

Dualism, Monism and the Wonder of Materiality as Revealed through Goethean Observation

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As a philosopher working in the Western tradition I want to think through a problem that arises from the heart of that tradition. Possible solutions to the problem of dualism that come from a materialist monist perspective are sometimes rejected out of a misunderstanding that comes from the sheer depth and resilience of dualist thinking. Using personal experience drawn from Goethean observation, I here set out another way of thinking about materialism. My central claim arises from an essentially simple question. We know that substance dualism (the idea that the world is made up of two types of substance: mind and matter) is fraught with problems, not least of which is the question of how these two substances interact. Moreover, the notion of two substances always seems to bring in its wake an evaluative component, where one substance (for us in the Western tradition: mind) is seen as better than the other substance. Attempts to solve the problem of interaction by creating a form of monism that basically claims that there is, in fact, only one substance have been unnecessarily hampered, I believe, by the idea that the one substance left remaining has to be either like mind or like matter *as conceived* by dualism. But why so? If the dualism model is wrong, then why carry over *its* interpretation of either mind or matter? And if we don't do this, then we are left with a pressing question: what is the real nature of the world and what is my relationship to it?

I want to explore this question through my own experience of encountering the world with the guidance of the eighteenth-century poet and scientist, J.W. von Goethe. To do this will involve adopting a certain autobiographical mode. I also want to do this in such a way that the reader could follow the way I have set this out and, should it seem inviting or important enough, test it for themselves with a phenomenon of their choice.

WHAT IS MATTER? GOETHEAN OBSERVATION AS AN APPROACH TO KNOWING NATURE

An example of “seeing the world otherwise” that I want to examine is the one that got me into this whole question. As a philosopher I was interested in epistemology and this, as an important area of philosophy of science, becomes “how do we know about the world?” As a research student I decided to look at Goethe's ideas. This is J.W. von Goethe, the poet who also carried out scientific studies and through his own character and approach to nature developed a particular way of finding out about things in the world. In order to learn more about his style of scientific method I undertook training in Goethean observation. I did this initially over the space of three years through the work of an organisation called The Life Science Trust. My training entailed a number of nine-day and three-week courses spent with a group of other people examining and entering into a particular phenomenon. For example, colour, the plant, landscape, and the human

skeleton. Rather than delve into the historical aspects of how Goethe's work does or does not fit the science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or whether the type of work I was undertaking follows Goethe to the letter, I would like to stay with this autobiographical mode because the picture I want to set out concerns the experience of making a perceptual shift, of engaging with the world in such a way that the world I experience changes.

Before explaining the details of the Goethean process I will just say a little about why it might be of interest to explore what Goethe called "delicate empiricism."¹ Goethe uses human qualities of careful observation whilst holding in abeyance received theories. And then far from trying to expunge from the scientist's mind human faculties such as imagination, inspiration and intuition, he advocates the use of these in a disciplined way to enter into the world of the thing studied. What happens after a long and exasperating journey is that the thing studied suddenly arrives, all previous notions of substantiality pale into insignificance as the experience of its very thingness hits you. In studying things from nature what also comes along with the phenomenon is its interconnectedness to everything else, so whilst my object of study might be the colour of the sky at sunset, once embarked on the experiment my experience of colour anywhere is heightened and I see everything differently. So let me draw out how the world changed for me.

Picture me at time t_1 : I am someone drawn to philosophy and interested in abstract thought and the world of the mind. I had in the past dabbled in various spiritual traditions and although I had not settled in any one I was in no doubt that I was a mind, spirit, ideal-realms kind of person with a "feeling at sea" response to the practical, physical world around me. Of course, I enjoyed walking in the countryside and proffered the occasional contribution to save the whale or rainforest or whatever the environmental flavour of the week was, but the world – the actual stuff – was, well, just stuff.

Now picture me at time t_2 : I am gripped by a passion for this clover leaf, its manner of unfolding, its connection to the other parts of the plant, the plant's network of roots and stems as it spreads across the field, its role in a cyclical process of dying and nourishing the coming into being of more clover leaves and I am just dumbstruck with wonder at its role in the nourishment of animals. I am in the grip of a real mystery and catching glimpses of just how *real* it is. Forget the cold and wind as I sit in this field or rather feel the cold and move with the wind to feel my way into the gesture of the trembling leaves and their ground hugging way of being. Just give me more time to experience this relationship, to unfold more of who this clover is.

Through the process of an engaged observation which makes use of all my human faculties, but re-tuned to an attempt at an open frequency rather than a particular wavelength, the world appears as never before. Particular phenomena and the places between them have an articulated gesture and specificity, but also a fittingness or flowing togetherness and what I can only describe paradoxically as a substantiality and a lightness. Interestingly I experience this shift as the world arriving, as opposed to me arriving in a different world.

¹ J.W. von Goethe (1988), *Scientific Studies*, D. Miller (ed. and trans.), Suhrkamp, New York, p. 307.

The world that arrives is a world of matter, a matter in which I am intertwined.² By really seeing beyond the dualist's conception of material substance we can experience the materiality of ourselves and the world. Yes, it is matter, but the point is there is nothing remotely clunky or machine-like about it. However, to jump to a conceptual picture of the world as pre-given by particular worldviews such as some forms of panpsychism would not necessarily be doing justice to the Goethean process. To attempt to escape the culturally centrifugal force of dualism is not going to be that easy and we could be in danger of concluding that the reason matter is not clunky is because it actually contains all that the dualists hived off into a realm of mind or spirit. Let's slow down, because the impulse we get from Goethe's work is to say, let's start from scratch, let's ditch the preformed theories as much as we can and actually experience the world. There are probably many ways and means to do this but the strength of Goethe's approach is that it takes a lot of us from where we are, as inheritors of Western thought, and allows us to move through a number of shifts in consciousness in a way that is holistic but also careful and precise with many checks and balances. This I believe will hold back the ever present tendencies to either reduce nature to a machine like entity or overwrite nature with one aspect of our own style of being: that of mentality. Neither captures the reality of ourselves, let alone other living entities or natural processes.

THE GOETHEAN APPROACH

What I would like to do now is lay out more clearly the process of conducting Goethean observation. There are many accounts of this process in the literature but my aim here is to give a basic account, such that readers could try this out for themselves and see how what is revealed could be related to the idea of onto-poetics.³

What should emerge here, along with the sense of time, diligence and self-observation necessary, is one of the strengths of Goethean observation in that it really is a staged process that moves through different modes of consciousness. Rather than a sense of flipping from habitual dualistic thinking to an inexplicable mystical state we can follow consciously and rigorously what is happening in the world and in ourselves as the practice progresses.

Goethean observation as a means to come to know a phenomenon is widely recognized as having four stages.⁴ (Actions in the world inspired by what is discovered

² I. Brook (2005), "Can Merleau-Ponty's Notion of 'Flesh' Inform or even Transform Environmental Thinking?" *Environmental Values* 14 (3), pp. 353–362.

³ F. Mathews (2008), "Thinking from within the Calyx of Nature," *Environmental Values* 17 (1), pp. 41–65.

⁴ J. Bockemühl (ed.) (1985), *Toward a Phenomenology of the Etheric World*, Anthroposophic Press, New York (esp. ch. 1). N. Hoffmann (2007), *Goethe's Science of Living Form*, Adonis Press, New York. C. Holdrege (2005), "Doing Goethean Science," *Janus Head* 8 (1), <http://www.janushead.org/8-1/Holdrege.pdf>, accessed 22 Oct. 2008.

require a further set of careful steps.) The four stages are usually preceded by a preliminary or pre-stage of recognizing one's habitual responses. In my own practice and my own teaching of this process I place more emphasis on this pre-stage than others do. Perhaps this is because I am a philosopher by training and thus am aware of the epistemologically controversial nature of claims such as, "being able to see how the world really is." In the present account I will be giving the pre-stage its due space as this is going to be a helpful way of explaining the difficulty of the journey from dualistic to holistic thinking.

Before beginning any study, it is necessary to identify the phenomenon that is to be the subject of the study. In order to do this one has to be drawn to a particular thing or question, which means that there can be no arbitrariness about the object of study. Being able to find the thing that it would be fruitful for one to study is not only a matter of waiting to be "spoken to." It requires a degree of patience and a child-like receptivity to, metaphorically, hear what it is about the world the individual is particularly fitted to explore. That "being drawn to" doesn't have to be an attraction or curiosity – it can be a feeling of revulsion or challenge. It is just a sense of there being something about that thing that I need to create a relationship with and come to understand. As the term "phenomenon" suggests, the object of study can be anything: a rock, a plant, colour, a landscape, a relationship, a social group, and so on. In the details that follow, where I use an example it will usually be of a plant and I would recommend choosing a phenomenon in the plant realm as helpful in learning this process before applying it to more complex or less responsive phenomena.

PRE-STAGE: CLEARING THE WORKSPACE

Our ways of thinking, feeling, moving, responding and simply being in the world are shaped by our physical environment, culture, personal history and a whole web of interactions. Many of these are permeated by the dominant Western tradition of thinking, mentioned earlier, of mind/body dualism. It is one thing to know this but quite another to escape it. Mind/body dualism is layered into our language and behaviour in the world, so even to express how something could be different involves using the language that has developed to enunciate the idea that it could not be different. Thus we have a problem. It was part of Goethe's genius to see that this was the case and to see its implications for our understanding of the world. Goethe moves against the flow of history in his proposal for science. Rather than assuming that we can in some way avoid using human subjective processes to examine the world he maintains that these subjective processes can be developed such that each scientist becomes an accurate instrument.⁵ One way of looking at the process of Goethean observation is to see it as a honing of the human being as a scientific instrument. If this is what we are going to be engaged in, understanding the starting point (our normal way of thinking and being) is going to be essential. Those readers familiar with phenomenology will see here a similarity with bringing to consciousness the "natural attitude."

⁵ *Op. cit.*, J.W. von Goethe (1988), p. 39.

To clear the workspace we need to take a preliminary look at what is actually there and how things usually work. How this is done in the Goethean process is by approaching the phenomenon in a normal, everyday way and articulating all of our first impressions in whatever form they may take. Examples of the kinds of things that can emerge in this part of the process are: habitual likes and dislikes, boredom or anger, snippets of information, inspiring ideas or urges to put something right and so on. What is different, and what makes this the pre-stage of a process, is that instead of acting on these or flowing into them with further reveries we just lay them out for inspection and for setting aside (akin to phenomenological bracketing). The inspecting is a helpful part of the process because we are not going to escape them quite so easily and being able to name the presuppositions with which we approach a phenomenon will make it easier for us to spot them creeping back in an unhelpful way through the later stages of the process.

What should become apparent in discussing this pre-stage is just how much the Goethean method involves self-examination and critical reflection. It is a qualitative approach to the world, but not one that revels in unschooled subjectivity. And so to the schooling.

STAGE ONE: EXACT SENSE PERCEPTION

Once we have cleared the workspace in the manner described above, we are ready to move on. However, it should be noted that the clearing can never really be more than a bit of tidying up and labelling, otherwise, like each of the stages, it could go on forever.

The first stage is characterized by standing away from that very personal first encounter and observing the phenomenon freshly. We need to perceive it in the way we might perceive something that we had never encountered before. From that perception we begin to record all that we can about the phenomenon. To do this recording we need to use all our senses rather than be swayed by the Western ocularcentric tradition, which beguiles us into thinking that we can take things in with a single glance.⁶ We are in a process of meeting a being and as the pre-stage emphasises we need to meet that being on its own terms and not overlay it with our preconceptions or normal ways of thinking. Not just personal feelings, but all our theories about a phenomenon need to be held back in order to let the “facts” speak for themselves. This practice can be seen in Goethe’s own work in his extraordinarily detailed observations of colour phenomena. Rather than draw hypotheses or work from a theory, his painstaking investigations followed every conceivable avenue of experimentation.⁷

Recording our observations can be done in a number of ways, for example, writing detailed descriptions. However, drawing the phenomenon is one of the best ways to focus one’s attention on the previously unnoticed detail and the relationships between parts. If our aim is to really see this oak tree then drawing can be very helpful to prevent

⁶ I. Brook (2002) “Experiencing Interiors: Ocularcentrism and Merleau-Ponty’s redeeming of the role of vision,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 33 (1), pp. 68–77.

⁷ D. Sepper (1988), *Goethe Contra Newton*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 45.

us slipping into our usual “seeing oak trees” mode of perception, although artists have the additional problem of having to avoid their usual “drawing oak trees” mode of perception. The categorized artefact created by our usual mode of perception must be ignored to let us see the oak tree as if we had not seen one before. A number of drawing exercises are helpfully detailed in Margaret Colquhoun and Axel Ewald’s book *New Eyes for Plants*.⁸ Such exercises can include drawing the outline of a thing without looking at the paper, using shading for depth with no regard for actual shades or shadows, or drawing from the outside as if chipping the form from a block. One of the most useful drawing exercises, and this one should never be left out or cut short, is drawing from memory. One may think that one knows everything about the appearance of a thing only to have that assumed knowledge disappear the moment the object is hidden from view and one attempts to draw it. Drawing from memory and just closing one’s eyes and trying to build in imagination the plant as one has come to understand it is extremely helpful in trying to build the bridge, so crucial to Goethean science, between the phenomenon and the human being as scientific instrument. Of course, just as we had to bracket our normal preconceptions about a phenomenon, we need also to bracket personal concerns about our ability to draw, the point is not to produce a beautiful picture, but to train our seeing.

Another tool one might use is to ignore some knowledge, for example, the names of things, so that the things in question can be seen and described outside of some of our learned classifications. This restriction on nomenclature can be helpful when sharing observations in a group because attempting to find a word that expresses what we are seeing rather than taking the ready-made one from a standard textbook prompts more looking and thus more potential to see fresh relationships that the standard nomenclature had covered over. It is impossible to continue in exact sense perception indefinitely. To register all the great amount of variety and detail would be, as Goethe said, “like trying to drink the sea dry.”⁹ Just amassing facts about the phenomenon as a static object at the moment at which we are observing it will not allow us really to see what the thing is or come to any firm idea of it. Exact sense perception is only the foundation on which the following stages rest and to which they return when necessary to compare conclusions reached by other means.

However, before leaving the first stage it is also worth mentioning the value of gathering information we could also use, what I shall term secondary sources. If the plant is our primary source, it would be worth knowing what other people have discovered about it. Thus, we could turn to some botanical knowledge, or the relevance of the plant in agriculture, herbalism, in myth, or even something like the language of flowers in both mediaeval and later paintings. The important point about using secondary sources is that we should always have a sceptical eye and always return to the primary source for verification. We need to be alive to the fact that with secondary sources we are gathering what other people have said. This might give us new ideas or other forms of access to our phenomenon or questions we can pose to it in our further investigation. On the other

⁸ M. Colquhoun & A. Ewald (1996), *New Eyes for Plants*, Hawthorn Press, Edinburgh.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, J.W. von Goethe (1988), p. 24

hand, it also gives us more material that we have to set aside in order to really see the plant.

STAGE TWO: EXACT SENSORIAL IMAGINATION

With the previous stage we were attempting to capture what the phenomenon is presenting to us right now in a frozen present. The activity there was all about being exact about what we see, hear, feel, smell, etc.; but the entity we are studying is not in reality itself captured in a frozen present. It exists through a process and so to get to what it really is we are going to have to move in that process ourselves so that we can in some sense begin to accompany it in its being. We do this by using the human faculty of imagination, but not imagination as we often think of it in the human realm as distanced from reality. Imaginative activity in Goethe's sense is called by him "exact sensorial imagination"¹⁰ and it builds on the rigour of the previous stage now set in motion. The aim of this activity is to perceive the phenomenon as a dynamic entity. Just as the previous stage required a certain policing of one's usual ways of thinking, our imaginations also need some schooling to allow us to stick with the phenomenon, not as we have come to know it as an entity frozen in time, but as a being in process.

There is something dreamlike about this stage. However, because we have laid aside our theories, bracketed our presuppositions, and undergone a rigorous working in exact sense perception, our "dreams" are "in the style of" the phenomenon and not drawn from our own personal fancies. These experiences need to remain dreamlike because any fixing of them will put us back into the first stage.

One of the easiest ways into using this type of imagination, and to seeing how it could lead to understanding something about a phenomenon, is through Goethe's work on the metamorphosis of plants. It is here that we can see his use of exact sensorial imagination as a kind of shift in consciousness that now connects with the phenomenon in a new, but nevertheless still rigorous, way.

Many plants produce a sequence of different leaves often beginning with a simple shape, becoming more differentiated and then contracting to a more pointed form. To school our imagination we could imaginatively move through this sequence, as if from the inside. And we could produce, imaginatively, the forms in between those which are evident in the plant. This helps to shed light on the process of metamorphosis in the "doing" of the plant as opposed to recording only its form. Jochen Bockemühl, whose work makes extensive use of leaf sequences, explains the process and shows just how different this kind of perception is in the following passage:

With the mode of observation corresponding to the watery element, it becomes possible to go beyond the single elements of form and reach a realm not directly accessible to sense perception; here the sequence of forms appears as formative movement, and the formative forces can be experienced. If something is observed as an object, it is always seen from the

¹⁰ N. Hoffmann (1998), "The Unity of Science and Art: Goethean phenomenology as a new ecological discipline," in D. Seamon & A. Zajonc (eds), *Goethe's Way of Science: A phenomenology of nature*, SUNY Press, New York, pp. 129–175.

outside, it is seen separately and seemingly from all sides at once. There, one's own standpoint is unimportant. The object exists without me. If, however, one begins to become aware of the formative forces in the way described, one's own inner activity (intentionality) and one's own position within the whole becomes significant.¹¹

With a living entity it is easy to move into this second stage because the phenomenon just seems to require it in order for us to see it as a living entity. We can't capture the livingness of even a plant if we stick with exact sense perception. Our thinking in that mode is too static to live into the phenomenon and experience it as changing and growing. Something of the phenomenon has to live in us if we are to make a connection between, for example, the sapling and the tree. Our thinking has to be mobilised to grasp that the stuff of the world (matter) is all the time changing or, to state the point more accurately, that matter is also the changing itself. It is imagination that makes this mobilization of our thinking possible. In this mode of perception we are living in the phenomenon as process. We are imaginatively engaged in those same processes but have to be so not by bringing in human meanings but by living in the phenomenon as the thing it is. We can't in one sense leave our humanity out of the picture as this is the source of our imaginative ability, but in this and the stages that follow we are all the time placing our faculties *in the service of the phenomenon*. Exact sensorial imagination leads us into a holistic apprehending where we understand, for example, the plant as a metamorphosing possibility connected to its place and to the plant realm. To do this, rather than writing our theories onto nature, we have to learn how to see from nature. As Goethe says, to understand the whole as a metamorphosing possibility we need to "remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives."¹²

It is the plant realm that gives us so clear a picture of the need for this shift in our thinking – a shift that enables us to understand a plant as a plant and not just as a marker in our system of classification. This is where we can first see that the empiricism, which in the first stage looked like a rather exacting, pedantic, form of empiricism, is what Goethe termed a delicate empiricism. "Delicate" because it doesn't impose a theory, but nor does it deny the human faculties their role in coming to know the world. But the faculties have to treat the world with delicacy in order to find the world rather than just find our specifically human faculties reflected in it.

STAGE THREE: SEEING-IN-BEHOLDING

Once we can shift our thinking into that fluid mode we can build up the phenomenon imaginatively through its changing forms, but this still feels somewhat attenuated. It provides the schooling of the imagination so that the phenomenon as it is, as a whole, rather than as parts we bring together imaginatively, can appear. For this we need to move even further back from our ordinary way of engaging with the world; we must even still our imaginative activity in order to make space for the phenomenon to present itself. It is the human faculty of inspiration that now offers itself to the phenomenon. Through

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, J. Bochemühl (1985), p. 21.

¹² *Op. cit.*, J.W. von Goethe (1988), p. 64.

our stillness the phenomenon can present its real self and this is often felt as a particular gesture, a gesture that somehow speaks or presents that phenomenon. The insights which come can seem counter to one's usual thoughts. It is also exhilarating, as what comes can seem so foreign that it feels absolutely given, received rather than made. These expressions can be made evident and explored in some form of artistic representation where gesture and meaning are brought out.

If exact sensorial imagination feels like being led into this seeing through to the gesture of the whole, the gesture of the whole can push us into the fourth stage of being one with the object.¹³

STAGE FOUR: BEING ONE WITH THE OBJECT

The first three stages of the Goethean method involve different activities and ways of thinking, and these could be characterized as first using *perception* to see the form, second, using *imagination* to perceive its mutability, and, third, inviting *inspiration* to reveal the gesture. The fourth stage uses *intuition* to both combine and go beyond the previous stages. Here we experience “the what it is” of the phenomenon in its full power and potentiality. It is here that the phenomenon can be understood and it presents itself to the human being as idea or theory. Thus in the Goethean process we don't start with theory, and thus overwrite the phenomenon with our own thinking; we place our human thinking and theorizing capacities at the service of the phenomenon. As Goethe says: “[T]here is a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory.” However, he then goes on to say: “[B]ut this enhancement of our mental powers belongs to a highly evolved age.”¹⁴ With Goethe there is always a mixture of positive claim about what is possible and then a pulling back from any hubristic over-extension. There are in his work always warnings about humanizing: of making all of nature like us, or understandable through human concerns about cause and function, or even more damningly understanding nature as shaped *for* us.¹⁵ Even though a great poet, Goethe carries through the warning about the necessity of holding our meanings back when we approach nature, language is a blunt tool when applied to nature because language has been shaped for human purposes.¹⁶

Thus we return to the question of dualism and materialist monism. If we reject the clunky version of matter that dualism has bequeathed to us, because on examination matter just doesn't seem like that, we shouldn't reanimate it by bringing back a dualistic conception of mind or spirit and inserting it into the clunky stuff, since to do so is still to play the dualists' game. We need an approach to nature that will refine our human faculties so that their personal idiosyncrasies and general ways of being are held back enough to see what, for example, this fish or river or ocean is with no more human

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁶ J.P. Eckermann (1935), *Conversations with Goethe*, J. Oxenford (trans.), Dent & Sons, London, p. 414.

coloration than is necessary to bring it to a shared human discourse. Goethean science aims to be one such approach. It allows us, potentially, to understand the world and move toward actions in the world which are respectful of what the world actually is rather than what we in our unschooled subjectivity or attempts at objectivity try to make it.

CONCLUSION

Goethe's thesis as I have set it out may appear to be a methodological one: that the facts our theorizing must account for need to be established following the precepts of his "delicate empiricism." But is that the correct inference to draw? There is an alternative, which I think does more justice to the subtlety and depth of Goethe's thought.

It is that the "materiality" which his methodology is intended to explore is revealed by that methodology to be quite other than the materiality of traditional dualism. It is materiality which is open to a relationship with us that we can best articulate in terms of identification. The subject and the material object for Goethe can become one. To thinkers belonging to the Cartesian tradition, such a degree of resonance between material object and a perceiving mind can only be understood if the material is thought to be already infused with (Cartesian) mentality. For example, a river thought of as a dwelling place of a god, or the universe conceived of as associated with a single (Cartesian) mind. Goethe's insight is that materiality properly understood is such as to be capable of intimate resonance with ourselves without any bolted-on mentality.

To what extent this approach makes sense to us or can be productive of harmonious human-nature relationships remains to be seen, but it sounds like a step in the right direction. At the very least it can be a means to begin the process of undoing our habitual dualistic patterns of thought. And potentially it could nourish new organs of perception that are receptive of and respectful to nature so that we might begin to glimpse what nature really is and what place we have within it.