fall into the mistake of extending what can be observed in one region of phenomena out over all of nature. The mechanistic world view, for example, is in this situation. It has a particularly good eye and understanding for what can be explained mechanically. Therefore only the mechanical seems to it to be in accordance with nature. It seeks to trace even the phenomena of organic nature back to a mechanical lawfulness. A living thing is for it only a complicated form of the working together of mechanical processes. Goethe found such a world view expressed in a particularly repellent form in Holbach's Systeme de la Nature, which came into his hands in Strassburg. One matter
supposedly exists from all eternity and has moved for all eternity, and now, with this
motion, supposedly brings forth right and left and on all sides, without more ado,
the infinite phenomena of existence. “We would indeed have been satisfied with this,
if the author had really built up the world before our eyes out of his moving matter.
But he might know as little about nature as we do, for as soon as he has staked up a
few general concepts, he leaves nature at once, in order to transform what appears
as something higher than nature or as a higher nature in nature, into a nature that
is material, heavy, moving, to be sure, but still without direction or shape, and he
believes that he has gained a great deal by this” (Poetry and Truth, second book).
Goethe would have expressed himself in a similar way if he could have heard Du
Bois-Reymond’s statement (Limits to Knowing Nature, page 13): “Knowledge of
nature ... is a tracing of the changes in the corporeal world back to the movements
of atoms which are caused by their central forces, independent of time, or it is a
dissolving of all the processes of nature into the mechanics of the atoms.” Goethe
thought the different kinds of nature workings to be related to each other and as
passing over into one another; but he never wanted to trace them back to one single
kind. He was not striving for one abstract principle to which all the phenomena of
nature should be traced, but rather he strove for observation of the characteristic
way in which creative nature manifested its general lawfulness in particular forms
within every single one of its realms. He did not want to force one thought form upon
the whole of nature's phenomena, but rather, by living into the different thought
forms, he wanted to keep his spirit as lively and pliable as nature itself is. When the
feeling of the great unity of all nature's working was powerful in him, then he was a
pantheist. “I for myself, with all the manifold tendencies of my nature, cannot get
enough from one way of thinking; as poet and artist I am a polytheist, as natural
scientist a pantheist, and am one just as positively as the other. If I need a God
for my personality as a moral person, that is also already provided for” (to Jacobi,
January 6, 1813). As artist, Goethe turned to those phenomena of nature in which
the idea is present to direct perception. The single thing appeared here directly
as divine; the world as a multiplicity of divine individualities. As natural scientist
Goethe had to follow the forces of nature also into phenomena whose idea does not
become visible in its individual existence. As poet he could be at peace with himself
about the multiplicity of the divine; as natural scientist he had to seek the ideas
of nature, which worked in a unified way. “The law, that comes into manifestation
in the greatest freedom, in accordance with its most archetypal conditions, brings
forth what is objectively beautiful, which, to be sure, must find worthy subjects by
whom it can be grasped.” This objectively beautiful within the individual creature
is what Goethe as artist wants to behold; but as natural scientist he wants “to know
the laws according to which universal nature wants to act.” Polytheism is the way of
thinking which sees and reveres something spiritual in the single thing; pantheism is
the other way, which grasps the spirit of the whole. Both ways of thinking can exist
side by side; the one or the other comes into play according to whether one’s gaze
is directed upon nature’s wholeness, which is life and sequence out of a center, or
upon those individuals in which nature unites in one form what it as a rule spreads
out over a whole realm. Such forms arise when, for example, the creative forces of
nature, after “thousandfold plants,” make yet one more, in which “all the others are
contained,” or “after thousandfold animals make one being which contains them all:
man.”

Goethe once made the remark: “Whoever has learned to understand them (my
writings) and my nature in general will have to admit after all that he has won a
certain inner freedom” (Conversations with Chancellor F. von Mueller, January 5,
1831). With this he was pointing to the working power which comes into play in all
human striving to know. As long as man stops short at perceiving the antitheses
around him and at regarding their laws as principles implanted in them by which
they are governed, he has the feeling that they confront him as unknown powers,
which work upon him and impose upon him the thoughts of their laws. He feels
himself to be unfree with respect to the things; he experiences the lawfulness of
nature as rigid necessity into which he must fit himself. Only when man becomes
aware that the forces of nature are nothing other than forms of the same spirit
which also works in himself does the insight arise in him that he does partake of
freedom. The lawfulness of nature is experienced as compelling only as long as
one regards it as an alien power. Living into its being, one experiences it as a
power which one also exercises in one’s own inner life; one experiences oneself as a
productive element working along with the becoming and being of things. One is
on intimate terms with any power that has to do with becoming. One has taken up
into one’s own doing what one otherwise experiences only as outer incentive. This
is the process of liberation which is effected by the act of knowledge, in the sense
of the Goethean world view. Goethe clearly perceived the ideas of nature’s working
as he encountered them in Italian works of art. He had a clear experience also of
the liberating effect which the possession of these ideas has upon man. A result of
this experience is his description of that kind of knowledge which he characterizes as
that of encompassing individuals. “The encompassing ones, whom one in a prouder
sense could call the creative ones, conduct themselves productively in the highest
sense; insofar, namely, as they take their start from ideas, they express already the
unity of the whole, and afterward it is in a certain way up to nature to fit in with
this idea.” But Goethe never got to the point of having a direct view of the act of
liberation itself. Only that person can have this view who in his knowing is attentive
to himself. Goethe, to be sure, practiced the highest kind of knowledge; but he did
not observe this kind of knowledge in himself. He admits to himself, after all:

“How did you get so very far?
They say you have done it all wonderfully well!”
My child! In this I have been smart;
I never have thought about thinking at all.

But just as the creative nature forces, “after thousandfold plants,” make still one more in which “all the others are contained,” so do they also, after thousandfold ideas, bring forth still one more in which the whole world of ideas is contained. And man grasps this idea when, to his perception of the other things and processes he adds that of thinking as well. Just because Goethe’s thinking was continuously filled with the objects of perception, because his thinking was a perceiving, his perceiving a thinking, he could not come to the point of making thinking itself into an object of thinking. One attains the idea of freedom, however, only by looking at thinking. Goethe did not make the distinction between thinking about thinking and looking at thinking. Otherwise he would have attained the insight that one, precisely in the sense of his world view, could very well reject thinking about thinking, but that one could nevertheless come to a beholding of the thought world. Man is uninvolved in the coming about of everything else he sees. The ideas of what he sees arise in him. But these ideas would not be there if there were not present in him the productive power to bring them to manifestation. Even though ideas are the content of what works within the things, they come into manifest existence through human activity. Man can therefore know the intrinsic nature of the world of ideas only if he looks at his activity. With everything else he sees he penetrates only into the idea at work in it; the thing, in which the idea works, remains as perception outside of his spirit. When he looks at the idea, what is working and what is brought forth are both entirely contained within his inner life. He has the entire process totally present if his inner life. What he sees no longer appears as brought forth by the idea; for what he sees is itself now idea. To see something bringing forth itself is, however, to see freedom. In observing his thinking man sees into world happening. Here he does no have to search after an idea of this happening, for this happening is the idea itself. What one otherwise experiences as the unity of what is looked at and the ideas is here the experiencing of the spirituality of the world of ideas become visible. The person who beholds this self-sustaining activity feels freedom. Goethe in fact experienced this feeling, but did not express it in its highest form. In his looking at nature he exercised a free activity, but this activity never became an object of perception for him. He never saw behind the scenes of human knowing and therefore never took up into his consciousness the idea of world happening in its most archetypal form, in its highest metamorphosis. As soon as a person attains a view of this metamorphosis, he then conducts himself with sureness in the realm.
of things. In the center of his personality he has won the true starting point for all consideration of the world. He will no longer search for unknown foundations, for the causes lying outside him, of things; he knows that the highest experience of which he is capable consists of self-contemplation of his own being. Whoever is completely permeated with the feelings which this experience calls forth will gain the truest relationships to things. A person for whom this is not the case will seek the highest form of existence elsewhere, and, since he cannot find it within experience, will suppose it to be in an unknown region of reality. Uncertainty will enter into his considerations of things; in answering the questions which nature poses him, he will continually call upon something he cannot investigate. Because, through his life in the world of ideas, Goethe had a feeling of the firm center within his personality, he succeeded, within certain limits, in arriving at sure concepts in his contemplation of nature. But because he lacked a direct view of his innermost experiences, he groped about uncertainly outside these limits. For this reason he says that man is not born “to solve the problems of the world but in fact to seek where the problem begins, and then to keep oneself within the limits of what is understandable.” He says, “Kant has unquestionably been of most use in his drawing of the limits to which the human spirit is capable of penetrating, and through the fact that he J unsolvable problems lie.” If a view of man’s highest experience! had given him certainty in his contemplation of things, then he would have been able to do more along his path than “through regulated experience, to attain a kind of qualified trustworthiness.” Instead of proceeding straight ahead through his experiences in the consciousness that the true has significance only insofar as it is demanded by human nature, he still arrives at the conviction that a “higher influence helps those who are steadfast, active, understanding, disciplined and disciplining, humane, devout” and that “the moral world order” manifests itself most beautifully where it “comes indirectly to the aid of the good person, of the courageously suffering person.”

Because Goethe did not know the innermost human’ experience, it was not possible for him to attain the ultimate thoughts about the moral world order which necessarily belong to his view of nature. The ideas of the things are the content of what works and creates within the things. Man experiences moral ideas directly in the form of ideas. Whoever is able to experience how, in his beholding of the world of ideas, the ideal element itself becomes content, fills itself with itself, is also in a position to experience the production of the moral within human nature. Whoever knows the ideas of nature only in their relation to the world we behold will also want to relate moral concepts to something external to them. He will seek for these concepts a reality similar to that which is present for concepts won from experience. But whoever is able to view ideas in their most essential being will become aware, with moral ideas, that nothing external corresponds to them, that they are directly
produced as ideas in spiritual experience. It is clear to him that neither a divine will, working only outwardly, nor a moral world order of a like sort are at work to produce these ideas. For there is in them nothing to be seen of any relation to such powers! Everything they express is also contained within their spiritually experienced pure idea-form. Only through their own content do they work upon man as moral powers. No categorical imperative stands behind them with a whip and forces man to follow them. Man feels that he himself has brought them forth and loves them the way one loves one’s child. Love is the motive of his action. The spiritual pleasure in one’s own creation is the source of the moral.

There are people who are unable to produce any moral ideas. They take up into themselves the moral ideas of other people through tradition, and if they have no ability to behold ideas as such, they do not recognize the origin, experienceable in the spirit, of the moral. They seek it in a supra-human will outside themselves. Or they believe that there exists, outside the spirit world which man experiences, an objective moral world order from which the moral ideas stem. The speech organ of that world order is often sought in the conscience of man. As with certain things in the rest of his world view, Goethe is also uncertain in his thoughts about the origin of the moral. Here also his feeling for what is in accord with ideas brings forth statements which are in accord with the demands of his nature. “Duty: where one loves what one commands oneself to do.” Only a person who sees the foundations of the moral purely in the content of moral ideas should say: “Lessing, who resentfully felt many a limitation, has one of his characters say, ‘No one has to have to.’ A witty jovial man said, ‘Whoever wants to has to.’ A third, admittedly a cultivated person, added, ‘Whoever has insight, also wants to.’ And in this way it was believed that the whole circle of knowing, wanting, and having to had been closed. But in the average case, man’s knowledge, no matter what kind it is, determines what he does or doesn’t do; for this reason there is also nothing worse than to see ignorance in action.” The following statement shows that in Goethe a feeling for the true nature of the moral held sway, but did not rise into clear view: “In order to perfect itself the will must, in its moral life, give itself over to conscience which does not err ... Conscience needs no ancestor; with conscience everything is given; it has to do only with one’s own inner world.” To state that conscience needs no ancestor can only mean that man does not originally find within himself any moral content; he gives this content to himself. Other statements stand in contrast to these, setting the origin of the moral into a region outside man: “Man, no matter how much the earth attracts him with its thousand upon thousand manifestations, nevertheless lifts up his gaze longingly toward heaven ... because he feels deeply and clearly within himself that he is a citizen of that spiritual realm which we are not able to deny nor give up our belief.” “We leave to God, as the all-determining and all-liberating
Being, what is totally insoluble."

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Goethe lacks the organ for the contemplation of man’s innermost nature, for self-perception. “I hereby confess that from the beginning the great and significant sounding task, Know thou thyself, has always seemed suspect to me, as a ruse of secretly united priests who wanted to confuse man with unattainable demands and to seduce him away from activity in the outer world into an inner false contemplation. Man knows himself only as he knows the world which he becomes aware of only within himself and himself only within it. Every new object which we really look at opens up a new organ within us.” Exactly the reverse of this is true: man knows the world only insofar as he knows himself. For in his inner life there reveals itself in its most archetypal form what is present to view in outer things only in reflection, in example, symbol. What man otherwise can only speak of as something unfathomable, undiscoverable, divine, comes into view in its true form in self-perception. Because in self-perception he sees what is ideal in its direct form, he gains the strength and ability to seek out and recognize this ideal element also in all outer phenomena, in the whole of nature. Someone who has experienced the moment of self-perception no longer thinks in terms of seeking some “hidden” God behind phenomena: he grasps the divine in its different metamorphoses in nature. Goethe remarked, with respect to Schelling: “I would see him more often if I did not still hope for poetic moments; philosophy destroys poetry for me, and does so for the good reason that it drives me to the object because I can never remain purely speculative but must seek right away a perception for every principle and therefore flee right away out into nature.” He was in fact not able to find the highest perception, the perception of the world of ideas itself. This perception cannot destroy poetry, for it only frees one’s spirit from all supposition that there might be an unknown, unfathomable something in nature. But for this reason it makes him capable of giving himself over entirely, without preconceptions, to things; for it gives him the conviction that everything can be drawn from nature that the spirit can ever want from it.

But this highest perception liberates man’s spirit also from all one-sided feelings of dependency. He feels himself, through having this view, to be sovereign in the realm of the moral world order. He knows that the driving power which brings forth everything works in his inner life as within his own will, and that the highest decisions about morality lie within himself. For these highest decisions flow out of the world of moral ideas, in whose production the soul of man is present. Even though a person may feel himself restricted in part, may also be dependent upon a thousand things, on the whole he sets himself his moral goal and his moral direction.
What is at work in all other things comes to manifestation in the human being as idea; what is at work in him is the idea which he himself brings forth. In every single human individuality a process occurs that plays itself out in the whole of nature: the creation of something actual out of the idea. And the human being himself is the creator. For upon the foundation of his personality there lives the idea which gives a content to itself. Going beyond Goethe one must broaden his principle that nature is “great enough in the wealth of its creation to make, after thousandfold plants, one in which all the others are contained, and to make, after thousandfold animals, one being that contains them all: man.” Nature is so great in its creation that it repeats in every human individual the process by which it brings forth freely out of the idea all creatures, repeats it through the fact that moral actions spring from the ideal foundation of the personality. Whatever a person also feels to be an objective reason for his action is only a transcribing and at the same time a mistaking of his own being. The human being realizes himself in his moral actions. Max Stirner has expressed this knowledge in lapidary words in his book, The Single Individual and What Is His Own. “It lies in my power to be my own person, and this is so when I know myself as a single individual. Within the single individual even someone who is his own person returns to the creative nothingness out of which he is born. Every higher being over me, be it God or man, weakens the feeling of my singleness and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I base my affairs upon myself, the single individual, then they rest upon their own transitory mortal creator, who devours himself, and I can say that I have based my affairs upon nothing.” But at the same time one can tell this Stirnerian spirit what Faust told Mephistopheles: “In your nothingness I hope to find my all,” for there dwells in my inner life in an individual form the working power by which nature creates the universe. As long as a person has not beheld this working power within himself, he will appear with respect to it the way Faust did with respect to the earth spirit. This working power will always call out to him the words, “You resemble the spirit that you can grasp, not me!” Only the beholding of one’s deepest inner life conjures up this spirit, who says of itself:

In the tides of life, in action’s storm,
Up and down I wave,
To and fro weave free,
Birth and the grave,
An infinite sea,
A varied weaving,
A radiant living,
Thus at Time’s humming loom it’s my hand that prepares
The robe ever-living the Deity wears,
The Metamorphosis of World Phenomena

(Priest’s translation)

I have tried to present in my Philosophy of Spiritual Activity how knowledge of the fact that man in his doing is based upon himself comes from the most inward experience, from the beholding of his own being. In 1844 Stirner defended the view that man, if he truly understands himself, can see only in himself the basis for his activity. With Stirner, however, this knowledge does not arise from a beholding of his innermost experience but rather from the feeling of freedom and independence from all world powers that require coercion. Stirner stops short at demanding freedom; he is led in this area to put the bluest possible emphasis upon the human nature which is based upon itself. I am trying to describe the life in freedom on a broader basis, by showing what man sees when he looks into the foundation of his soul. Goethe did not go as far as to behold freedom, because he had an antipathy for self-knowledge. If that had not been the case, then knowledge of man as a free personality founded upon himself would have had to be the peak of his world view. The germ of this knowledge is to be found everywhere in his works; it is at the same time the germ of his view of nature. In his actual nature studies Goethe never speaks of unexplorable foundations, of hidden driving Powers of phenomena. He contents himself with observing the phenomena in their sequence and of explaining them with the help of those elements which, during observation, reveal themselves to the senses and to the spirit. In this vein he writes to Jacobi on May 5, 1786 that he has the courage “to devote his whole life to the contemplation of the things which he can hope to reach” and of whose being “he can hope to form an adequate idea,” without bothering himself in the least about how far he will get and about what is cut out for him. A person who believes he can draw near to the divine in the individual objects of nature no longer needs to form a particular mental picture for himself of a God that exists outside of and beside the things. It is only when Goethe leaves the realm of nature that his feeling for the being of things no longer holds up. Then his lack of human self-knowledge leads him to make assertions which are reconcilable neither with his inborn way of thinking nor with the direction of his nature studies. Someone who is inclined to cite these assertions might assume that Goethe believed in an anthropomorphic God and in the individual continuation of that life-form of the soul which is bound up with the conditions of the physical bodily organization. Such a belief stands in contradiction to Goethe’s nature studies. They could never have taken the direction they did if in them Goethe had allowed himself to be determined by this belief. It lies totally in the spirit of his nature studies to think the being of the human soul such that, after laying aside the body, it lives in a supersensible form of existence. This form of existence requires that the soul, because of different life requirements, also take on a different kind of consciousness from the one it has through the physical body. In this way the Goethean teaching
of metamorphosis leads also to the view of metamorphoses of soul life. But this Goethean idea of immortality can be regarded correctly only if one knows that Goethe had not been able to be led by his world view to an unmetamorphosed continuation of that spiritual life which is determined by the physical body. Because Goethe, in the sense indicated here, did not attempt to view his life of thought, he was also not moved in his further life’s course to develop particularly this idea of immortality which would be the continuation of his thoughts on metamorphosis. This idea, however, would in truth be what would follow from his world view with respect to this region of knowledge. Whatever expression he gave to a personal feeling about the view of life of this or that contemporary, or out of any other motivation, without his thinking thereby of the connection to the world view won through his nature studies, may not be brought forward as characteristic of Goethe’s idea of immortality.

For the evaluation of a Goethean statement within the total picture of his world view there also comes into consideration the fact that his mood of soul in his different stages of life gives particular nuances to such statements. He was fully conscious of these changes in the form of expression of his ideas. When Foerster expressed the view that the solution to the Faust problem is to be found in the words, “A good man is in his dim impulse well aware of his right path,” Goethe responded, “That would be rationalism. Faust ends up as an old man, and in old age we become mystics.” And in his prose aphorisms we read, “A certain philosophy answers to each age of man. The child appears as realist; for he finds himself as convinced of the existence of pears and apples as of his own. The youth, assailed by inner passions, must take notice of himself, feel his way forward; he is transformed into an idealist. On the other hand the grown man has every reason to become a skeptic; he does well to doubt whether the means he has chosen for his purpose are indeed the right ones. Before acting and in acting he has every reason to keep his intellect mobile, so that afterward he does not have to feel badly about a wrong choice. The old man, however, will always adhere to mysticism; he sees that so much seems to depend upon chance; what is unreasonable succeeds; what is reasonable goes amiss; fortune and misfortune turn unexpectedly into the same thing; it is so, it was so, and old age attains peace in what is, what was, and will be.”

I am focusing in this book upon the world view of Goethe out of which his insights into the life of nature have grown and which was the driving force in him from his discovery of the intermaxillary bone in man up to the completion of his studies on color. And I believe I have shown that this world view corresponds more perfectly to the total personality of Goethe than does any compilation of statements in which one would have to take into account how such thoughts are colored by the mood of his youthful period or by that of his old age. I believe that Goethe in his studies
of nature, although not guided by a clear self-knowledge in accord with ideas, was
guided by a right feeling and did observe a free way of working which flowed from
a true relationship between human nature and the outer world. Goethe is himself
clear about the fact that there is something incomplete about his way of thinking:
“I was aware of having great and noble purposes but could never understand the
determining factors under which I worked; I was well aware of what I lacked, and
likewise of what I had too much of; therefore I did not cease to develop myself,
outwardly and from within. And still it was as before. I pursued every purpose
with earnestness, force, and faithfulness; in doing so I often succeeded in completely
overcoming stubborn conditions but also often foundered because I could not learn
to give in and to go around. And so my life went by this way, in doing and enjoying,
in suffering and resisting, in the love, contentment, hatred, and disapproval of others.
Find yourself mirrored here whoever’s destiny was the same.”