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GOETHE

The polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is a seminal author and cultural figure of his era—so much so in Germany that the very era is at times referred to as *Goethezeit*. However, it is notoriously difficult to discern Goethe’s achievements as a scientist and philosopher: his approach seems to be a synthesis of specific forms of metaphysics and natural philosophy, which does not scorn mysticism. At any rate, he most definitely *was* influenced by Spinoza, the philosopher he esteemed above all others.

Goethe first read the *Ethics* in 1773, and most notably again in 1784–85, during the so-called Pantheism Controversy (that concerned Lessing’s alleged Spinozism). The controversy revealed that basically all the luminaries of the *Goethezeit* were, in one way or another, admirers of Spinoza. Goethe himself endorses a number of Spinozistic tenets. He identifies God and nature with each other; accordingly, finite things are parts of an infinite whole. Moreover, reminiscent of Spinoza’s parallelism, Goethe thinks that all things have a mental and a physical side. Finally, both Spinoza and Goethe are ethical perfectionists with Stoical aspirations.

All these affinities notwithstanding, Spinoza’s impact on Goethe is strongest in his studies of nature, especially of botany. There are two aspects to this, metaphysical and epistemological. To start with the former, Goethe thinks that due to a *Bildungstrieb* (formative drive) things strive toward greater perfection and complexity—an idea far more widely known in the form of Goethe’s *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonists develop toward their true being. *Bildungstrieb* resembles Spinoza’s *conatus* doctrine and its power-enhancement principles (3p12–p13), according to which the intrinsic striving to persevere in being results not only in resting content with the prevailing condition but in striving to increase one’s perfection.

As for the latter, the idea of *scientia intuitiva* directs Goethe’s natural philosophy: he wants to latch onto the inner nature or essence of things from which properties follow. For him, the essence is an intuitively grasped archetype or ideal. In his botanical studies, Goethe was looking for the *Urphänomen* (the originary phenomenon), a principle that fixes for instance the steps a plant strives to go through. This largely corresponds to Spinoza’s notion of *formal essence* that determines the internal setup—all the properties that necessary follow from the essence if unhindered—of finite individuals. Accordingly, Goethe endeavored to find the primal plant (*Urpflanze*), in which he never succeeded, and thus hypothesized that an

‘ideal leaf’ equals the organ or formal essence that arguably underlies the plant’s metamorphic steps of expansion and contraction.

Methodologically, Goethe stresses careful empirical observation; this might be seen to be at odds with Spinoza’s epistemology, but it seems that for Goethe imaginative intuition is to be transformed into intellectual intuition by tracking the transitions from one stage of the natural object to the next. In this, he stumbled on a similar if not the same problem Spinoza did in the *TIE*, namely how to attain knowledge of the essence from the thing’s properties.

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