The Story of My Life
GA 28

Chapter VI

In the field of pedagogy Fate gave me an unusual task. I was employed as tutor in a family where there were four boys. To three I had to give only the preparatory instruction for the *Volkschule*.[1] and then assistance in the work of the Mittelschule. The fourth, who was almost ten years old, was at first entrusted to me for all his education. He was the child of sorrow to his parents, especially to his mother. When I went to live in the home, he had scarcely learned the most rudimentary elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic. He was considered so subnormal in his physical and mental development that the family had doubts as to his capacity for being educated. His thinking was slow and dull. Even the slightest mental exertion caused a headache, lowering of vital functions, pallor, and alarming mental symptoms. After I had come to know the child, I formed the opinion that the sort of education required by such a bodily and mental organism must be one that would awaken the sleeping faculties, and I proposed to the parents that they should leave the child's training to me. The mother had enough confidence to accept this proposal, and I was thus able to set myself this unusual educational task.

I had to find access to a soul which was, as it were, in a sleeping state, and which must gradually be enabled to gain the mastery over the bodily manifestations. In a certain sense one had first to draw the soul within the body. I was thoroughly convinced that the boy really had great mental capacities, though they were then buried. This made my task a profoundly satisfying one. I was soon able to bring the child into a loving dependence upon me. This condition caused the mere intercourse between us to awaken his sleeping faculties of soul. For his instruction I had to feel my way to special methods. Every fifteen minutes beyond a certain time allotted to instruction caused injury to his health. To many subjects of instruction the boy had great difficulty in relating himself.

This educational task became to me the source from which I myself learned very much. Through the method of instruction which I had to apply there was laid open to my view the association between the spiritual-mental and the bodily in man. Then I went through my real course of study in physiology and psychology. I became aware that teaching and instructing must become an art having its foundation in a genuine understanding of man. I had to follow

out with great care an economic principle. I frequently had to spend two hours in preparing for half an hour of instruction in order to get the material for instruction in such a form that in the least time, and with the least strain upon the mental and physical powers of the child, I might reach his highest capacity for achievement. The order of the subjects of instruction had to be carefully considered; the division of the entire day into periods had to be properly determined. I had the satisfaction of seeing the child in the course of two years accomplish the work of the *Volkschule*, and successfully pass the examination for entrance to the *Gymnasium*.[2] Moreover, his physical condition had materially improved. The hydrocephalic condition was markedly diminishing. I was able to advise the parents to send the child to a public school. It seemed to me necessary that he should find his vital development in company with other children. I continued to be a tutor for several years in the family, and gave special attention to this boy, who was always guided to make his way through the school in such a way that his home activities should be carried through in the spirit in which they were begun. I then had the inducement, in the way I have already mentioned, to increase my knowledge of Latin and Greek, for I was responsible for the tutoring of this boy and another in this family for the Gymnasium lessons.

I must needs feel grateful to Fate for having brought me into such a life relationship. For through this means I developed in vital fashion a knowledge of the being of man which I do not believe could have been developed by me so vitally in any other way. Moreover, I was taken into the family in an extraordinarily affectionate way; we came to live a beautiful life in common. The father of these boys was a sales-agent for Indian and American cotton. I was thus able to get a glimpse of the working of business, and of much that is connected with this. Moreover, through this I learned a great deal. I had an inside view of the conduct of a branch of an unusually interesting import business, and could observe the intercourse between business friends and the interlinking of many commercial and industrial activities.

My young charge was successfully guided through the *Gymnasium*; I continued with him even to the *Unter-Primai*.[3] By that time he had made such progress that he no longer needed me. After completing the Gymnasium he entered the school of medicine, became a physician, and in this capacity he was later a victim of the World War. The mother, who had become a true friend of mine because of what I had done for her boy, and who clung to this child of sorrow with the most devoted love, soon followed him in death. The father had already gone from this world.

A good portion of my youthful life was bound up with the task which had grown so close to me. For a number of years I went during the summer with the family of the children whom I had to tutor to the Attersee in the Salzkammergut, and there became familiar with the noble

Alpine nature of Upper Austria. I was gradually able to eliminate the private lessons I had continued to give to others even after beginning this tutoring, and thus I had time left for prosecuting my own studies.

In the life I led before coming into this family I had little opportunity for sharing in the play of children. In this way it came about that my "play-time" came after my twentieth year. I had then to learn also how to play, for I had to direct the play, and this I did with great enjoyment. To be sure, I think I have not played any less in my life than other men. Only in my case what is usually done in this direction before the tenth year I repeated from the twenty-third to the twenty-eighth year.

It was during this period that I was occupied with the philosophy of Eduard von Hartmann. As I studied his theory of knowledge, continual opposition was aroused within me. The opinion that the genuinely real lies as the unconscious beyond conscious experience, and that the latter is nothing more than an unreal pictorial reflection from the real – this was to me utterly repugnant. In opposition to this I postulated that the conscious experience can, through the strengthening of mental life, dip down within the real. I was clear in my own mind that the divine-spiritual reveals itself in man if man makes this revelation possible through his own inner life.

The pessimism of Eduard von Hartmann appeared to me as an utterly false questioning of human life. I had to conceive man as striving toward the goal of drawing up from within himself that with which life fills him for his satisfaction. I said to myself: "If through the ordering of the world a 'best life' were simply imparted to man, how could he bring this inner spring to a flowing stream?" The external world order has come to a stage in evolution in which it has ignored the good and the bad in things and in facts. Then first the human being awakes to self-consciousness and guides the evolution farther, but in such way that this evolution takes its direction toward freedom, not from things and facts, but only from the fountain head of man's being. The mere introduction of the question of pessimism or optimism seemed to me to be running counter to the free being of man. I frequently said to myself: "How could man be the free creator of his highest happiness if a measure of happiness were imparted to him through the ordering of the external world?"

On the other hand, Hartmann's work *Phänomenologie des Sittlichen Bewusstsein* [4] attracted me. There, I found, the moral evolution of man was traced according to the clue of what is empirically observable. It does not become – as in the case of Hartmann's theory of knowledge – speculative thought linked to unknown being which lies beyond consciousness; but rather it is that which can be experienced as morality, and grasped in its manifestations. And it was clear

to me that no philosophical speculation must think *beyond* the phenomena if it desires to reach the genuinely real. The phenomena of the world reveal of themselves this genuinely real as soon as the conscious soul prepares itself to receive the revelation. Whoever takes into consciousness only what is perceptible to the senses may seek for real being in a beyond-consciousness; whoever grasps the spiritual in his perception speaks of this as being *on this side*, not of a *beyond* in the sense characteristic of a theory of cognition. Hartmann's consideration of the moral world seemed to me congenial because in this his *beyond* standpoint withdraws wholly into the background, and he confines himself to that which can be observed. Through a deeper penetration into phenomena, even to the point where these disclose their spiritual being – it was in this way that I desired to know that knowledge of real being is brought to pass, not through inferential reasoning as to what is "behind" phenomena.

Since I was always striving to sense a human capacity on its positive side, Eduard von Hartmann's philosophy became useful to me, in spite of the fact that its fundamental tendency and its conception of life were repugnant; for it cast a penetrating light upon many phenomena. And even in those writings of the "philosopher of the unconscious" from which in principle I dissented I yet found much that was immensely stimulating. So it was also with the popular writings of Eduard von Hartmann, which dealt with cultural historical, pedagogical, and political problems. I found in this pessimist "sound" conceptions of life such as I could not discover in many optimists. It was just in connection with him that I experienced that which I needed,-to be able to understand even though I had to oppose.

It was thus that I sat till late many a night – when I could leave my boys to themselves, and after I had admired the starry heavens from the balcony of the house – in studying *the Phenomenology of Moral Consciousness* and the *Religiöses Bewusstsein der Menscheit in der Stufenfolge seiner Entwickelung* [5] and while I was reading these writings I attained to an ever increasing assurance concerning my own standpoint in regard to the theory of knowledge.

Upon the suggestion of Schröer, Joseph Kürschner invited me in 1884 to edit Goethe's scientific writings with an introduction and accompanying interpretive notes as a part of the edition of *Deutsche National-Literatur* planned by him. Schröer, who had taken responsibility for Goethe's dramas within the great collective work, was to preface the first volume assigned to me with an introductory foreword. In this he analysed the manner in which Goethe as poet and as thinker was related to the contemporary spiritual life. In the philosophy introduced by the age of natural science which followed after Goethe, he saw a falling away from the spiritual height upon which Goethe had been standing. The task which had been assigned to me in the editing of Goethe's scientific writings was characterized in a general way in this preface.

For me the task included an exposition in which natural science should be on one side and Goethe's whole philosophy on the other. Now that I had to come before the public with such an exposition, it was necessary for me to bring to a certain issue all that I had thus far won for myself in the way of a world-conception.

Until that time I had occupied myself as a writer with nothing more than brief articles for the press. It was not easy for me to write down what was a vital inner experience in such manner that I could consider my work worthy of publication. I always had the feeling that what had been elaborated within appeared in a very paltry form when I had to present it in a finished shape. So all literary endeavours became to me the source of continual inner unhappiness.

The form of thought by which natural science has been dominated since the beginning of its great influence upon the civilization of the nineteenth century seemed to me ill-adapted to reach an understanding of that which Goethe strove to attain for natural science, and actually did in large measure attain.

I beheld in Goethe a personality who, by reason of the unusual spiritual relationship in which he had placed man with reference to nature, was also in a position to place the knowledge of nature in the right form in the totality of human achievement. The form of thought of the period in which I had grown up appeared to me fit only for shaping ideas regarding lifeless nature. I considered it powerless to enter with capacity for knowledge into the realm of living nature. I said to myself: “In order to attain to ideas which can mediate a knowledge of the organic, it is necessary that one should first endue with life the concepts adapted for an understanding of inorganic nature.” For these seemed to me dead, and therefore fit only for grasping that which is dead.

How the ideas became endued with life in Goethe's spirit, how they became ideal forms, this is what I sought to set forth in order to clarify Goethe's conception of nature.

What Goethe thought and elaborated in detail regarding this or that field of the knowledge of nature appeared to me of less importance than the central discovery which I was forced to attribute to him. This I saw in the fact that he had discovered how one must think in regard to the organic in order to come at it understandingly.

I found that mechanics completely satisfy the need for knowledge in that they generate conceptions in a rational manner in the human mind which then prove to be real when applied in the sense-perception of that which is lifeless. Goethe was to me the founder of a law of organics, which in like manner applies to that which has life. When I looked back to Galileo in the

history of modern spiritual life, I was forced to remark how he, by the shaping of ideas from the inorganic, had given to the new natural science its present form. What he had introduced for the inorganic Goethe had striven to attain for the organic. Goethe became for me the Galileo of the organic.

For the first volume of Goethe's natural-scientific writings I had first to elaborate his ideas on metamorphosis. It was difficult for me to express the relation between the *living ideal forms* through which the organic can be understood and the *formless ideas* suited to enable one to grasp the inorganic. But it seemed to me that my whole task depended upon making this point in true fashion intelligible. In understanding the inorganic, concept is added in series to concept, in order to survey the correlation of forces which bring about an effect in nature. In reference to the organic it is necessary so to allow one concept to grow out of another that in the progressive living metamorphosis of concepts there come to light images of that which appears in nature as a being possessing form. This Goethe strove to do in that he sought to hold fast in his mind an ideal image of a leaf which was not a fixed lifeless concept but such a one as might present itself in the most varied forms. If one permits these forms in the mind to proceed one out of another, one thus constructs the whole plant. One re-creates in the mind in ideal fashion the process whereby nature in actual fashion shapes the plant.

If one seeks in this way to conceive the plant world, one thus stands much nearer in spirit to the world of nature than in conceiving the inorganic by means of formless concepts. For the inorganic one conceives only a spiritual fantasm of that which is present in nature in a manner void of spirit. But in the coming into existence of a plant there lives some thing which has a remote resemblance to that which arises in the human mind as an image of the plant. One becomes aware of how nature, while bringing forth the organic, is really bringing into action something spiritually similar within her own being.

I desired to show, in the introduction to Goethe's botanical writings, how in his theory of metamorphosis he took the direction of thinking about the workings of organic nature in the manner in which one thinks of spirit. Still more spiritual in form appeared to me Goethe's way of thinking in the realm of the animal and in the lower natural stages of the human being.

In relation to the animal-human, Goethe began by seeing through an error which he noticed among his contemporaries. These sought to ascribe a special position in nature to the organic bases of the human being by finding individual distinctions between man and the animal. They found such a distinction in the intermaxillary bones which the animals possess, in which their upper incisor teeth are bedded. In man, they said, such a special intermediary bone in the upper jaw is lacking; his upper jaw consists of a single piece.

This seemed to Goethe an error. For him the human form was a metamorphosis of the animal to a higher stage. Everything which appears in the forming of the animal must be present also in the human, only in a higher form so that the human organism might become the bearer of the self-conscious spirit.

In the elevation of the whole united form of man Goethe saw the distinction from the animal, not in details.

Step by step does one perceive the organic creative forces become more like spirit as one rises from consideration of the plant-beings to the varied forms of the animals. In the organic form of man creative forces are active which bring to pass the highest metamorphosis of the animal shape. These forces are present in the process of becoming of the human organism; and they finally live there as the human spirit after they have formed in the natural basic parts a vessel which can receive them in their form of existence free from nature.

In this conception of the human organism it seemed to me that Goethe had anticipated everything true which was later affirmed, on the ground of Darwinism, concerning the kinship of the human with the animal. But it also seemed to me that all which was untrue was omitted. The materialistic understanding of that which Darwin discovered leads to the adoption of conceptions based upon the kinship between man and the animals which deny the spirit where it appears in its highest form in an earthly existence – in man. Goethe's conception leads to the perception of a spiritual creation in the animal form which has simply not yet arrived at the stage at which the spirit as such can *live*. That which *lives* in man as spirit *creates* in the animal form at a preliminary stage; and it metamorphoses this form in the case of man in such a way that it can then appear, not only as creative, but also in its own living presence.

Viewed in this way, Goethe's consideration of nature becomes one which, while tracing the natural process of becoming from the inorganic to the organic, also leads natural science over into spiritual science. To bring out this fact was to me of more importance than anything else in working up the first volume of Goethe's natural-scientific writings. For this reason I allowed my introduction to narrow down to an explanation of the way in which Darwinism establishes a one-sided view, coloured by materialism, which must be restored to wholeness by Goethe's way of thinking.

How one must think in order to penetrate into the phenomena of life – this is what I wished to show in discussing Goethe's view of the organic. I soon came to feel that this discussion required a basis upon which to rest. The nature of cognition was then conceived by my contemporaries in a way which could never arrive at Goethe's view. The theorists of cognition had in

mind natural science as it then existed. What they said in regard to the nature of cognition held good only for a conception of inorganic nature. There could be no agreement between what I must say in regard to Goethe's kind of cognition and the theories of cognition ordinarily held at that time.

Therefore, whatever I had established upon the basis of Goethe's theory of the organic sent me afresh to the theory of cognition. I had before my mind theories such as that of Otto Liebmann, which expressed in the most varied forms the dogma that human consciousness can never get outside itself; that it must therefore be content to live in that which reality sends into the human soul, and which presents itself within in spiritual form. If one views the thing in this way, one cannot say that one perceives a spiritual relationship in organic nature after the manner of Goethe. One must seek for the spirit within the human soul, and consider a spiritual contemplation of nature inadmissible.

I discovered that there was no theory of cognition fitting Goethe's kind of cognition. This induced me to undertake to sketch such a theory. I wrote my *Erkenntnistheorie der Goethe'schen Weltanschauung* [6] out of an inner need before I proceeded to prepare the other volumes of Goethe's natural scientific writings. This little book was finished in 1886.

1. The *Volkschule* course usually extends from the sixth to the tenth year; the *Mittelschule* covers the three following years, though the term is not always so definite.

2. That is, the boy completed in two years what children usually do in the years from the sixth to the tenth year of age.

3. The next to the last year in the *Gymnasium*.

4. *Phenomenology of Moral Consciousness.*

5. *Religious Consciousness in Man in the Stages of its Evolution.*

6. *Theory of Cognition in Goethe's World Conception*
