

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter X

When I look back upon my life, the first three decades appeal to me as a chapter complete in itself. At the close of this period I removed to Weimar, to work for almost seven years at the Goethe and Schiller Institute. The time that I spent in Vienna between the first journey to Germany, which I have described, and my later settling down in the city of Goethe I look upon as the period which brought to a certain conclusion within me that toward which the mind had been striving. This conclusion found expression in the preparation for my book *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. An essential part of the general ideas in which I then expressed my views consisted in the fact that the sense-world did not pass with me as true reality. In my writings and lectures at that time I always expressed myself in such a way as to make the human mind appear as a true reality in the creation of a thought, which it does not form out of the sense world but unfolds in an activity above the region of sense perception. This sense-free thinking I conceived as that which places the soul within the spiritual being of the world. But I also emphasized strongly the fact that, while man lives within this sense-free thinking, he really finds himself consciously in the spiritual foundations of existence. All talk about limits of knowledge had for me no meaning. Knowing meant to me the rediscovery within the perceptual world of the spiritual content experienced in the soul. When anyone spoke of limits of knowledge, I saw therein the admission that he did not experience spiritually within himself the true reality, and for this reason could not rediscover this in the perceptual world.

The first consideration with me in advancing my own insight was the problem of refuting the conception of the limitation of knowledge. I wished to turn away from that road to knowledge which looked toward the sense-world, and which would then break through from the sense-world into true reality. I desired to make clear that true reality is to be sought, not by such a breaking through *from without*, but by sinking down into the inner life of man. Whoever seeks to break through from without and then discovers that this is impossible – such a person speaks of the limitation of knowledge. But this impossibility does not consist in a limitation of man's capacity for knowledge, but in the fact that one is seeking for something of which one cannot speak in true self-comprehension. While pressing on farther into the sense-world, one

is there seeking in a certain sense a continuation of the sensible behind the perceptual. It is as if one living in illusions should seek in further illusions the causes of his illusions.

The sense of my conception at that time was as follows: While man is evolving from birth onward he stands consciously facing the world. He attains first to physical perception.

But this is at first an outpost of knowledge. In this perception there is not at once revealed all that is in the world. The world is real, but man does not at first attain to this reality. It remains at first closed to him. While he has not yet set his own being over against the world, he fashions for himself a world-conception which is void of being. This conception of the world is really an illusion. In sense-perception man faces a world of illusion. But when from within man sense-free thought comes forth to meet the sense-perception, then illusion is permeated with reality and ceases to be illusion.

Then the human spirit, living its own life within, meets the spirit of the world which is now no longer concealed from man behind the sense-world, but weaves and breathes within the sense-world.

I now saw that the finding of the spirit within the sense-world is not a question of logical inferences or of projection of sense perception, but something which comes to pass when man continues his evolution from perception to the experience of sense-free thinking.

What I wrote in 1888 in the second volume of my edition of Goethe's scientific writings is permeated with such views: "Whoever attributes to thinking his capacity for an awareness which goes beyond sense-perception must also attribute to thought objects which lie beyond mere sense reality. But these objects of thought are ideas. When this thinking of the idea grows strong enough, then it merges with the fundamental existence of the world; what is at work without enters into the spirit of man: he becomes one with objective reality at its highest potency. Becoming aware of the idea within reality is the true communion of man. Thinking has the same significance in relation to the idea as the eye has for light, the ear for sound. *It is the organ of perception.*¹

I was then less concerned to represent the world as it is when sense-free thought advances beyond the experience of oneself to a spiritual perception, than I was to show that the being of nature as revealed to sense-perception is spiritual. I wished to express the truth that nature is in reality spiritual. It was inevitable from this that my fate should bring me into conflict with the contemporary formulators of theories of cognition. These conceived, to begin with, a nature

void of spirit, and therefore their task was to show how far man is justified in conceiving in his own spirit a spiritual conception of nature. I wished to oppose to this an entirely different theory of cognition. I wished to show that man in thinking does not form conceptions in regard to nature while standing outside of her, but that knowing means *experiencing*, so that man while knowing is actually inside the being of things.

Moreover, it was my fate to knit my own views to those of Goethe. In this union there were many opportunities to show how nature is spiritual, because Goethe had striven toward a spiritual nature; but one does not in the same way have the opportunity to speak of the world of pure spirit as such since Goethe did not carry his spiritual view of nature all the way to direct perception of spirit.

In a secondary degree I was then concerned to find expression for the idea of freedom. When man acts upon his instincts, impulses, passions, etc., he is not free. Then impulses of which he becomes conscious as he does of the impressions from the sense-world determine his action. But his true being is then not acting. He is then acting on a plane where his true being has not yet manifested itself. He then discloses himself as man just as little as the sense-world discloses its being to mere sense-observation. Now, the sense-world is not really an illusion, but is only made such by man. But man in his action can permit the sense-like impulses, desires, etc., really to become illusions; then he permits illusions to act upon him; it is not he himself that acts. He permits the unspiritual to act. His spiritual being acts only when he finds the impulses for action in the moral intuitions of his sense-free thought. Then he alone acts, nothing else. Then he is a free being acting from within. I desired to show that whoever rejects sense-free thought as something purely spiritual in man can never grasp the conception of freedom; but that such a conception comes about the moment one understands the reality of sense-free thinking.

In this field I was at that time less intent upon representing the world of pure spirit, in which man experiences his moral intuitions, than to emphasize the spiritual character of these moral intuitions. Had I been concerned with the former should have been obliged to begin the chapter in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* on "Moral Imagination" in the following way: "The free spirit acts upon his impulses; these are intuitions which are experienced by him apart from the existence of nature in the world of pure spirit without his being aware of this spiritual world in the ordinary state of consciousness." But it was my concern then only to describe the purely spiritual character of moral intuitions. Therefore I referred to the existence of these intuitions within the totality of the world of human ideas, and said in regard to them: "The free spirit acts upon his impulses, which are intuitions that by means of thought are selected from the totality of his world of ideas." – One who does not direct his gaze toward a world of pure

spirit, and who could not, therefore, write the first statement, could also not entirely admit the second. But allusions to the first statement are to be found in plenty in my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*; for example: “The highest stage of the individual life is thinking in concepts without reference to a specific content of perception. We determine the content of a concept by means of pure intuition out of the sphere of ideas. Such a concept then shows no relation to definite perceptions.” Here sense-perceptions are intended. Had I then desired to write about the spiritual world, and not merely about the spiritual character of moral intuitions, I should have been forced to refer to the contrast between sense-perceptions and spiritual perceptions. But I was concerned only to emphasize the non-sensible character of moral intuitions.

My world of ideas was moving in this direction when the first chapter of my life ended with my thirtieth year, and my entrance upon the Weimar period.

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