

79. GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFGANG VON (1749–1832)

THE POLYMATH GOETHE WAS such an important literary and cultural figure in Germany that his era is sometimes referred to as *Goethezeit*. However, it is notoriously difficult to assess Goethe's achievements as a scientist and philosopher, given his syncretic, and sometimes mystical approach. Spinoza, the philosopher Goethe esteemed above all others, was among his key influences.

Goethe first read the *Ethics* in 1773, and most notably again in 1784–85, during the so-called **Pantheism Controversy** concerning Lessing's alleged Spinozism. The controversy revealed that practically 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 with nature; accordingly, he agrees with Spinoza that finite things are **parts** of an **infinite** whole. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of Spinoza's **parallelism**, Goethe thinks that all things have both a mental and a physical side. Finally, Spinoza and Goethe are both ethical perfectionists with **Stoic** tendencies.

But Spinoza's impact on Goethe is arguably greatest 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 familiar from Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonists develop toward their true being. This *Bildungstrieb* arguably resembles Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine and its **power-enhancement** principles (E3p12–13), according to which the intrinsic striving to persevere in being results not only in preserving the prevailing condition but in increasing one's power or **perfection**.

As for the epistemological aspect of Spinoza's influence, the idea of *scientia intuitiva* (**intuitive** knowledge, E2p40s2) arguably directs Goethe's natural philosophy: he wants to latch onto the inner nature or **essence** of things from which properties follow. For him, this 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 the stages a plant (for instance) strives to go through. This arguably corresponds to Spinoza's notion of "formal essence." Accordingly, Goethe endeavored to find the primal plant (*Urpflanze*), in which he never succeeded, and thus hypothesized that an 'ideal leaf' is the organ or formal essence that arguably underlies for instance the annual plant's metamorphic steps of expansion and contraction: this takes place from the seed, via the roots and leaves, to a full-blown organism, which then produces fruit – the source of new seeds – and finally decays (this process is depicted in detail in Förster 2012b, 271–74).

Methodologically, Goethe stresses careful empirical observation. This might be seen to be at odds with Spinoza's epistemology, but it seems that for Goethe observation is to be transformed into intellectual intuition by tracking the transitions from one stage of the

natural object to the next. In this, he encounters a similar problem Spinoza did in the **TIE**, namely how to attain knowledge of the essence from knowledge of the thing's properties.

Valtteri Viljanen

RECOMMENDED READING

- Beiser, F. C. (1987). *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Harvard University Press.
- Förster, E. (2012a). "Goethe's Spinozism." In E. Förster & Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism* (pp. 85–99). Cambridge University Press.
- (2012b). *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*. Trans. B. Bowman. Harvard University Press.
- Richards, R. J. (2002). *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the age of Goethe*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tantillo, A. O. (2002). *The Will to Create: Goethe's Philosophy of Nature*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Timm, H. (1974). *Gott und die Freiheit: Studien zur Religionsphilosophie der Goethezeit*, vol. I: *Die Spinozarennaissance*. Klostermann.

RELATED TERMS

Idealist Readings; Intuition; Kant; Nietzsche; Pantheism Controversy; Striving