

# The Story of My Life

## GA 28

### Chapter XXIII

With the mental revolution thus described must I bring to a close the second main division of my life. The paths of destiny now took a different bearing from what had preceded, During both my Vienna and also my Weimar period, the outward indications of destiny manifested themselves in such directions as fell in line with the content of my inner mental strivings. In all my writings there is vitally present the basic character of my spiritual world-conception, even though an inner necessity required that my reflections should be less extended into spiritual spheres. In my work as a teacher in Vienna the goals set up were solely those which resulted from the insights of my own mind. At Weimar, as regards my work in connection with Goethe, there was active only what I considered to be the responsibility attaching to such a piece of work. I never had to overcome difficulties in order to bring the tendencies coming from the outer world into harmony with my own.

It was just from this course of my life that I was able to perceive the idea of freedom in a form shining clearly within me, and thus to set it forth. I do not think that the great significance which this idea had for my own life has caused me to view it in a one-sided way. The idea corresponds with an objective reality, and what one actually experiences of such a thing cannot alter this reality through a conscientious striving for knowledge, but can only enable one to see into it in greater or lesser degree.

With this view of the idea of freedom there was united the “ethical individualism” of my philosophy, which has been misunderstood by so many persons. This also at the beginning of the third division of my life was changed from an element in my conceptual world living within the mind to something which had now laid hold upon the entire man.

Both in physics and in physiology the world-conception of that period, to whose forms of thinking I was opposed, as also the world-conception of biology, which, in spite of its incompleteness, I could look upon as a bridge leading to a spiritual conception, required of me that I should continually improve the formulation of my own conceptions in all these aspects of the world. I must answer for myself the question: Can impulses for action reveal themselves to man from the external world? What I found was this: The divine spiritual forces, which are the

inner soul of man's will, have no way of access from the outer world to the inner man. A right way of thinking both in physics and physiology, as well as biology, seemed to me to arrive at this result. A way in nature which gives access from without to the will cannot be discovered. Therefore no divine spiritual moral impulse can by such a road from without penetrate to that place in the soul where the impulse of man's own will, acting in man, comes into existence. External natural forces, moreover, can stimulate only that in man which pertains to nature. In that case, however, there is no real expression of a free will, but the continuation of the natural event in man and through him. Man has then not yet laid hold upon his entire being, but remains as to the natural element of his external aspect an unfree agent.

The problem can by no means be – so I said to myself again and again – to answer this question: Is man's will free or not? – but to answer this quite different one: How is the way to be attained in the life of the mind which leads from the unfree natural will to that which is free – that is, which is truly moral? And if we are to find an answer to this question we must observe how the divine-spiritual lives in each individual human soul. It is from the soul that the moral proceeds; in its entirely individual being, therefore, must the moral impulse have its existence.

Moral laws – as commands – which come from an external environment within which man finds himself, even though these laws had their primal origin in the spiritual world, do not become moral impulses within man by reason of the fact that he directs his will in accordance with them, but only by reason of the fact that he himself, purely as an individual, experiences the spiritual and essential nature of their thought content. Freedom has its life in human thought; and it is not the will which is of itself free, but the thinking which empowers the will.

So, therefore, in my *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* I had found it necessary to lay all possible emphasis upon the freedom of thought in discussing the moral nature of the will.

This idea also was confirmed in very special degree through the life of meditation. The moral world-order stood out before me in ever clearer light as the one clearly marked realization on earth of such ordered systems in action as are to be found in the spiritual regions ranged above. It showed itself as that which only he lays hold upon in his conceptual world who is able to recognize the spiritual.

During just that epoch of my life which I am here describing, all these insights were linked up for me with the lofty comprehensive truth that the beings and events of the world will not in truth be explained if man employs his thinking to “explain” them; but only if man by means of his thinking is able to contemplate the events in that connection in which one explains another,

in which one becomes the riddle and another its solution, and man himself becomes the word for the external world which he perceives.

Herein, however, was experienced the truth of the conception that in the world and its working that which holds sway is *the Logos, Wisdom, the Word*.

I believed that I was enabled by these conceptions to see clearly into the nature of materialism. I perceived the harmful character of this way of thinking, not in the fact that the materialist directs his attention to the manifestation of a being in the form of matter, but in the way in which he conceives the material. He contemplates matter without becoming aware that in reality he is in the presence of spirit, which is simply manifesting itself in material form. He does not know that spirit metamorphoses itself into matter in order to attain to ways of working which are possible only in this metamorphosis. Spirit must first take on the form of a material brain in order to lead in this form the life of the conceptual world, which can bestow upon man in his earthly life a freely acting self-consciousness. To be sure, in the brain spirit mounts upward out of matter; but only after the material brain has arisen out of spirit.

I must reject the form of thinking of physics and physiology only on the ground that this makes of matter that is not vitally experienced but only conceived through thought the external cause of man's spiritual experience; and, moreover, this matter is so conceived in thought that it is impossible to trace it to the point where it is spirit. Such matter, which this way of thinking postulates as real, is in no sense real. The fundamental error of the materialistically-minded thinkers about nature consists in their impossible idea of matter. Through this they bar before themselves the way leading to spiritual existence. A material nature which stimulates in the soul merely that which man experiences within nature makes the world an "illusion." The intensity with which these ideas entered into my mental life led me four years later to elaborate them in my work *Conception of the World and of Life in the Thirteenth Century*, in the chapter entitled "Die Welt als Illusion."<sup>1</sup> (In later enlarged editions this work was given the title *Rötsel der Philosophie*.)<sup>2</sup>

In the biological form of conceptions it is impossible in the same manner to fall into typical ways of thought which remove the thing so conceived wholly out of the sphere that is open to man's experience, and therefore to leave behind in his mind an illusion as to this. Here one cannot actually arrive at this explanation: "Outside of man there is a world of which he experiences nothing, which makes an impression on him only through his senses; an impression, however, which may be utterly unlike that which causes it." If a man suppresses within his mental life the more weighty elements of thinking, he may believe, indeed, that he has uttered

something when he asserts that to the subjective perception of light the objective counterpart consists of a wave-form in ether – such was then the conception; but one must be an absolute fanatic if one proposes to “explain” in this way that also which is perceived in the realm of the living.

In no case, so I said to myself, does such a conception of ideas pertaining to nature penetrate to ideas concerning the moral order of the world. Such a conception can view this only as something which drops down into the physical world of man from a sphere foreign to man's knowledge.

The fact that these questions confronted my mind I cannot consider as having a significance for the third phase of my life; for they had confronted me for a long time. But it was significant for me that the whole sphere of knowledge within my mind – without changing anything essential in its content – attained by means of these questions to a quickness of vital activity in a greatly heightened sense as compared with what had hitherto been the case. In the *Logos* lives the human soul; how does the external world live in this Logos? This is the basic question in my *Theory of Cognition in Goethe's World-Conception* (of the middle of the 'eighties); such it continued for my writing *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft*<sup>3</sup> and *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. There were dominant in this orientation of soul all the ideas I was able to formulate in the effort to penetrate into the substrata of the soul from which Goethe sought to bring light for the phenomena of the world.

That which especially concerned me during the phase of my life here set forth was the fact that the ideas which I was forced to oppose so strongly had laid hold with the utmost intensity upon the thinking of that period. People lived so completely according to these tendencies of mind that they were not in a position to realize at all the range of anything which pointed in the opposite direction. I so experienced the opposition between that which was to me plain truth and the opinions of my age that this experience gave the prevailing colour to my life, especially in the years near the turn of the century.

In every manifestation of the spiritual life the impression made upon me was drawn from this opposition. Not that I regretted everything brought forward by this spiritual life; but I had a sense of profound distress in the presence of the many good things that I could hold dear, for I believed that I saw the powers of destruction ranging themselves against these good things, the evolutionary germs of the spiritual life.

So from all directions my life was focused upon this question: “How can a way be found whereby that which is inwardly perceived as true may be set forth in such forms of expression as can be understood by this age?”

When one has such an experience, it is as if the necessity faced one of climbing in some way or other to the scarcely accessible peak of a mountain. One attempts it from the most varied points of approach; one remains there still, forced to feel that all the struggles one has put forth have been in vain.

I spoke once during the 'nineties at Frankfort-am-Main concerning Goethe's conception of nature. I said in my introduction that I would discuss only Goethe's conceptions of life, since his ideas regarding light and colours were such that there was no possibility in contemporary physics of throwing a bridge across to these ideas. As for myself, however, I was forced to view this impossibility as a most significant symptom of the spiritual orientation of the age.

Somewhat later I had a conversation with a physicist who was an important person in his field, and who also worked intensively at Goethe's conception of nature. The conversation reached its climax when he said that Goethe's conception regarding colours is such that physics cannot possibly lay hold of it; and I – was speechless.

How much there was then which said that what was truth to me was such that the thought of the age could “not in the least lay hold of it.”

1. *“The World of Illusion”*.
2. *Riddles of Philosophy*.
3. *Truth and Science*, the dissertation offered for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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