

9. The World Inside the Human Being is the Inside of Nature.

Some paragraphs from “Goethe’s Worldview in his Verses in Prose,” chapter eighteen of Nature’s Open Secret (Steiner 2000). This text originated as Rudolf Steiner’s 1897 introduction to part 5 of Goethe’s Writings on Natural Science.

These paragraphs by Steiner illuminate the philosophical issues raised in the previous chapter. They may surprise a reader who has not consciously experienced the role of intentionality as illustrated in the examples given throughout this book. Comments upon Steiner’s text are in italics.

We are not satisfied with what nature freely offers to the observing mind. We feel that, to produce the vast variety of her creations, nature uses driving forces that she initially conceals from the observer. Nature herself does not speak her final word. Our experience reveals what nature can create but not how that creation takes place. The means for unveiling the driving forces of nature exist in the human mind itself. It is here that ideas arise that throw light on the way nature brings forth her creations. What the phenomena of the external world conceal manifests within the human being. What we think through as natural laws is not invented as an addition to nature; it is nature’s own inner constitution. The mind is simply the theater in which nature allows the secrets of her creativity to manifest. What we *observe* is only one aspect of things. The other is what then wells up within our minds. The same things speak to us from outside and from within us. We realize the complete reality only when we join the language of the outer world with that of our inner being. True philosophers throughout time have desired nothing but to proclaim the essential nature of things—what those new things themselves express when the mind is offered as their organ of communication.

When Steiner contrasts nature’s first appearance with the fuller appearance that arises through its union with our inner being, he is not suggesting that phenomena first arise altogether without intentionality, after which we think about these phenomena to gain a deeper understanding of them. Rather, he is simply taking for granted the (perhaps unconscious) intentionality, rooted in culture and history, through which nature already has come to appearance for us. Then he draws our attention to the philosopher’s (scientist’s) more conscious and disciplined intentions, where we can more easily recognize the role of our inner being in

bringing about the appearances. You can think of the matter this way: something meets us in the world, but this something does not become appearance until we have united ourselves intentionally with it, whether in the manner that is largely given to us through our culture, or in the more conscious and sophisticated manner of the scientist.

When we observe nature, the focus of our interest depends upon our particular situation and what we bring to the encounter. A great deal hinges on our ability to recognize and then to integrate the details of the context in which we find ourselves, and then to experience the nature of the resulting whole as it appears both to the bodily eye and the mind's eye. Take Goethe's example of the brook:

I find by a brook well formed stones, the parts of which exposed to the air are picturesquely covered with green moss. Now it is not alone moisture which has caused this formation; but perhaps also a northerly aspect, or the shade of trees and bushes, have cooperated. If I omit these influential causes in my picture, it will be without truth and without the proper convincing power.

First, perhaps, you are struck by something you were not expecting. So you may take notice and attend. Since the green surface contrasts to the surrounding dark areas, you may recognize the moss, especially as you regard the scene with moisture in mind and also note the elements guaranteeing shade for much of the day. As you continue with this inner activity, the scene in its wholeness may acquire the beauty and "magical" quality we earlier heard Goethe speak of. We are reminded of Karl Aschenbrenner's remark, "Yes, somehow the more beautiful object is always the more intelligible."

When we allow our inner being to speak about nature, we recognize that nature herself fails to fully achieve what her driving forces could accomplish. Inwardly, we see in more complete form what experience contains. We discover that nature has not attained her goals in her creations and we feel a need to express her intentions in more perfect form. Thus we create forms that express what nature willed, but could achieve only to a certain point. Such forms are works of art: human creations showing in more perfect form what nature manifests less perfectly.

Philosophers and artists have a common goal; they attempt to portray the perfection that their spirit sees when they allow nature to impress itself upon them. But they have different

means available for achieving this goal. When philosophers are confronted with a natural process, a *thought*, or *idea* lights up within them. And this is what they express. In artists, on the other hand, a picture of the process arises that reveals it more completely than it could be observed in the external world. Philosophers and artists develop their observations differently. Artists do not need to know the driving forces of nature as they reveal themselves to the philosopher. When they perceive a thing or event, an image immediately arises in their mind in which the laws of nature are more completely expressed than in the corresponding things or events of the outer world. Laws in the form of thoughts do not need to enter their mind. Nevertheless, knowledge and art are related inwardly. They show the *potentials* of nature that have not been fully realized in the external world.

Goethe, you will recall, was both artist and scientist (“philosopher”), and he clearly brought both sensitivities to the scene by the brook. In this case the brook seemed to yield up its secrets. But Steiner refers, perhaps puzzlingly, to cases where nature does not succeed in expressing herself—cases where her appearances do not fully embody or express the “driving forces” at work. We are given the task of articulating nature's working more purely.

We have seen, for example, how an artist may pare away everything superfluous in order to bring a characteristic gesture to fullest visibility. This is what Brancusi achieved again and again. No bird will stretch its body into the vertical the way his birds do. But these birds convey more perfectly than any actual bird (for those who can appreciate it) the gesture of this creature's utter devotion to its song. Likewise, The Newborn brings to appearance the pure expression of an infant's cry.

Technological civilization brings nature to a kind of perfection through mechanical means. We are impressed by this perfection when we look down the rows of seemingly endless fields of a single crop reaching to the horizon—a scene made possible by massive machinery, the creation of artificial environments, and, increasingly, genetic engineering. From a different point of view, however, we may say that the opposite of natural perfection is on display here. Nature is being muted; harnessed to the profit-making objective, she cannot express her full potentials. The endless fields manifest something of the barrenness we associate with Silent Spring. Nature's way, by contrast, is one of health in diversity.

When we approach such questions esthetically, we not only begin to recognize the steps required for remedy, but we also sense a moral urgency to act.

The thought-content that arises within us when we confront the external world is truth. We cannot seek any knowledge other than the insight that we ourselves produce. Those who look behind things for something else that is supposed to explain them have not realized that all questions about the essential nature of things can arise only from our human need to permeate our perceptions with thinking. Things speak to us, and our inner nature speaks as we observe them. Both sides of this dialog arise from the same primal being, and we are called on to bring about their mutual understanding. This is what knowledge is all about. Those who understand inherent human needs seek this and nothing else. For those who lack such understanding, the things of the outer world remain alien. Such people do not hear the essential nature of things speaking out of their own inner being. Consequently, they presume that it is concealed behind the things. They believe in another external world behind the perceptible one. But things remain external only as long as we merely observe them. When we reflect on them, they are no longer outside us; we merge with their inner aspect. The contrast between objective, external percept and subjective, inner world of thought exists for us only as long as we fail to recognize that these worlds belong together. Our inner world is nature's inner being.

Merely observing leaves us in a mode of consciousness in which we remain onlookers, just noting what we have recognized. We have not yet steeped ourselves in the appropriate integrating activity that makes details meaningful in the context of the whole situation. When we do that, the encounter begins to become important to us, leaving an imprint in our biography. Obviously, what remains external is something we have desisted from uniting with.

These thoughts are not refuted by the fact that different people view things differently. Nor are they refuted because people are organized differently so that we cannot know if a color is seen exactly the same way by different people. The question is not whether we form precisely the same judgment about something, but whether the language of our inner being is the language that expresses the essential nature of things. Individual judgments vary according to individual organization and the perspective of observation, but all judgments arise from the same element and lead to the essential nature of things. This may be expressed in various nuances of thinking, but it nevertheless remains the nature of things.

If two people experience a situation differently, so that they develop different thoughts about it, this need not result in discord. Through conversation each can live into the experience and thought of the other. In this way, each not only learns to appreciate the other as a person, but

also gains new perspectives upon the world. Just as two people looking at a tree from different vantage points gain different, but wholly compatible, views, so we find that different perspectives always enrich our understanding of the world.

As human beings, if we want to know the essential nature of things, we must allow them to speak through our own mind. All that we can say about their essential nature is taken from the spiritual experiences of our own inner being. Only out of ourselves can we form a conclusion about the world. We must think anthropomorphically. When we say something about the simplest phenomenon—when two bodies collide, for example—we anthropomorphize. Even to conclude that one body strikes another is anthropomorphic. If we want to go beyond mere observation of what happens, we must connect it to the experience of our own body when it sets another body in motion. All physical explanations are hidden anthropomorphisms. We humanize nature by explaining her; we project inner human experiences into her.

But these subjective experiences are the essential inner nature of things. Thus, one cannot argue that we do not recognize objective truth, or the “things in themselves,” because we can form only subjective representations of them. There can be no question of any truth other than subjective human truth. Truth is the projection of subjective experiences into the objective interrelationships of phenomena. These subjective experiences may even assume a completely individual character. Nevertheless, they express the inner nature of things. One can only put into things what one has experienced in oneself. Hence, in a certain sense, each person puts something different into things, depending on his or her individual experiences. My interpretation of certain events in nature is not quite comprehensible to someone who has not had the same inner experience. What is important is not that people all have the same thoughts about things, but that when we think about things, we all live in the element of truth. Therefore, we should not reflect on another’s thoughts as such and accept or reject them, but we should view them as proclamations of that person’s individuality. “Those who contradict and argue should occasionally reflect on the fact that not all languages can be understood by everyone” (*Verses in Prose*). A philosophy can never provide a universal truth, but it does describe the inner experiences through which the philosopher interpreted outer phenomena.

When something expresses its essential being through the agency of a human mind, complete reality manifests only through the confluence of outer objectivity and inner subjectivity. We come to cognize reality neither through one-sided observation nor through one-sided thinking. Reality does not exist as something ready-made in the objective world; it is brought about through the human spirit in its connection with things. Objective things are only an aspect of reality. Goethe answers those who extol only sensory experience: “Experience is

only half of experience. . . . Everything factual is already theory” (*Verses in Prose*). In other words, an ideal element manifests in the human mind when it observes something factual.

The preceding paragraphs will be baffling to those who still believe their knowledge is knowledge of a world remaining strictly outside them. To gain understanding in the sense meant in this text requires us to develop as individuals, which gives a profound meaning to “learning by doing.” Through active engagement with the world we develop the inner capacities necessary for understanding the world.

With the role of intentionality in mind, you will recognize the meaning of the claim that “experience is only half of experience.” Experience has two halves: what the outer world offers us pre-phenomenally, and the inner activity with which we meet this offering. The inner and the outer are in conversation. As we wake up to this conversation, we give up the habit of taking sides in it. That is, we give up identifying ourselves only with the inner half of experience and associate ourselves fully with the understanding that “reality does not exist as something ready-made in the objective world.” The chasm between subject and object then vanishes, as the two merge. Subject and object as such—as separate and opposed realities—cease to exist. And their merging results in our presence of mind—our presence on earth.

As human beings, we are limited to states attainable within the conditions of human nature. Aware of this limitation, Goethe was prepared to acknowledge that our experience is of human form—anthropocentric. Only through experience of our own bodies can we recognize other bodies, and we tend to test other bodies by touching them. Our eyes follow the ball in a tennis match as the appropriate muscles allow the eyes to turn in their sockets. Listening to music, we find our respiratory system, even our limbs, stimulated to join in the melody and rhythm. Our practice as gardeners gives us an appreciation for the functioning of climate, soil, and surrounding vegetation in the habitat and development of a particular crop. “Only out of ourselves can we form a conclusion about the world.” But in doing this we are not reaching an inferior understanding. Rather, we become the platform on which the world is communicating with itself.

It is admittedly hard to give up the metaphysical dogma of the lone self, the subject cut off from inaccessible objects. A humorous story illustrates the difficulty:

Once upon a time there was a mentally ill patient who was convinced that he was a mouse. He was hospitalized in fear of being eaten by a cat, while a psychiatrist worked hard to banish the illusion. Slowly but surely progress seemed to be made, until one day

the psychiatrist said to the patient, "We are both sure that you aren't a mouse, so now you can leave this place." The patient answered, "Yes, you are right. Of course I am not a mouse. What a silly idea! But still, I think I should better not leave." Surprised, the doctor asked him why. "Well," said the patient, "I know full well that I am not a mouse. But who can be sure whether the cat knows?"

We cannot banish old notions about ourselves without also banishing old notions about reality. We can transcend the lone self only by transcending the ready-made, objective world.