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DISCOVERING ARCHETYPES: GOETHE AND THE POETRY OF NATURAL HISTORY

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Abstract: This paper engages Goethe's studies in the natural sciences, especially his morphology, and the fundamental role that the concept of archetype (*Urphänomen*) plays therein. While recent scholarship focuses on the influence of Spinoza's or Kant's philosophy on Goethe, like Robert J. Richards (2002), and others, like Eckart Förster (2009/10; 2012) and De Laurentiis (2000; 2021), have underscored the mutual influence of Goethe and other key German contemporaries, like Hegel or Schelling, I contend alternatively, and on the model of Karl Löwith (1964), that it is important to acknowledge Goethe's fundamental philosophical problems on their own terms. I argue that the defining motivation for Goethe's natural scientific inquiry is the knowledge of human spirit but that the notion of an 'archetype' of the human fails in this crucial aspect, due to the inherent arbitrariness and undecidability of human history; and I read this as a productive contradiction.

Keywords: Goethe; archetypes; *Naturphilosophie*; aesthetics; German Post-Kantian philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Without my studies in the natural sciences," Goethe said, "I should never [...] have come to know men as they are." (*Gespräche*, VI, 69). In this paper I seek to clarify this claim by looking at Goethe's scientific corpus and his reflections on that portion of his intellectual activity. Keeping Goethe's perspective on natural sciences in mind, I assess the relevance of the concept of archetype within Goethe's broader poetic-artistic scope and try to interpret his understanding of the relationship between science and art. From the mid-1780s through for the rest of his life, in part out of his engagement with Spinoza's *Ethica* and with the *Pantheismusstreit*, Goethe pursued a form of natural inquiry, 'morphology.' On one hand, morphology was a 'comparative' method of carefully observing natural phenomena: the various conditions for the existence of certain organisms and the complex of life *in* actual organisms, and their processes of genesis and transformation. On the other hand, he conceives of morphology as a study leading to the 'superlative': that is, to the knowledge of the archetype (*Urphänomen*). In Goethe's eccentric appropriation of Kant, the *intellectus archetipus* and *archetypal intuition* is that level of cognition which allows access to the '*idea*' that governs the species of living beings studied and transcends the individual components of that class. In this latter sense, morphology enables a conceptual mediation that permits insights into Nature.

Recent Goethe scholarship focuses on the influence of Spinoza's or Kant's philosophy on Goethe, like Robert J. Richards, others, like Eckart Förster and Allegra De Laurentiis, have underscored the mutual influence of Goethe and other key German contemporaries, like Hegel or Schelling. I contend alternatively, and on the model of Karl Löwith, that it is important to acknowledge Goethe's fundamental philosophical problems on their own terms. I argue that the profound motivation for Goethe's natural scientific inquiry and his idea of archetype (*Urphänomen*) is the knowledge of human spirit; but that the notion of the 'archetype' in morphology fails in this crucial aspect, due to the inherent arbitrariness and undecidability of human history. And I do so by articulating the argument in three sections.

In the first section, I show Goethe's indebtedness to Spinoza and the contemporary debates on Spinozism for his own conception of science. Second, I expand of his account of morphology as a form of scientific inquiry but also one capable of leading to fundamental insights into Nature as a whole. Third, I develop the significance of Goethe's account of archetypal intuition and of what is characteristic of it vis a vis the German Idealist and especially Hegel's model of absolute knowledge. In conclusion, I show that it is on the basis of the tension between natural necessity and human arbitrariness that we can see Goethe's own work of creative fiction and poetry as pointing to the right kind of engagement with the 'archetype' of the human, offering real insight in the knowledge of "men as they are."

2. A SPINOZIST SCIENCE

Reading of Spinoza's *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata* proved to be of formative importance for Goethe, not only in his first reading, in his early twenties, but decisively over a decade later, in 1784, when his friend Friedrich H. Jacobi sent him an envelope containing the manuscript of the first edition of *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, a work that within a short period of time would trigger a philosophical debate on the real meaning and significance of Spinoza's philosophy, the *Pantheismusstreit*. This was a debate of so great a significance and far-reaching consequences that the subsequent attempts by the representatives of the German Romantic movement to conjugate Spinoza's pantheism with Kantian transcendental criticism can be seen as part of its effects.[1] My goal here is neither to present the content of Jacobi's text, nor unfurl of the dispute he stirred between himself and Moses Mendelssohn over the alleged Spinozism of the then defunct Lessing. It suffices for my purposes to restate that one of the outcomes of Jacobi's writing was

[1] See E. Förster, "The Significance of §§76 and 77 of the *Critique of Judgement* for the Development of Post-Kantian Philosophy (Part 1)," trans. M. Congdon and Karen Ng, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2009): 197–217, 201.

to prompt his friend Goethe to reengage Spinoza's text in the most heartfelt and long-lasting of ways.[2]

In the short writing "Studie nach Spinoza" ("A study based on Spinoza"), composed in 1784–1785, Goethe presents a summation of his engagement with Spinoza's text. Here one can already discern some of the lines of Goethe's thought that would become thematic and more concrete in his later scientific writings. Goethe writes:

> The concepts of being [Dasein] and totality [*Vollkommenheit*] are one and the same; when pursuing the concept as far as possible, we say that we are conceiving of the infinite. But we cannot think of the infinite, or of total existence. We can conceive only of things which are finite or made finite by our mind; i.e., the infinite is conceivable only insofar as we can imagine total existence—but this task lies beyond the power of the finite mind. (*Scientific Studies*, 8)[3]

A way to explain this tenet is to see how, for Spinoza, mind and body are the two defining modes of a single reality: the *mind* is a "finite mode," or the simple idea that we can form that corresponds to the other, material, finite mode. Through the knowledge of the effects that a thing, qua idea or bodily passion, has on me, I cannot come to the full understanding of another and of all things. In this respect, infinite totality is inaccessible to human finite cognitive powers. Instead, by means of following the conditions of existence and the immanent features of finite natures, the human mind is capable of finding gradual coherence, making connections, and progressing towards the acquisition of what Spinoza calls the adequate knowledge of the *laws of nature*: knowledge of the rules that regulate nature and its necessity.

It is nevertheless the peculiar capacity of the human mind that, once the knowledge of the finite modes of things and their causal relations are established, intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) becomes possible. This is the unification of the human intellect with the divine one, what Spinoza calls, "intellectual love of God." In Spinoza's words, "[t]he human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence" (*Ethics*, 2p47) because it "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things." (*Ethics*, 2p40s2)[4] Goethe quotes the latter proposition of Spinoza's *Ethics* in a letter to Jacobi, adding: "[W]hen Spinoza speaks of *scientia intuitiva* [...] these few words give me courage to devote all my life to the contemplation of things [...] and of whose essential forms I can hope to develop and adequate idea, without worrying in the least how far I will go" (*Briefe der Jahre 1764–1786*, 911). As I interpret Goethe's enthusiasm about Spinoza's

[2] See Goethe's correspondence in the 1784–1786, esp. letters *832* and *911* both addressed to Jacobi, in J. W. von Goethe, *Gedenkenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche,* vol. 18, *Briefe der Jahre 1764–1786* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949).

[3] J. W. von Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, ed. and trans. D. Miller (New York: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), hereafter referred to as SS followed by page number.

[4] B. Spinoza, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters,* ed. S. Feldman, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991).

scientia intuitiva, the "adequate knowledge of the essence of things" would be the knowledge bestowed on the human intellect by thinking of a part of the whole of nature *as part of the whole*.

Regardless of whether the above is an adequate interpretation of Spinoza or not—and there are good reasons to believe that it is not—, Goethe takes the Spinozist knowledge of the essence of things, or intellectual love of God, to be the model for thinking about the truth and beauty as exemplified first and foremost by the kind of natural entities of living organisms. He writes: "we call the individual or collective impressions" that living beings "make on us true—so long as it springs from the totality of their existence," and "we call the object beautiful when this existence is partially finite so that we grasp it easily, when it is related to our nature so that we grasp it with pleasure" (SS 9). In this sense, for Goethe, truth and beauty cannot be grounded by conditions like familiarity, usefulness, or mere pleasure, if not by means of an *ad hoc* hypothesis, which in turn can only be justified on the basis of a materialistic foundation, and that cannot explain natural science as a human pursuit that begins in wonder, or in the distinction between the natural and the artificial.[5] Truth and beauty, instead, are at once subjective and objective. As phenomenal, they spring forth from the relation between natural beings and subjectivity: truth is the finite subjective experience of the infinity of the existence of a natural object, or totality; while beauty is the pleasant experience of the finitude of that existence in relation to the infinity of our nature. Insight into the beauty and truth a being, as a part of the Nature, bestows upon human comprehension the experience of the infinite in which finite things partake.

3. THE COMPARATIVE AND THE SUPERLATIVE OF MORPHOLOGY

While in the previous section I showed how a certain reading of Spinoza informs Goethe's understanding of the relevance of natural inquiry for thinking about nature understood as a whole, in the next two sections I will expand, respectively, on Goethe's account of morphology and on his conception of the archetype (*Urphänomen*) and the *intellectus archetypus*. In order to better illustrate

[5] I suggest that this is also the fundamental reason for Goethe's long polemics against British natural philosophy and empiricism, as in fact finding in the mathematical sciences and not in biology their basic template. Hobbes, one of the key founders of British sensualism, had to see the mathematical, as the exception among the human cognitive capacities, as the fundamental grounding of his system of scientific materialism, and as the template for the political science. Goethe seemed to consider his science compatible yet not simply alternative, rather hierarchically higher than the natural sciences of his time, stemming from materialistic assumption. On this issue see H. Hegge, "Theory of Science in the Light of Goethe's Science of Nature," in *Goethe and the Sciences: A Reappraisal*, edited by F. Amrine, F. J. Zucker, and H. Wheeler (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987), 195–218. See also note 20 below. Goethe, in a way that is reminiscent of Fichte, suggests that to different kinds of cognitions, or methods, there seem to correspond different human types and characters; see BW 22, 92, 216. He moreover suggested that on a psychological level these differences might have been generated by an *anxiety* difficult to endure when customarily entertaining the idea of intellectual intuition or archetype; see SS 303 §§4–5.

Goethe's approach to nature and the archetype, I will first give a brief account of the kind of experiential account of life that Goethe claimed to have founded with his *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären* (*Morphology of Plants*), a text which he never grew tired of expanding and revising throughout his life, and alongside which he elaborated his philosophic insights and the concepts resultant from an ongoing confrontation with some of his most significant philosophical contemporaries.

Morphology is the study of *morphē,* the Greek for *form*, or, in German, *Gerstalt*. But form in this sense is far from being a simple thing, it is in fact "the complex of life in an actual organism," (*Botanical Writings,* 23). The concept of metamorphosis (*Metamorphose*) includes an account of the various processes of organic development, formation, transformation, and activity of the natural being. Most commentators moreover look at the three levels of cognition that Goethe briefly outlines in "Erfahrung und Wissenschaft" ("Experience and Science"), of 1798, where Goethe distinguishes between (1) the empirical phenomenon, (2) the scientific phenomenon, and (3) the pure phenomenon.[6] Firstly, then, the ordinary experience of Nature is expanded upon and elevated in the scientific treatment. This is the properly scientific stage of engagement with natural phenomena, and, at this level, morphology is an experimental and comparative discipline.[7] Goethe writes:

> [W]e now ask and explore the question: What effect does a general element in its various modification have upon one and the same form? What counter-effect does the determined and determining form has upon those elements? What is the effect on the shape of the firm, the softer, the innermost, and the outermost parts? And as mentioned before, what results do the elements in all their modifications bring about through height and depth, geographical zones and regions? (BW 84)

The issue is, in the first place, one of the *methodology* most suited to the inquiry in natural objects.[8] There are different, non-exclusive, and somewhat hierarchical levels of cognition of natural phenomena: Goethe both acknowledges *and* criticizes the viewpoints of atomism and of Newton, and he makes conditional, regulative, and provisional employment of mechanisms, chemistry, and of dynamism.[9] In this respect, moreover, morphology has the potential for dispelling teleological accounts; accounts that Goethe finds ultimately inspired by human pride or drive for comfort and utility, or as driven by a religious "attempt to trace all things back to one." (BW 79).

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[6] See for instance A. De Laurentiis, *Hegel's Anthropology: Life, Psyche, and Second Nature* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 38; J. Ziguras, "Archē as Urphänomen: A Goethean Interpretation of Aristotle's Theory of Scientific Knowledge," *Epoché*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2013): 79–105, 89; and J. Kerkman, "Divine Ground and Vertical Level Order: On the Metaphysical Foundation of Goethe's Conception of Nature," *Epoché*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2024): 273–287, 281.

[7] See BW 44, 71, 81, 245.

[8] See esp. BW 81–84; see also 78 §§3–4, 79 §5, 80 §§7–9, 93, 234; this critique of "teleology" includes also the scientific theory of "preformation/evolution" very influential at the end of the nineteenth century.

[9] See BW 238–9, 59 §70, 80, 87, 89, 94.

Yet, what is constitutive of morphology, as Goethe conceives of it, is the assumption of natural organisms being complex and self-contained wholes, existing for their own sake: "we conceive of the individual animal as a small world, existing for its own sake, by its own means." (SS 123) Building upon the various levels of natural knowledge (i.e. physics as knowledge of forces, chemistry, anatomy, and physiology), morphology proceeds to the study of an individual organism, qua organism, through "the consideration of form both in its parts and as a whole, the conformities and deviations, *apart from all other considerations*." (BW 88; italics added) Living organisms are methodologically taken to be independent from one another, and display a somewhat independent and organic capacity of transformation.[10] To the careful, patient and experimental observer, the natural organism shows itself for what it is, with its internal structural composition of parts and their respective internal constitution, external conditioning (elements, environment, etc.), and necessary and organizing principles.[11]

Beyond its comparative methodology, though, Goethe finds morphology to be also important for making advances into the understanding of Nature as a whole. Morphology enables a mediation on the fundamental insights into Nature understood as a whole: 'pure' or archetypal phenomena. It is through the conception of the natural wholes as temporal entities that we come, in the Goethean account, to the Spinozist adequate knowledge of the whole of Nature. Differently from the way in which the intellect comes to understand mathematics, with its homogeneous and discrete relations, natural inquiry leads to the knowledge of Nature in the way in which it is composed through its heterogeneous parts, its temporal heterogeneity. The temporal constitution of natural phenomena is both the condition of the possibility for their 'objective' manifestation, and the condition for their study in a way that is non-arbitrary.[12]

The notion of archetypal understanding, as many scholarly contributions on the matter have remarked, is something that Goethe, Schelling and Hegel all drew in one form or another from Kant's third Critique.[13] In Goethe's own eccentric rendition of Kant, *archetypal intuition* would be that level of knowledge that

[10] See BW 24, 94–95, 129. This is akin to Aristotle approach to simple organisms like plants and worms in Aristotle, *De Anima*, bk. I.5, bk. II.2, and 418a27–64. On the comparison between Aristotle and Goethe on the study of nature, see A. De Laurentiis, "Aristotle in the Nineteenth Century," *Idealistic Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2000): 107–119; and Ziguras "Archē as Urphänomen", esp. 86–89.

[11] For the organism and its internal variations, divisibility, and identity see BW 23, 31, 42, 48, 55, 67, 77 §§115–120, 80 §8, 85, 94.

[12] See J. L. Larson, "Goethe and Linnaeus," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 28, no. 24 (October–December 1967): 590–596, 596; and Förster, "The Significance (Part 1)," 208–209.

[13] Förster makes a particularly good job at pointing out the indebtedness and dissimilarities between Kant's and Goethe's and the two idealists' notions of the *intellectus archetipus*. Goethe's assiduous relationship with these two younger friends benefited him as well as them, contributing not little to the enlarging of his philosophic horizon and to the depth of his vision. Although eventually each of them would part ways in their lives and projects, the philosophic views of his two former companions remained for Goethe an ongoing object of scrutiny. See Förster, "The Significance (Part 1);" see also K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, trans. D. E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), esp. Part I, chap. 2.

allows us not to go in an endless and disruptive regressive search for, say, the first plant.[14] And, conversely, it is also not a genetic account of organic nature.[15] The archetypal intuition (*Urphänomen*) is instead Goethe's way of designating the *intelligible character* of a natural being.[16]

For instance, in the cases of the less complexly organized forms of life as plants or even the internal parts of a plant (like when Goethe writes about as the plant's "spiral vessels"), in a prior study Goethe discovers that two tendencies reign in the plant kingdom, a vertical force and a spiral one: on the one hand the germination and manifestation of the plant "that enables the plant to take root" and to lift itself upward; on the other, the spiral tendency which stands for the reproductive principle of life.[17] Although "Nature is molded from all direction and towards all directions" (BW 84), here, an immanent end of the plant's cyclical process is met.[18] In this respect, this morphological insight is a qualified claim about the tendencies of specific kinds of natural phenomena, and one that does not allow to draw hasty conclusions about the total reality and purpose of Nature.[19]

Here the comparative aspect of morphology leads into the superlative one. In the plant realm Goethe designates as "organic duality," the highest morphological stance that gives access to the intelligible form of the plant, or archetypal plant, as his treatment of the plant's root and leaf exemplifies.[20] In Goethe's own words, morphology and the theory of metamorphosis, when pursued and perfected, are "the key to the whole alphabet of nature" (BW 13). Through the fundamental insights "all natural phenomena have gradually been linked together for the human intellect" which connects "the comparative […] with the superlative." (BW 245)

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[14] On this point see G. Hindrichs, "Goethe's Notion of an Intuitive Power of Judgment," *Goethe Yearbook*, vol. 18 (2011): 51–65, 58–59, 62.

[15] This is perhaps the most perspicuous difference between Goethe and Schelling, with his theory of the dynamic evolution. See R. J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 289–306.

[16] See Kant *Critique of Judgement*, §77, quoted and briefly commented on by Goethe in "Intuitive Judgment," BW 232–33. An important rereading of Goethe and Kant on the possibility of the intelligibility of natural essences seems to me that of Edmund Husserl in *Ideas I*, and, even more explicitly, in *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936), e.g., §§3, 8, 9, 12. See also Husserl's concept of *Urleben*, developed since *Internal Time Consciousness* (1928).

[17] See BW 129.

[18] See BW 24, 74 §106, 85.

[19] See BW 90, 97, and esp. 116.

[20] See *Preliminary Notes for a Physiology of Plants*, at BW 85–96, especially chap. IV, "Organic Duality," which I suggest reading together with the passage in "Commentary on *Nature*," (1828) on the polarity of matter and progression (*Steigerung*), BW 244–5; see also "Formation and Transformation", BW 21, for 'twofold infinitude,' and 76 §113. That of *Steigerung* is a concept developed by Goethe at least since the *Theory of Colors* (1810), but that he finds to be incompatible with the materialistic conception underlying Newtonian mechanics and the scientific notions of light and wavelength already formulated at the time. See also BW 80 §8. When, in the Introduction to the *Theory of Colors*, Goethe writes about the physiological process of the eye's sight of colors he indicates that the simplicity of the physiological always offers a pattern and passage to the understanding the natural phenomena of light and colors; and, conversely, it is as if nature, in bringing about the eye-organ, were to reproduce is inner processes through it.

Yet, knowledge or insight about the intelligibility of natural beings is not knowledge of the transcendent whole, or "absolute knowledge." The next section will deepen this difference.

4. THE ARCHETYPAL IDEA

Goethe's approach to archetypes as irreducible insight into the living, although indebted to Kant's philosophy, cannot be altogether accounted for from within Kant's transcendental framework. However, it becomes somewhat more conceivable within Hegel's. Here I follow Eckart Förster's illuminating intellectual-biographical reconstruction, where he shows how in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel takes his steps from Goethe's morphology to show that the determinate phenomenal classes of the whole are truthful representations, that indeed turn up being erroneous or limited when taken as absolutes. Moreover, Hegel draws on Goethe's morphology the insight of making conceptual accounts of reality changeable together with the development of its object: "it is shown that instead of an external generation of identities, the categories of reflection move of themselves towards a totality." (The Significance, Part 2, 335)[21] Unlike Goethe, however, Hegel endorsed the possibility and necessity for absolute conceptual knowledge. Following Schelling on this, Hegel adopts Nicholas of Cusa's concept of "Absolute."

Indeed, within Hegel's philosophy of absolute knowledge, the philosophy of nature has an important role to play: Nature is structured to proceed through a wholly immanent (teleological) self-development towards the higher human historical process; hence—at least on his account—the knowledge of the fundamental ontological structures of nature is necessary to advance to spiritual knowledge.[22] Nature is the domain of the external appearance (or negative determination) of the Idea, its becoming other from itself "as the otherness of the idea, while spirit as *second nature*," as the place where Reality can reflect upon itself qua Spirit by looking at the history of its own self-dissatisfaction and strive for self-actualization.[23] Hegel, then, wants to say that the spiritual reality is that by which the negative manifestation of the Idea in nature returns to itself positively if in a mediated rational way. Against the radical skeptic, Hegel advances the possible and necessary knowledge of the truth by means of moving away from nature and land on the apparently safe ground of an absolute science: the progressive conceptual advancement of absolute reason in History is the only significant sign of the independent truth of the whole.

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[21] See E. Förster, "The Significance of §§76 and 77 of the *Critique of Judgement* for the Development of Post-Kantian Philosophy (Part 2)," trans. M. Congdon and Karen Ng, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2010): 323–347; see also De Laurentiis, *Hegel's Anthropology*, chap. 2.

[22] The entire second part of the three volumes composing the 1830 edition of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* is dedicated to the systematic unfolding of the philosophy of nature grounding its place in the overall Hegelian system of science.

[23] See Löwith, *From Hegel*, 9.

Here I find Förster's account of the biographical and conceptual indebtedness of Hegel to Goethe problematic. If in fact Förster shows the similarities between the basic concepts of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and the genesis of his mature system of philosophy, and how it was important for his breaking away from and critique of Schelling's system of nature,—he stops short of expanding on the dissimilarities between Hegel and Goethe. This leaves the reader with the impression that Hegel provides for a better and more philosophically articulated version of Goethe's views,[24] where it is of capital importance to acknowledge, along the lines of Karl Löwith, that the differences between the two are also at the level of the fundamental problems.

Goethe's appropriation of Spinoza, unlike the German Idealist one, does not culminate in the conceptual appropriation of the whole. For Hegel conceptual immanence and determinate negation (and thus sublation, *Aufhebung*) become the cement for the construct of the full deduction of the whole, or the Idea: the contradictions immanent to the different classes of appearances and the judgment of them changes the very content of the insight into phenomena, ultimately leading all the way to the content of absolute knowledge. It is not only that, according to his Spinozist stance, Goethe does not resort to an absolute science because something like the idea of the absolute is only conceivable in parts and hence in the insight guiding the scientific study of natural phenomena. More fundamentally, for Goethe the change in the content of the *judgment* necessary for the scientific experimentation and knowledge does not fundamentally change the original experiential insight in the thing, but only helps to inform, articulate, and illuminate it. As Karl Löwith has it: "For Hegel, then, Goethe's primary phenomena do not assume a status of idea but rather an entity intermediate between the intellectual and the sensual mediating between pure essential concepts and the accidental appearances or the sensual world." (*From Hegel*, 13)

Morphology is a knowledge or science (*Wissenschaft*) both originated and renewed by the human capacity of *intuitive insight* into the living—or what Goethe at times calls the *idea*.[25] Because this idea essentially cannot be conceptually deduced, the epistemological status of the underlying intellectual intuition is not

[24] Similarly, the analogous account given by De Laurentiis; in De Laurentis, *Hegel's Anthropology*, chap. 2. A more nuanced version of this argument is contained in E. Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. B. Bowman (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), esp. chap. 14.

[25] See SS 118: "The idea must govern the whole, must abstract the general image in a genetic way." Gunnar Hindrichs has interestingly suggested to think of the articulation of the archetypal intuition as being mimetic; in G. Hindrichs, "Goethe's Notion", 61–62. As I understand it, the mimetic idea is an artistically organized image guided by the intellection of a naturally organized whole. However, as Walter Benjamin specifies, the archetypes or "*ur*-phenomena do not exist before art; they subsist within it"; in W. Benjamin "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in W. Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 297–360, 315. Besides the interpretive rout that I explore here, and the 'Hegelian' one represented by De Laurentiis and Förster, there is also the significant 'Neo-Platonist' one developed by Jan Kerkman.

one of apodictic certainty but retains a primarily problematic character. Even if not a strictly defined concept of nature, it can still artistically symbolize it.[26]

Through the above I have wanted to indicate how for Goethe morphology is neither a science of causal explanation, nor a conclusive theoretical knowledge. Indeed, natural knowledge leads to knowledge of a certain kind: it aims at studying the forms of the living in order to open up the space for thinking about the knowledge of the human. And while Goethe sees in nature the real of the unchanging archetypes, he sees in history the realm of human arbitrariness and opposes to it the natural *Urphänomen*.[27] Knowledge of nature, including of human nature, and the study of history are two poles of the same fundamental inquiry.

> My purpose [...] was to discover through the clash of inevitability and accident, compulsion and desire, impetus and inertia, the manner in which a third thing emerges that is neither art nor nature, but both at the same time– inevitable and accidental, premeditated and fortuitous. Human society is something I understand well. (BW 168)

There is almost a mutual constraint in place here: by looking at human nature, Goethe was able to acquire an insight into the biological features of human throughout history; while, by looking at history he was able to de-essentialize many biological and psychological conceptions about human life. Nonetheless, what is of greatest interest to Goethe is—as he has it here—the human society (the in-between) over and above, or perhaps precisely in virtue of, his grasp of natural necessities and historical arbitrariness.

> [L]et the reader think of me as a born poet who, in order to do justice to his subjects, always seeks to derive his expressions immediately from the objects themselves, each time anew.[28]

My claim is that the core, or the origin, of Goethe's morphological science and his concept of the archetypal, eventually rests upon an always-to-be-renewed insight into the human spirit as ultimately responsible for the character of phenomenal

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[26] Moreover, if poetry is that at which Goethe excelled most, his scientific treatises cannot be read if not as retaining a dialogical voice, a trait that the aphoristic literary character assists. It is perhaps not a negligible detail that Goethe's most dedicated and articulated studies in the natural sciences, while having contributed not little to specific scientific fields and their development, do not bear an analytical and disputative character. They present an intuitive and synthetic account accompanied, for the most part, by a narrative and meditative exposition.

[27] "Without my studies in the natural sciences, I should never […] have come to know men as they are. In no other realm can one so easily observe pure intuition and strength in character. Elsewhere, everything is more or less flexible and insecure, and can be more or less controlled; but nature has no sense of humor, it is always true, always serious, always rigorous, always right, and mistakes and errors are always on the part of man. It scorns the inadequate surrendering itself and revealing its secrets only to the man who is prepared, honest and pure." (*Gespräche*, VI, 69).

[28] J. W. von Goethe, Weimar Ausgabe, Abteilung II, vol. 6, 116, quoted in Larsen, "Goethe and Linnaeus," 592.

appearances. In this respect, the problem becomes how in Goethe's work the study of the natural archetypes, on the one hand, and the study of human life or human history, on the other, converge towards what he calls the poetic ideas or intuitions, and how in turn those poetic intuitions guide Goethe to the insight into the archetype of the human, or the ideal.

5. CONCLUSION

Whereas history known critically, according to Hegel, reveals the absolute truth, Goethe refutes the thesis of the deeper rationality of the historical process. History for Goethe is not an independent phenomenon, it does not constitute a whole, an independent truth. The Hegelian doctrine of Absolute Spirit, as Löwith remarks, is predicated still on the Christian separation of world and ideal. The belief in the intrinsic rationality of the otherworldly is now translated into the idealization of historical experience, *second nature* or the second world. Similarly, in his doctrine of the Beautiful, Hegel is oblivious to the beautiful in nature. He in fact defines the work of art as the sensible manifestation of the Idea, i.e., what he calls the ideal, a manifestation with a primarily historical character.[29] Goethe, on the contrary, always downplays the historical dimension of beauty. While the intellectual progression of the human mind is conditioned by "historical or common sense," knowledge of the condition is not the knowledge of the constitutive principles. Spiritual insight transcends the historical conditioning of human knowledge.

Even though it does sometimes read like Goethe claims possession of an archetypal knowledge of the human, for example, when he writes:

> The circle of man's course is definite enough; notwithstanding the standstill brought about by barbarism, it has gone through its cycle more than once. Even if a spiral movement is ascribed to it, it still returns again and again to the region through which it has already passed. In this way, all true views and all errors are repeated.[30]

I suggest that this conflict between natural and historical knowledge be read not as an obstacle but as a productive tension, within the work of Goethe, and as retrieving what for him was the "deepest theme of world and human history, the one to which all others are subordinated […] the conflict between skepticism

[29] It seems to me that Goethe returns to the ancient conception of art as imitative of nature; instead of sudden emergence of the idea or as sensible speculative articulation of the absolute, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1, 111. In a quite opposite way, it is possible for a late exponent of the British sensualist tradition, Edmund Burke, to deny in his *Philosophical Enquiry* the connection between beauty and intellectual ideas like perfection, proportion, worth or virtue, order, fitness; yet, for Burke, for all its irregularity and imperfection, the marker of beauty lays in its historical genesis.

[30] J. W. Goethe, *Geschichte der Farbenlehre*, from Goethe, Cotta Edition, 40 vols., 1840, vol. 39, 1, quoted in Löwith, *From Hegel*, 226–227.

and faith."[31] This is a conflict neither in need to be decided on one way or the other, as if Goethe sided with either skepticism or faith, nor in need of an higher synthesis. The tension between faith and skepticism is a polarity internal to the human condition. As Goethe's Mephistopheles, the superhuman originator of all forms of negativity, pronounces in a way that is still haunting: "Just despise reason and science, the very highest power of […] man and I have got you completely" (*Faust I*, 1851–1855). Goethe's position is strange enough not to be relegated to the synthesis or to the favoring of science or of faith. And it is only by unearthing the distance between these two poles that human beings can make themselves alive to the "idea" of humanity which is, in principle, identical with the idea of poetry.

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[31] See J. W. von Goethe, *West-East Divan: Poems, with "Notes and Essays": Goethe's Intercultural Dialogues*, trans. M. Bidney and P. A. von Arnim (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), chap. "Israel in the Desert," 244 (translation modified by the author).

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