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Goethe's contribution to philosophy: the morphology of individuality

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Abstract: In this essay, I will discuss a variety of considerations that Goethe expressed in his writings. I will with few exceptions address these writings in chronological order. I include both literary and scientific-philosophical works. In this way I hope to show that a certain theme is at the heart of Goethe's thinking, and that Goethe's later works expresses a sophisticated and "deep" account of this theme. In addition, I will try to explain how one can ascribe this Goethean theme to major philosophers of the twentieth century – Cassirer, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. The theme in question concerns the individuality of a human life in a metaphysical sense, characterizing the individual as situated "in between" Nature and Culture. By being both a child of Nature and a child of Culture, the fate of individuals is the transformation of previously given human concerns and practices. There never is a natural child nor a cultural formation securing human individuality. In Goethe's words: The history of an individual human being is the individual human being.¹

Keywords: Goethe, individuality, entelechy, observation, morphology

Introduction

The Goethean view on individuality has a root in classic philosophy since it latches on to the idea of *entelechy*. This idea comes from Aristotle and inspired Leibniz to formulate the idea of individual monads. *Entelechy* is a grounding power that secures that individuals remain within constant changing relations and conditions. It is thus an *Urphänomen* in Goethe's sense. Goethe broke with characterizing the grounding power as an "essence", or as a substantial core, or a prevailing character regulating the interaction of individuals. Instead, I conjecture, Goethe regarded this *Urphänomen* as a *form*, which continuously

¹ "Die Geschichte der Wissenschaft ist die Wissenschaft selbst, die Geschichte des Individuums, das Individuum". See Hamacher (2010, 182). Hamacher's book has been a major source for me!

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realizes itself in a sequence of individual formations. Consequently, this is how an individual human life is always the realization of *the* human form of life.²

Rousseau had an impact on Goethe. Much in Goethe is a response to Rousseau (Cassirer 1932). There is a critical reference to Rousseau in that Dr Faust makes a contract, a contract not with fellow citizens, but with The Devil. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* expresses an implicit critique of Rousseau's *Emile*, and Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandschaften* expresses an implicit critique of Rousseau's *Julie* and marks an alternative to Rousseau's *Confessions*. Thus, Goethe's literary work in many ways is in dialogue with the philosopher, Rousseau. What is more, there is a striking parallel between this dialogue and Hannah Arendt's "positive critique" of Rousseau in her work *The Human Condition* (Brown 2014, 43, 47). Arendt, who had firsthand knowledge of Goethe's works, uses a lot of Goethean phrases and concerns in her account of Rousseau. So perhaps, even if the latter is seen as the founder of the "philosophy of intimacy", Goethe might be the greater such philosopher.

There are many examples of scholars and philosophers who have written about individuality in a Goethean way. I personally think that the later Schelling's considerations in *Philosophie der Offenbarung* on the not yet existing God and the complex relation between God as father and God as son owes a lot to Goethe. Goethe also had a huge impact on Emerson, and one might especially mention Emerson's notion of "unattained but attainable self" (Hileman 2018). The crucial voice of Wilhelm in Kierkegaard's *Either Or* is configured around Goethe's figure Wilhelm Meister, and more around the older Wilhelm of *Wanderjahre* than the younger Wilhelm of *Lehrjahre* (Roos 1955, 19–22). The explicit voice of Wilhelm in Kierkegaard's text however comes from Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (Roos 1955, 26). Kierkegaard's inspiration from Goethe does not stop here. As I have argued elsewhere (Brock 2003, 233–4), Kierkegaard's later works *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* centers on a notion of *self-liberation* that have affinities with Goethe's idea of individuality. The many works of Georg Simmel all have an outspoken Goethean background, and it is likely that this left a mark on Simmel's "student" Ernst Cassirer.³

One can read Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms from the 1920s as an exposure of the development of Objective Spirit, and thus as a phenomenology of culture in a Hegelian sense (Kreis 2010). However, Cassirer's general philosophy concerns the link between "Spirit" and "life" (Cassirer 1930; Cassirer 1929). Cassirer explicitly points out that no form of Objective Spirit, say in terms of

² There is a precise account of this in Cassirer (1932, 98).

³ Simmel even wrote a book on Goethe (Simmel 1913).

scientific thoughts, works of art, or recognized Laws, ever encapsulates the real historical conditions of human lives. As Cassirer put it in his inaugural lecture in Gothenburg in 1936, where he explained his idea of “Critical Idealism” (Cassirer 1935),⁴ there will always be a tension within a given human condition between a neo-platonic vision of a union between reality and ideality, on the one hand, and a neo-Aristotelian vision about, precisely, *entelechy*, on the other. Individual efforts can always break through the boundaries of an ideal order. However, this does not mean that ideal orders fully fall apart: features of these orders always remain. Cassirer in several places calls this tension between the ideal and the real “symbolic pregnancy”. Nature and Culture is always pregnant with children that will be different from those previously born.

Goethe's intellectual history

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774) displays the human being as not attuned to nature, nor to society and culture. Werther is drifting, not finding resonance in relation to any ground. However, Werther does not appear as a stranger on Earth, nor as a loner. His fate is more that he cannot come to terms with the reality of things, with the fact of there being no escape into, say religion or science, nor love. In 1776 the poem *Seefahrt* links this idea of being lost to a general character of nature. It is not because Man is weak or blind that he cannot be at one with the forceful nature surrounding him. The loss, including loss of orientation, instead expresses the natural organic character of a human life. The poem indirectly has a message: Even if we are lost, we can try to express this loss in poetic fashion. Art does not deliver an escape either, but it is Man as a true natural being that speaks in true art.

Goethe wrote the first version of his *Faust* in 1775, and a second version of the first part in 1790. Later versions appeared in 1808 and 1831, respectively. The main figure is an intellectual who symbolizes the unrest that even a highly developed knowledge cannot block. The “first” or “framing” question in *Faust* is if one can guide the drifting intellectual in the direction of a superior being (God) or if human life must fall victim to the implications of ordinary pleasures and thus be doomed to “hell”. In Kantian terms, if The Understanding is not enough, because it never exemplifies True Reason and must be mediated by other drives, including a certain sensibility, how can The Understanding escape

⁴ I take the text “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture”, a Lecture delivered in London in 1936, to be a continuation of the Inaugural Lecture of 1935.

the boundaries of this sensibility? This is the question symbolically presented as a bet between God and Mephisto.

However, both God and Mephisto face the problem that they cannot determine beforehand what the human being is, and how it will behave. God and Mephisto both face the problem that there is something missing in the Kantian outlook. The way in which Goethe introduces his main character shows what is missing: Faust wants more than knowledge, he wants a *living* knowledge, and he insists that this living knowledge must come with a kind of “action” in relation to Nature, symbolically expressed by the need for tasting the milk from Nature’s Breast (Øhrgaard, 285).⁵ This is the point of the famous words *Am Anfang war die Tat*. Faust wants to live by acting in line with how God acted in his Creation. However, one might ask, which has the upper hand, the Creation or the created beings? Consequently, the bet that Faust makes with Mephisto is this: Can there be a kind of earthly satisfaction in dealing with particular examples and aspects of God’s creations, which blinds the human being to the Creation as such?

Accordingly, for me *Faust* is far from being a work on the tension between immediate pleasures and higher principles. Mephisto symbolizes a living organic Whole that encompasses human lives and human behavior. Within this Wholeness, certain things stand out, appearing strong, right, beautiful, or overwhelming. Thereby one objectifies certain features of Nature, or “Being is reduced to beings” as Heideggerians would put it. Mephisto symbolizes the temptation to make such reductions. Mephisto symbolizes the temptation only to tell the trees and become blind to the forest. Mephisto therefore symbolizes western metaphysics as having fallen victim to such temptation.

Goethe developed his thoughts about nature, culture, and individuality partly during the time he worked for the Duke of Weimar and had duties in relation to diverse things such as finances and warfare. Goethe thus acquired first hand and personal experience about social and political matters. This shows in Goethe’s works, for instance in *Torquato Tasso* (1790) which deals with the social conditions of art and how one has to regard artistic endeavors as anchored in social reality. In the story *Egmont* (1788) a smaller community falls victim to greater political powers to the effect that the relation between community and personal freedom of citizens are transformed. Changes in political institutions and relations of power have implications for individual human lives. However, even within such moments, the human form of life in a sense reaffirms itself. In the work *Iphigenie* (1787), the tensions between human emancipation, social destiny, and fate are expressed in a way that almost became paradigmatic in Goethe’s poetic works in that *Iphigenie* focuses on the

5 This book has been one of my major guides into Goethe’s literary works.

different living conditions of men and women. Goethe shows how even the most intimate and personal aspects of a human life are associated with public, social, and cultural institutions, and powers. In this case, the question of marriage, the union of the sexes, becomes a matter of both political strategy and individual freedom.

Because of the impacts of the French Revolution, Goethe's thoughts about the interplay between nature, culture, and individual human lives became more complex. In a sense these complexities simply mirror contemporary social change, for instance the fact of refugees, immigration, and the gradual integration of the rights of the nobility into new bourgeois social orders. In another sense, the complexities have a universal natural feature in that the social dynamics emerges as a clear example of the *metamorphosis* of natural beings within all-embracing nature. Although Goethe explicitly says that morphology is a matter for the natural sciences only, there is no doubt that his observations during his travel to Italy (1786–88) concerning different epochs of art and architecture left a mark, such that it makes sense to claim that his general ideas about morphology somehow colored his understanding of cultural matters as well.

After his return from Italy he published (1790) a thesis *Versuch die Metamorphosis der Pflanzen zu Erklären*. We return to that work below. Before that, let me point to some indications of the idea that the complexities of nature and those of culture have a family-likeness. One might here mention, first, that two of the crucial notions of the work on metamorphosis, the ideas of *Polarität* and *Steigerung* (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 48, 120) appear in the essay on aesthetic expression from 1790, *Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier und Stil*. Second, the figure of Tasso has a certain “polar” relation to the figure of Antonio, and as we shall see in all of Goethe's subsequent works, he presents his characters by means of polar interrelations. Third, the poem *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1798) is actually a characterization of the union of man and wife as belonging to a higher natural order. Fourth, Goethe formulated the idea that all beings are engaged in a constant and harmonious movement between *systole* and *diastole* (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 488). Finally, the title and theme of the work *Die Natürliche Tochter* (1803) in a sense hinges on this family-likeness between natural and cultural complexities.

The latter work is a radical version of *Iphigenie*, just as *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797) is a radical version of *Egmont*.⁶ Now the theme is no longer the impact of large-scale social change on human lives but also the impact of minor social development, exemplified by the adoption of a refugee, Dorothea, into the daily

6 See Safranski (2009, Chapter 9).

life of a smaller community and her becoming the life companion of Hermann. The different historical background and personal experience of Dorothea transforms the micro sociological dynamics of the local community, i.e. *Steigerung*. Again, the relation between men and women is at the core of the theme, and this gives a symbolic ring to the idea of being a child of such a transformed couple. In a sense, to be a child, is to be a child of nature, a child of the natural transformation of the polar relation between the two parents. Therefore, Goethe symbolically calls the main figure in *Die Natürliche Tochter* Eugenie, indicating being a creature of, and creature in, transformation.

A number of writers and intellectuals had an influence on Goethe, especially Pindar and Shakespeare. Among contemporaries, Karl Philip Moritz, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Leonard Euler, Joseph Louis Lagrange, and not the least his new friend Friedrich Schiller. In 1790, Goethe, together with Reinhold, read Kant's *Third Critique*, and he was in general well acquainted with the works of contemporary philosophers to the extent that he had opinions about these writers. He was acquainted with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and through him with the theme of pantheism after Spinoza (Safranski 2013, Cpt. 16). The natural philosophy of Schelling, and later Schelling's philosophy of freedom, was perhaps closest to his own thinking but supposedly this is more a story about how Schelling caught on to Goethe than the other way around.

Goethe found Kant's analysis of the interplay between The Understanding, the Power of Judgement, and the Power of Imagination interesting. Instead of the symbolic schemata, which Kant formulated, especially in his *Third Critique*, Goethe formulated an alternative idea about "intuitive judgement" (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 30). In this way a number of ideas in Goethe's thinking, as we shall see below, in a sense pointed to each other (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 49–52, 32–37): the idea of *Urphänomene*, the idea of a *Steigerung* of phenomena, the idea of *Bildungstrieb*. The idea of "pure phenomena", and the idea of a "steady sequence of phenomena". Finally, belonging to this constellation of related ideas, there is the idea of what I will call *Blick-Lenkung*.⁷ For scholarly-minded Kantians this marks a red spot and calls for alert: The idea of intuitive judgement expresses a non-mediated, yet intellectual, way of observation, namely observing what Schiller coined *Die Idee in der Erscheinung* (Safranski 2009, 107ff). Accordingly, one of the cornerstones in Goethe's thinking became a non-Kantian notion of intuitive understanding that was somehow still closely linked to empirical observations, which is the very point of Goethe's "Letter" of

⁷ I learned the phrase from Schieren (1998).

1799 *Der Sammler und die Seinigen* (Schellenberg 2012). Thus, the core-concept in Goethe's philosophy is his concept of *observation*, which I will explain in detail below.

The scientific experiment, morphology and the teaching of colors⁸

The 1792 essay *Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Subjekt und Objekt* ought to be recognized as a milestone in modern philosophy (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 10–20). Goethe here describes an experiment not so much as a way in which to obtain empirical facts in a methodological and reproducible way, but more as a way in which – using a phrase of Niels Bohr – to scrutinize the conditions under which certain phenomena can appear. A single experiment, which discloses particular phenomena, does, according to Goethe, *not in itself* deliver objective information about certain objects. An experiment is not a means for producing “evidence” in relation to certain hypothesis. An experiment always belongs to a continuous series of experiments, where a variety of phenomena in a sense “encircles” particular kinds of objects. Making experiments is in this way an art of Observation. In experimentation one learns to look for objects by seeing how certain phenomena appears under given experimental conditions. Observation then is a form of thought, *Gegenständliches Denken* (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 39).

One should recognize that Goethe's thoughts about the interrelation between nature and culture now has a concrete anchoring point: Thinking is a cultural practice whereby one can disclose the orders of natural phenomena. One can arrange the *real* phenomena such that *ideal* structures appear. This arrangement is in principle *historical*. What Goethe calls the “pure” phenomenon is the phenomenon embedded within a historically and concrete sequence of experimental findings (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 25). I can best illustrate all this by mentioning a distinction one finds in Niels Bohr's account of physical experiments (Brock and Harré 2016, 6–9): In physics, you take notice of concrete manifestations for instance the track of an electron in a cloud chamber. This is not yet a “phenomenon” for Bohr in the sense that the manifestation of the electron still does not count as an *atomic* phenomenon, as the display of how an atom appears. It is first when you “arrange” a series of experiments one can say that the manifestation of the track in the cloud

⁸ Two great books on Goethe and the sciences are Amrine et al. (1987) and Stephenson (1995).

chamber displays a way in which an electron, which was previously bound within the atom, now behaves in a certain way as a free particle. Only then do we get the *phenomenon* of “emission”, like the emission of an electron from an atomic system. The track in the cloud chamber, the manifestation, is concrete and real. The phenomenon is in another sense ideal, but it still expresses something real in so far as we have a real historical sequence of different possible manifestations in a variety of experiments relating to, and only to, *atoms*.

Goethe first coined the term “morphology” in 1797, but it is clear that he followed that method in his work of 1790, and that the method answers to the essay on The Experiment. More specifically, in the study of the metamorphosis of plants Goethe studied the conditions under which the formation of leaf made the appearances of particular plants possible. Goethe studied leaf-structures as formations under certain conditions. This is the *Urpflanze*, the becoming of a leaf structure. As such it is a phenomenon-of-life. It is a *natural* synthesis of *Vermögen, Kraft, Gewalt, Streben und Trieb* whereby a certain *matter* acquires ever new forms (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 49–52, 32–37). Life as an *Urphänomen* is this total *Bildungstrieb* (ibid. 32–37), whereby a transformation of the dynamic character of natural beings takes place, in that they are transformed into new material formations, and where there is a constant *Steigerung* within these formations, as in the growth of plants or in the development of animal bodies.

We are here talking about *our way of analyzing* “what nature has itself synthesized” (ibid. 49–52). We are talking about the very task of morphology, namely being able to provide a *Darstellung* of phenomena of life. Goethe explicitly says what Wittgenstein was to repeat that the task is “not to explain but to present”. Recall, we are talking about a way of *thinking*, *Gegenständliches Denken*, whereby we learn to observe objective matters within the arrangements of experimentally produced phenomena. Objective thought is in this sense at one with our ability to establish and develop a certain dealing with things. Objective thinking is a cultural practice. Methodologically, this means that any *theoretical* analysis presupposes that one has achieved a sequence of experiences concerning phenomena.

The primary example of such objective thought in Goethe’s works is his *Farbenlehre*. First, colors are not objects that has an independent existence. Colors are visual phenomena that emerge when we direct our attention at ways in which light and darkness (shadows) actively influence how we see a variety of turbid (non-transparent) things (surfaces, boundaries, substances, organisms, and more). The *Urphänom* relating to colors is how light and darkness interact with such turbid items to the effect that we come to see things differently.

Phenomena of color express a kind of co-existence, between light and the human eye. Accordingly, Goethe's *Farbenlehre* will teach the reader to make use of her eyes within a variety of practical efforts, namely efforts to deal with light and shadows. We do not simply "see" items. We see *how they appear as "half-light and half shadow"* in relation to light and shadow as such. When we talk about specific colors, what we talk about is in effect a way in which one can learn to *chain the attention* in relation to phenomena of light and darkness. This means that different kinds of engagement with things answers to different kinds of colors. The physicist, the chemist, the physician, or the artist deals in different fashion with phenomena of color. Newton was wrong in believing that any one such particular dealing discloses the very nature of colors. The Newtonian link between colors and the frequency of a beam of light is merely a particular example of a special experimental practice. By contrast, the *Farbenlehre* displays a morphology of different phenomena of color in a variety of practical contexts.

Goethe's later literary work: the grounding and independence of human lives

Characterizing the first Volume on *Wilhelm Meister, Lehrjahre* (1795–6), as the first *Bildungsroman* is misleading. The name "Wilhelm Meister" (WM) refers to Shakespeare and thus to an ambition of becoming an artist like him. One way of becoming Shakespeare is learning to play one of his figures like Hamlet. Accordingly, WM a son of Shakespeare plays the Prince of Denmark, the son of the King. WM himself has a son Felix. However, WM never becomes an artist, and he cannot realize himself through the role of Hamlet. Moreover, he loses his own son, all of which shows that the idea of the formation of a human person is blurred. First, one thinks that former cultural achievements can regulate this formation. However, in order to adopt what culture offers, one must engage with fellow human beings, such as a group of artists. Learning presupposes doing things with other pupils, and no two pupils adopt matters in the same way. Consequently, one must develop ambitions and visions that one shares with only *some* of the other pupils. Thus, getting a child symbolizes engaging with "another pupil". Thus Wilhelm gets a child with a particular other woman, and he engages with particular others in the Tower Society, and so on. Again, within the formation of an individual human being there is no "natural child", no straightforward way of being a pupil. So the evolving sequence of personal experiences and projects cannot follow overall rational goals. However, some

kind of acquaintance with the reality of things may help in the sense that the individual life may escape pure Fate and a rigid social destiny. One may not become master of one's *life as such*, but there are ways of making one's relations to natural and social matters *personal*.

Consequently, Goethe questions the sense in which the human being is a *Gattungswesen*. The lesson of the first volume on Wilhelm Meister reappears in a radical form in a work, which Goethe published almost at the same time of his *Farbenlehre*, namely *Wahlverwandschaften*. Human lives do not evolve merely through heritage. Instead, human beings constantly face *families of choice*. Goethe took this phrase from chemistry and symbolically a number of the leading figures of the book bears a name containing the same constellation of letters *OTT* (such as Otto, Charlotte, Ottilie). Just as chemical compounds are temporary constellations of fixed elements, similarly the *situation* in which a human being finds herself will always contain elements that also are contained in situations in which other people find themselves. Some physical reality, some social reality, some psychological reality may answer to features of different human situations. The situations will always remain different, but by forming compounds, or "couples", there appears a stratification of certain realities. The work analyzes a variety of such "couples" and does thus catch on to Goethe's idea of the polar character of all natural relations:

First, there is the coupling of Man and nature. The leading figure is a gardener and architect of landscape. It is no longer Shakespeare but Alexander von Humboldt who is the hero. Second, there is the coupling of society and nature, namely the idea of *Sittlichkeit*, a kind of union between rational social life and nature. Finally, one can mention culturally established couplings, like families. In each case it turns out that "the couple" falls apart. Difference becomes more telling than union. Only the ideal coupling of Man and Woman remains, even if it turns out to be an unrealistic ideal. In modern terms, Goethe is concerned with the union of gendered beings and the point is that only in relation to such couples do we find a truly *human* couple, which for instance the coupling of nature and society never becomes.⁹

In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1829) we find a further couple, namely that between the old World, Europe, and the New World, America. In *Hermann und Dorothea* the refugees came to Germany, now the Germans have themselves become refugees in the sense that social ambitions are associated with efforts to move across different geographic territories. Goethe substitutes the Romantic idea of being at home with a sense of being always in a kind of exile. The human being has become a wanderer, moving crisscross over borders and places.

⁹ Walter Benjamin wrote a famous praise of the work in 1922 (Benjamin 1922).

I think that Goethe in *Wahlverwandschaften* portrayed human lives as he described colors in that he displays a kind of phenomenology concerning what we can call phenomena-of-life. The work was originally a section of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, and in that work Goethe unfolds a kind of *morphology of human lives*. There are no “centers” accompanying the unfolding tales, no personal perspectives, no personal subjects, no personal fate. Being alive means “being situated” within a variety of transformations, standing in between the formations of the past and those to come. Such is the *human form of life*. The social space has in a sense dissolved and remains only in the form of a number of temporarily given practices and projects. Better, this is as such “The Project”. Goethe envisions an Organization that will *spread* its messages and practices all over the world. However, this Organization is not like the church or like a university. It does not pretend to represent the general and universal. It addresses anyone anywhere but does not do so *on behalf of* anyone or anything. There are no teachers nor preachers, only the attempt to raise strong voices within the ongoing conversation of Mankind. Moreover, these attempts “are to be continued”, – the closing words of the work.

Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre displays a cosmological understanding of Mankind. It plays out Schelling's idea of a troubled unity between “the essence of the ground” and “the essence of existence” formulated by Schelling in his work on the essence of human freedom. Nature is the ground of human lives. At the same time, a form of independence, called existence, characterizes human lives. As Schelling argues, human freedom hinges on a fine balance between having a ground and being independent. One can say that Goethe similarly shows that one can neither achieve freedom in a human life through a harmony with Cosmos (symbolically expressed by the figure Makarie as being part of the Solar System) nor reach that freedom by holding on to an Original Position not infused by social circumstance (represented by the figure Mignon).

Human individuality in 20th-century philosophy

Both “the linguistic turn” in philosophy and the emergence of phenomenology implies a philosophical assessment of human individuality. Frege's vision of a *Begriffsschrift*, a logically regimentated language, is concerned with a kind of objective understanding that is mediated by individual experiences. The very relation between “sense” and “reference” in Frege relates to the awareness of an individual user of a given language for whom, say, the planet Venus appears as “the evening star”. Accordingly, it is in principle possible for each individual to

add to the available “senses” of a given word. An example in Frege is the different senses of the name “Dr Gustav Lauben” provided by different persons (Frege 1918, 38). Even if the young Wittgenstein did not adopt Frege’s cognitive notion of “sense”, mastering the language unfolded in his *Tractatus* is something personal. “The world” depicted through the construction of sentences as truth-functions of elementary sentences, is “my world” (Wittgenstein 1921, § 5.62). This world is so to speak a life-companion, the repertoire of possible facts that I may confront in my life. So both the Fregean and the Tractarian user of language faces “the mercy of fate” (Wittgenstein 1921, § 6.374). Logical necessity comes with a certain kind of contingency and the individual user of a language is placed in between this polarity.

We find the same polarity expressed in Husserl, there is no “pure phenomenology” in abstraction from an “epoché”, and no scientific (systematic) thought without a “Life-world”. In both cases, the younger and the older Husserl, the regimentation of thought may imply a qualification of human understanding but it can never silence individual experience and its associated efforts. This was of course precisely the point when Saussure argued that the grammatically regimented written language presupposes the spoken, and lived, language, *Parole*. We shall now see how Merleau-Ponty and the later Wittgenstein developed similar views on human individuality and did so with explicit reference to Goethe.

Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenology of perception

Merleau-Ponty’s work *Phenomenology of Perception* deals with an inevitable, ongoing “transformation of contingency into necessity” to the effect that *particular* contingencies are appropriated even if contingency *as such* remains:

All that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of *escape* which is never an unconditioned freedom. (Merleau-Ponty 1946, 170–1)

The work centers on what he calls “The Problem of the Body”, which turns out to be the Goethean problem concerning the conditions of possibility of *Gegenständliches Denken* (Merleau-Ponty 1946, 71–72). Just as the perception of colors for Goethe was a matter of linking the movements of the eye to spots filled with light, the movements of the body for Merleau-Ponty shall be linked to parts of reality surrounding the body, such that the emerging experiences both

are directed at “something” and expresses “some-body’s view” (*ibid.*, 152–3). Now, the opening scenario of the work is a Goethean “couple”. Symbolically this is called “the body in its sexual being” but is meant to express the idea that *co-existence*, the coupling of bodily beings, is a primary phenomenon (*ibid.*, 160) from which a variety of perceptions spring. The whole book aims at showing how, once such co-existence has achieved rigid structures, one has established the conditions of possibility for developing a “natural world”, a social order common to a large group of people (*ibid.*, 450).

The line of argumentation, which Merleau-Ponty develops, is this:

- (a) Bodily co-existence is the primary form of existence in that it emerges through an interplay of basic phenomena (*ibid.*, p. 160).
- (b) Thus, co-existence always already involves a grounding metamorphosis, as well as a “dual existential action of systole and diastole” (*ibid.*, p. 164).
- (c) Therefore, it is possible gradually transforming “the structure of erotic perception” into patterns of speech and later into concepts and thoughts, thereby obtaining “a structural co-ordination of experience” (*ibid.*, p. 193).
- (d) In this way, a “natural world”, a social order might emerge. This order is a necessary condition for engaging objectively with others and conditions the freedom of any individual, both negatively and positively. Individuality remains within the ongoing “transformation of contingency into necessity”.

Consequently, there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of co-existence is explicitly associated with the three Goethean *Urphänomene* of life, experience, and deed. He also explains the role of the body in perception as an ongoing “metamorphosis” and makes use of the major metaphors of Goethe “diastole” and “systole”. Accordingly, co-existence is for Merleau-Ponty always situated within a particular metamorphosis on the one hand, and involves a re-appearance of contingency on the other.

In Merleau-Ponty’s last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, the Goethean approach remains. What is new is that the “primary coupling” is not a *human* coupling of bodies. Thus, while early Merleau-Ponty followed Goethe’s presentation in *Die Wahlverwandschaften*, the later Merleau-Ponty followed the presentation in *The Wandering Years*. The primary coupling is between human bodies and a “flesh” that appears in our bodily encounters with reality (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 146–7). Again, the analysis is Goethean in that Merleau-Ponty wants to trace a grounding metamorphosis in the way in which we learn to “see” things within our bodily entanglements with reality (*ibid.*, p. 148, 154). The gradual chaining of the attention answers to such continuing transformation, and re-birth, of the matters of which we become aware (*ibid.*, p. 124). This is the “flesh of the world”, a real and grounding structure emerging within the continuing transformation of

perceptions to the effect that nature involves culture (*ibid.*, 152). As for the younger Merleau-Ponty, individuality is for the older still situated between necessity and contingency. Only, for the older Merleau-Ponty this situation is not related to the co-existence of human beings, but the co-existence of nature and Man. In that sense, we are all different children of nature.

Wittgenstein: the human form of life

I think that Goethe twice played a major role within the development of Wittgenstein's thought. In 1931 (Wittgenstein 2000, MS 110) Wittgenstein had realized that the semantics of the *Tractatus* expressed an unwarranted metaphysical outlook. Wittgenstein then elaborated his idea of "language games" to the effect that the use of words are part of practical dealings with things. Instead of simply disclaiming his former views, Wittgenstein gave them a new ring: He characterized speculative metaphysics of modern philosophy, including his own, as a form of *mythology*. MS 110 also contains the famous "early" remarks on Sir James Frazer. The latter had described an African Tribe as having a "primitive" culture in that the culture lacked proper scientific methods and based major social decisions on magical rites. To Wittgenstein, Frazer appears to be primitive. For Frazer has a simple and narrow view concerning what a "culture" is: Wittgenstein regards the magical rites of the Azande as a crucial part of the organization of their social life.

This is how the idea of language games is associated with a *cultural* understanding, namely an understanding of the way in which forms of expression can be part of the organization of social communities and as such be part of the conditions of the possibility for living an individual human life. For any cultural setting, and at any time, part of the organization of that setting is given through – not just a bundle of language games – but ways in which the available language games have been (in my words) *entangled and enmeshed*. In short, understanding "our situation" involves understanding the historical background for, and the historical character of, the available language games. That is why Frazer's view was primitive: He had forgotten to take into account how the development of modern scientific language games depends on a whole number of quite different games.

This is where Goethe comes into the story: Cultural understanding requires a *perspicuous presentation* of the available language games in accord with Goethe's *Farbenlehre*. Cross-cultural understanding further requires understanding a kind of metamorphosis between two different sets of available

language games (Brock 2016). There is already a morphological feature in Wittgenstein's account of "perspicuous presentation" (Schulte 1989, Schulte 2003). He gives an example where one shall imagine a series of ellipses where the ellipses in the series become more and more circular. This of course corresponds to a transformation of (elliptic) forms, but it means more than that. First, the series expresses a *family* of possibilities. Second, the "limit" of the series, the pure circle, is a pure phenomenon in Goethe's sense. Third, the *mathematical* character of the example is to the effect that there are clearly established operations for comparing any two different ellipses.

The second time an inspiration from Goethe influenced Wittgenstein's philosophy heavily was in 1945. In the beginning of that year, Wittgenstein had revised and expanded his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) several times and had completed the so-called *Zwischenfassung*. Thus, Wittgenstein had augmented the rule-following considerations (PI §§ 137–225)¹⁰ with the so-called "private-language" considerations (PI §§ 226–421).¹¹ This ought to puzzle Wittgenstein scholars, for the puzzle is *why did Wittgenstein feel compelled to add further 272 paragraphs to his work* (PI §§ 422–693) *and how did these remarks come about?* Whatever the answer to these questions, it is a fact that Wittgenstein spent most of 1945 composing three texts (Wittgenstein 2000, TP 228–30), called *Bemerkungen* I, II. It is very clear to me that in these texts, Wittgenstein is engaged in a dialogue with Goethe.

Because of this, in PI § 654 we find Wittgenstein's famous dictum, taken from Goethe's similar claim about morphology (Goethe 2000, Band 13, 123), that the aim of philosophy not is providing explanations, but giving *Feststellungen*, noticing that "these language games are played" (PI § 655). Wittgenstein explicitly calls such *Feststellungen* *Ur-phänomene* (*ibid.* § 654). Moreover, noticing which language games are played involves not the least noticing which language games people have been taught. Wittgenstein in (PI § 441) underscores both how human beings always are pupils and how human behavior still is influenced by a natural impulse. Human behavior is both socially configured and personal in nature. Wittgenstein calls this having an *Einstellung*, and following a remark from Wittgenstein (2000, TP 230 (§ 137)), he further relates it to an idea of having a *Bürgerliche Stellung* in one's life. Such social, yet personal positions in accordance with the

¹⁰ In Brock (2016) I give reasons for calling these remarks "the rule-introduction considerations"!

¹¹ I think one too often associates Wittgenstein's thoughts on rules and privacy with certain key remarks and fail to notice that the issue of *Verwendungen* begins at PI § 137 and that "privacy" for Wittgenstein not was an epistemic issue but a behavioral.

naturally given human form of life should be the concern of philosophy, Wittgenstein says.¹² One finds a similar view in (McGuinness 2002).

So again, why must the philosophy of language games, including the rule-following considerations and the private language considerations, be augmented through a dialogue with Goethe? In conjunction, the two considerations of the *Zwischenfassung* show that no teaching of rules determines the behavior of pupils. Still, this behavior belongs to a weave of previously accepted rule-governed games. Human behavior can never be private in the sense of escaping this weave, “the weave of life”, or *Lebensteppich* as Wittgenstein later called it. Consequently, human behavior unfolds in relation to a civic order (*Bürgerliche Stellung*). Therefore, the *Fest-stellung* (that certain language games are played) includes noticing (1) how people appear as a kind of citizen, and (2) that being a citizen within the web of available language games is not determined by the order of the day. Natural impulses will always color human behavior to the effect that the individuality and particularity of such behavior is part of civil life. In short, the parallel to Goethe is evident.

Closing words

20th-century philosophy never escaped the ambitions of German Idealism. It rarely embraced Nietzschean nihilism, radical scepticism, or strict pragmatism. The institutions of science, art, the law, and the basic structures of written languages remained at the heart of philosophical thought. However, philosophers often wanted to underscore the *ordinary* character of these focal points. Thus, philosophers often related the possibility of objective thought and objective Reason to skills and capacities that in principle unfolds on an everyday basis. The “higher” forms of understanding were related to the lower forms which always already are at play within the everyday appropriation of nature, an appropriation that takes place in human work. Individuality therefore becomes a significant “middle” position between the general ordinary background and the common institutional superstructures, such as the sciences. Individuality is both doomed to try to link the ordinary with the institutional and doomed to find there is no way that this link can itself be institutionalized. One might say: Rule-following is something you must

¹² Wittgenstein moved this remark to an early part in the final edition of Wittgenstein (2000, TP 227a, § 125) just as he did with a number of remarks that originally came from the early remarks on Frazer, including underscoring the importance of the notion of “perspicuous presentation” (*ibid.*, § 122).

engage with, even if this engagement always comes with a certain contingency and according conditioned freedom. Such “rule-following considerations” might seem very abstract, however when one associates such considerations with the sophisticated thoughts of Goethe and thus are reminded of a huge number of “cases in point”, the *depth* of the considerations are revealed.

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