

A Fresh Take on the Goethean Approach

SOME TIME AGO I was contacted by a colleague who had heard me speak at a conference and had read my monograph, *Do Frogs Come From Tadpoles?* In his email he offered a succinct formulation of the Goethean way of science that we here at the Institute found both original and illuminating. We'd like to share his thoughts — in my words (he wrote in German). I'll add a little commentary afterwards.

He wrote that in reading the monograph he discerned three capacities that are essential to the Goethean approach. In his view, research is inadequate if you only exercise one or two of them. He characterized the capacities this way:

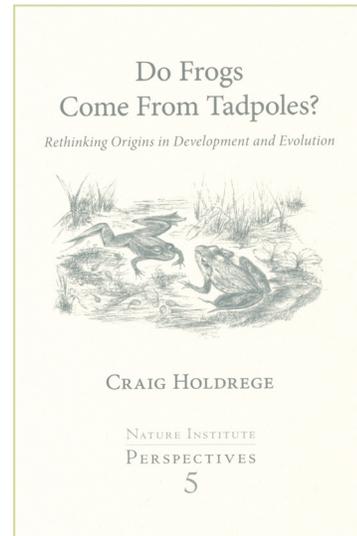
(1) You must be a good observer in order to take seriously the manifoldness of appearances in nature. You need to love the phenomena so much that you persist in attending to them and resist sacrificing them to “beautiful thoughts.”

(2) You need to be able to think clearly in a philosophical way. Such thinking is more than logical. It needs a feeling for where a thought carries you when you think it through to an end. That is, you need a compass within the world of ideas. This is the quintessence of philosophical thinking. And here as well, you must love the consequences of the orientation in the world of ideas enough so that you don't sacrifice them to something else.

(3) Finally, it is also necessary that you bring the two sides together. That is, you shouldn't observe something in a careful way and then philosophize about something else. Rather, you need to stay with precisely those ideas that come to you through the observation — ideas that were stimulated by the observation.

In the English-speaking world, people often use the term “Goethean observation.” I'm not always sure what they mean by this term, but in the best case it conforms to the first capacity —working to perceive and stay true to the phenomena in their manifoldness.

What people often do not see so readily is how essential the second and third capacities are for the process of inquiry. Just as we need to be keenly aware of what the encounter with the sense world brings us, so also do we need to be



aware of our thinking processes and where a given thought or train of thought leads. To take an example from the frog monograph: What do I mean and what do I *not* mean when, after carefully considering the rich phenomena of development, I say “a frog comes from a tadpole”? In that monograph I described how everything in a tadpole is broken down and transformed as the adult frog comes to appearance. Therefore, in a very real sense, a frog does *not* come from a tadpole. In considering such matters, I strive to express the fresh meaning that reveals itself in the particular phenomena I am focusing on. I make every effort to hold habits of thought at bay so that they do not occlude this encounter with the world.

When we can keep the intensity of sensory observation and clear, self-aware thinking together, then we are creating fertile soil for moments of insight — the third capacity. In moments of grace, a new insight may spring to us — out of the process itself. In the case of my frog studies, a moment came when my understanding was revolutionized by realizing that there is good reason to say: frogs do not come from tadpoles!

We cannot make such insights happen. They come to us. But we can prepare for such insight in the sense that we are patient, can wait, and remain open. We free ourselves from the compulsion to get hold of the truth once and for all. We are prepared to let knowledge grow.

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