

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XXII

At the end of the Weimar period of my life I had passed my thirty-sixth year. One year previously a profound revolution had already begun in my mind. With my departure from Weimar this became a decisive experience. It was quite independent of the change in the external relationships of my life, even though this also was very great. The realization of that which can be experienced in the spiritual world had always been to me something self-evident; to grasp the sense world in full awareness had always caused me the greatest difficulty. It was as if I had not been able to pour the soul's experience deeply enough into the sense-organs to bring the soul into union with the full content of what was experienced by the senses.

This changed entirely from the beginning of my thirty sixth year. My capacities for observing things and events in the physical world took form both in the direction of adequacy and of depth of penetration. This was true both in the matter of science and also of the external life. Whereas before this time the conditions had been such that large scientific combinations which must be grasped in a spiritual fashion were appropriated by me without mental effort, and that sense-perceptions, and especially the holding of such facts in memory, required the greatest effort on my part, everything now became quite different. An attentiveness not previously present to that which appeals to sense-perception now awakened in me. Details became important; I had the feeling that the sense-world had something to reveal which it alone could reveal. I came to think one's ideal should be to learn to know this world solely through that which it has to say, without man's interjecting himself into this by means of his thought, or by some other soul-content arising within him.

I became aware that I was experiencing a human revolution at a far later period of life than other persons. But I saw also that this fact carried very special consequences for the soul's life. I learned that, because men pass early out of the soul's weaving in the spiritual world to an experience of the physical, they attain to no pure conception of either the spiritual or the physical world. They mingle permanently in a wholly instinctive way that which things say to their senses with that which the mind experiences through the spirit and which it then uses in combination in order to "conceive" things. For me the enhancement and deepening of the powers of sense-observation meant that I was given an entirely new world. The placing of oneself ob-

jectively, quite free from everything subjective in the mind, over against the sense-world revealed something concerning which a spiritual perception had nothing to say.

But this also cast its light back upon the world of spirit. For, while the sense-world revealed its being through the very act of sense-perception, there was thus present to knowledge the opposite pole also, to enable one to appreciate the spiritual in the fulness of its own character unmingled with the physical.

Especially was this decisive in its vital effect upon the soul in that it bore also upon the sphere of human life. The task for my observation took this form: to take in quite objectively and purely by way of perception that which lives in a human being. I took pains to refrain from applying any criticism to what men did, not to give way to either sympathy or antipathy in my relation to them; I desired simply to allow “man as he is to work upon me.”

I soon learned that such an observation of the world leads truly into the world of spirit. In observing the physical world one goes quite outside oneself; and just by reason of this one comes again, with an intensified capacity for spiritual observation, into the spiritual world. Thus the spiritual world and the sense-world had come before my mind in all their opposition. But I felt opposition to be not something which must be brought into harmony by means of some sort of philosophical thought – perhaps to a “monism.” Rather I felt that to stand thus with one's soul wholly within this opposition meant “to have an understanding for life.” Where the opposition seems to have been reduced to harmony, there the lifeless holds sway – the dead. Where there is life, there works the unharmonized opposition; and life itself is the continuous overcoming, but also the recreating, of oppositions.

From all this there penetrated into my life of feeling a most intense absorption, not in theoretical comprehension by means of thought, but in an experiencing of whatever the world contains which is in the nature of a riddle.

Over and over again, in order that I might through meditation attain to a right relationship to the world, I held these things before my mind: “There is the world full of riddles. Knowledge would draw near to these. But for the most part it seeks to produce a thought-content as the solution of a riddle. But the riddles” – so I had to say to myself – “are not solved by means of thoughts. These bring the soul along the path toward the solutions, but they do not contain the solutions. In the real world arises a riddle; it is there as a phenomenon; its solution arises also in reality. Something appears which is being or event, and this represents the solution of the other.”

So I said also to myself: “The whole world except man is a riddle, the real world-riddle; and *man himself* is its solution!”

In this way I arrived at the thought: “Man is able at every moment to say something about the world-riddle. What he says, however, can always give only so much of content toward the solution as he has understood of himself as man.” Thus knowledge also becomes an event in reality. Questions come to light in the world; answers come to light as realities; knowledge in man is his participation in that which the beings and events in the spiritual and physical world have to say. All this, to be sure, is contained both in its general significance and in certain passages quite distinctly in the writings I published during the period I am here describing. Only it became at this time the most intense mental experience, filling the hours in which understanding sought through meditation to look into the foundations of the world, and – which is the fact of chief importance – this mental experience in its strength came at that time out of my objective absorption in pure, undisturbed sense-observation. In this observation a new world was given to me; from what had until this time been present to knowledge in my mind, I had to seek for that which was the counterpart in mental experience in order to strike a balance with the new. The moment I did not *think* the whole reality of the sense-world, but contemplated this world through the senses, there was brought before me a riddle as a reality; and in man himself lies its solution.

In my whole mental being there was a living inspiration for that which I later called “knowledge by way of reality.” And especially was it clear to me that man possessed of such a “knowledge by way of reality” could not stand in some corner of the world while being and becoming should be taking their course outside of him. Understanding became to me something that belongs, not to man alone, but to the being and becoming of the world. Just as the roots and trunk of a tree are not complete if they do not send their life into the flower, so are the being and becoming of the world nothing truly existing if they do not live again as the content of understanding. Having reached this insight, I said to myself on every occasion at which this came up: “Man is not a being who creates for himself the content of understanding, but he provides in his soul the stage on which for the first time the world partly experiences its existence and its becoming.” Were it not for understanding, the world would remain incomplete. In thus knowingly living in the reality of the world I found more and more the possibility of creating a defence for human knowledge against the view that in this knowledge man is making a copy, or some such thing, of the world.

For my idea of knowledge he actually partakes in the creation of the world instead of merely making afterwards a copy which could be omitted from the world without thereby leaving the world incomplete.

But this led also to an ever increasing clarity of understanding with reference to the “mystical.” The participation of human experience in the world-event was removed from the sphere of indeterminate mystical feeling and transferred to the light in which ideas reveal themselves. The sense-world, seen purely in its own nature, is at first void of idea, as the root and trunk of the tree are void of blossoms. But just as the blossom is not a disappearance and eclipse of the plant's existence, but a transformation of that very existence, so the ideal world in man as related to the sense-world is a transformation of the sense-existence, and not a darkly mystical interjection of something indefinite from the human soul world. Clear as things physical become in their way in the light of the sun, so spiritually clear must that appear which lives in the human soul as knowledge.

What was then present in me in this orientation was an altogether clear experience of the soul. Yet in passing on to find a form of expression for this experience the difficulties were extraordinary.

It was at the close of my Weimar period that I wrote my book *Goethe's World-Conception*, and the introduction to the last volume that I edited for *Kürschner's Deutsche National Literatur*. I am thinking especially of what I then wrote as an introduction to my edition of *Goethe's Sprüchen in Prosa*, and compare this with the formulation of contents in the book *Goethe's World-Conception*. If the matter is considered only superficially, this or that contradiction can be made out between the one and the other of these expositions, which I wrote at almost the same time. But, if one looks to what is vital beneath the surface – to that which, in the mere shaping and formulating of the surface, would reveal itself as perception of the depths of life, of the soul, of the spirit – then one will find no contradictions, but, indeed, in my writings of that period, a striving after means of expression. A striving to bring into philosophical concepts just that which I have here described as experience of knowledge, of the relation of man to the world, of the riddle-becoming and riddle-solving within the truly real.

When I wrote, about three and a half years later, my book *Welt- und Lebensanschauungen im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* I had made still further progress in many things; and I could draw upon my experience in knowledge here set forth in describing the individual world-conceptions as they have appeared in the course of history. Whoever rejects writings because the life of the mind knowingly strives within these – that is, because, in the light of the exposition here given, the world-life in its striving unfolds itself still further on the stage of the human mind – such a person cannot, according to my view, submerge himself with knowing mind into the truly real. This is something which at that time became confirmed within me as perception, although it had long before been vitally present in my conceptual world. In connection with the revolution in my mental life stand inner experiences of grave import for me. I came to know in

my mental experience the nature of meditation and its importance for insight into the spiritual world. Even before this time I had lived a life of meditation; but the impulse to this had come from a knowledge through ideas as to its value for a spiritual world-conception. Now, however, there arose within me something which demanded meditation as a necessity of existence for my mental life. The striving life of the mind needed meditation just as an organism at a certain stage in its evolution needs to breathe by means of lungs.

How the ordinary conceptual knowledge, which is attained through sense-observation, is related to perception of the spiritual, became for me, at this period of my life, not only an experience through ideas as it had been, but one in which the whole man participated. The experience through ideas – which, however, takes up within itself the real spiritual – has given birth to my book *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. Experience by means of the whole man attains to the spiritual world in its very being far more than does experience through ideas. And yet this latter is a higher stage as compared with the conceptual grasp upon the sense-world.

In the experience through ideas one grasps, not the sense-world, but a spiritual world which to a certain extent rests immediately upon this.

While all this was seeking for experience and expression in my soul, three sorts of knowledge were inwardly present before me. The first sort is the conceptual knowledge attained in sense-observation. This is acquired by the soul, and then sustained within in proportion to the powers of thought there existent. Repetitions of the acquired content have no other significance than that this may be well sustained. The second sort of knowledge is that which is not woven of concepts taken from sense-observation but experienced inwardly, independently of the senses. Then experience, by reason of its very nature, becomes the guarantor of the fact that these concepts are grounded in reality. To this realization that concepts contain the guarantee of spiritual reality one attains with certitude by reason of the nature of experience, just as one experiences in connection with knowledge through the senses a certainty that one is not in the presence of illusions but of reality.

In the case of this ideal-spiritual knowledge one is not content – as in the case of the sense-knowledge – with the acquisition of the knowledge, with the result that one then possesses this in one's thought. One must make this process of acquisition a continuous process. Just as it is not sufficient for an organism to have breathed for a certain length of time in order then to metamorphose what has been acquired through breathing into further life processes, so also an acquiring like that of sense-knowledge does not suffice for the ideal-spiritual knowledge. For this it is necessary that the mind should remain in a continuous interchange with that world into which one has entered through knowledge. This takes place by means of meditation,

which – as above indicated – arises out of one's ideal insight into the value of meditating. This interchange I had sought long before this revolution in my thirty-fifth year.

What now came about was meditation as a necessity for the mental life; and with this there stood before my mind the third form of knowledge. This not only led to greater depths of the spiritual world, but also permitted an intimate living communion with this world. By force of an inner necessity I was compelled to set up again and again at the very central point of my consciousness an absolutely definite sort of conception.

It was this: If in my mind I live in conceptions which rest upon the sense-world, then, in my direct experience, I am in position to speak of the reality of what is experienced only so long as I confront with sense-observation a thing or an event. My sense assures me of the reality of what is observed so long as I observe it.

Not so when I unite myself through ideal-spiritual knowledge with beings or events of the spiritual world. Here there enters into the single perception the direct experience of the status of the thing of which I am aware continuing beyond the duration of observation. For instance, if one experiences the human ego as the inner being most fundamentally one's own, then one knows in the perceiving experience that this ego was before the life in the physical body and will be after this. What one experiences thus in the ego reveals this directly, just as the rose reveals its redness in the act of our becoming aware.

In such meditation, practised because of inner spiritual necessity, there was gradually evolved the consciousness of an “inner spiritual man” who, through a more complete release from the physical organism, can live, perceive, and move in the spiritual. This self-sufficing spiritual man entered into my experience under the influence of meditation. The experience of the spiritual thereby underwent an essential deepening. That sense-observation arises by means of the organism can be sufficiently proven by the sort of self observation possible in the case of this knowledge. But neither is the ideal-spiritual knowledge yet independent of the organism. Self-comprehension shows the following as to this: For sense-observation the single act of knowing is bound up with the organism. For the ideal-spiritual knowing the single act is entirely independent of the physical organism; but the possibility that such knowledge may be unfolded at all by man requires that in general the life within the organism shall be existent. In the case of the third form of knowing the situation is this: it can come into being in the spiritual man only when he can make himself as free from the physical organism as if this were not there at all.

A consciousness of all this evolved under the influence of the life of meditation. I was able truly to refute for myself the opinion that in such meditation one becomes subject to a form of

auto-suggestion whose product is the resulting spiritual experience. For the very first ideal-spiritual knowledge had been enough to convince me of the reality of spiritual experience: not only the experience sustained in its life by meditation, but indeed the very first of all, that whose life thus merely began. As one establishes absolutely exact truth in a discriminating consciousness, so I had already done for what is here brought forward before there could have been any question of auto-suggestion. Therefore, in the case of what was attained by meditation, the question could have to do only with something whose reality I was in a position to test prior to the experience.

All this, bound up with my mental revolution, appeared in connection with the result of a practicable self-observation which, like that described, came to have a momentous significance for me.

I felt that the ideal element in the ongoing life retired in a certain aspect, and the element of will took its place. If this is to be possible, the will during the unfolding of knowledge must succeed in ridding itself of everything arbitrary and subjective. The will increased as the ideal diminished. And the will also took over the spiritual knowledge which hitherto had been controlled almost wholly by the ideal. I had, indeed, already known that the separation of the soul's life into thinking, feeling, and willing has only limited significance. In truth there is a feeling and a willing contained in thinking; only thinking predominates over the others. In feeling there lives thinking and willing; in willing, likewise, thinking and feeling. Now it became to me a matter of experience that the willing took more from thinking; thinking more from willing.

As meditation leads on the one side to a knowledge of the spiritual, on another side there follows as a result of such self-observation the inner strengthening of the spiritual man, independent of the organism, and the establishment of his being in the spiritual world, just as the physical man has his establishment in the physical world. Only one becomes aware that the establishment of the spiritual man in the spiritual world increases immeasurably when the physical organism does not cramp this process of establishment; whereas the establishment of the physical organism in the physical world yields to destruction – at death – when the spiritual man no longer sustains this establishment from itself outward. For such an experiential knowledge, that form of theory of cognition is inapplicable which represents human knowledge as limited to a certain field, and considers the “beyond” the “primal bases,” the “thing in itself” as unattainable by human knowledge. That “unattainable” I felt to be such only “for the present”; it can continue unattainable only until man has evolved within himself that element of his being which is allied to the hitherto unknown, and can henceforth grow into one with this in experiential knowledge. This capacity of man to grow into every form of being became for me

something that must be recognized by the person who desires to see the place of man in relation to the world in its true light. Whoever cannot penetrate to this recognition, to him knowledge cannot give something which really belongs to the world, but only a copy of some part of the world-content, something to which the world itself is indifferent. But through such a merely reproducing knowledge man cannot grasp a being within himself, which gives to him as a fully conscious individuality an inner experience of the truth that he stands fast within the cosmos.

What I wished to do was to speak of knowledge in such a way that the spiritual should be not merely recognized, but so recognized that man may reach it with his perception. And it seemed to me more important to hold fast to the fact that the “primal basis” of existence lies within that which man is able to reach in his totality of experience than to recognize in thought an unknown spiritual in some sort of “beyond” region.

For this reason my view rejected that form of thinking which considers the content of sense-experience (colour, heat, tone, etc.) to be something which an unknown external world calls up within man by means of his sense-perception while this external world itself can be conceived only hypothetically. The theoretical ideas which lie at the foundation of the thinking in physics and physiology in this direction seemed to my experiential knowledge as being in very special degree harmful. This feeling increased to the utmost intensity at the period of my life which I am here describing. All that was designated in physics and physiology as “lying behind subjective experience” caused me – if I may use such an expression – discomfort in knowledge.

On the other hand I saw in the form of thinking of Lyell, Darwin, Haeckel something which, although incomplete as it issued from them, was nevertheless suitable to a sound mind according to the order of evolution.

Lyell's basic principle – to explain by means of ideas which result from present observation of the earth's nature those phenomena which escape from sense-observation because they belong to past ages – this seemed to me fruitful in the direction indicated. To seek for an understanding of the physical structure of man by tracing his form from the animal forms, as Haeckel does in comprehensive fashion in his *Anthropogenie* appeared to me a good foundation for the further evolution of knowledge.

I said to myself: “If man places before himself a boundary of knowledge beyond which is supposed to lie ‘the thing in itself,’ he thus bars himself from any access to the spiritual world; if he relates himself to the sense-world in such a way that one thing explains another within that world (the present stage in the earth's becoming thus explaining past geological ages; animal

forms explaining that of man), he may thus prepare himself to extend this intelligibility of beings and events also to the spiritual.”

As to my experience in this field also I can say: “This is something which was just at that time confirmed in me as perception, whereas it had long before been vitally present in my conceptual world.”

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