



A Goethean Approach

The Archetypal Plant

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The qualitative-phenomenological approach developed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was deepened and taken further by Rudolf Steiner. Through it, the plant can be grasped in its inner nature as a living entity. The approach begins by simply using our senses (morphology, taste, texture, etc.) to observe the plant. According to Goethe: ‘The unique quality of this approach is that the information for evaluation does not come from oneself but from the things that are being observed themselves.’¹

In order to take a new and fresh look at sense-perceptible phenomena in a Goetheanistic way, everything which is already known and all preconceived ideas must be laid to one side. A Goethean approach means that sense perceptions need to become more refined. Goethe invites us to regain trust in our senses:

*In so far as the senses are healthy, the human being itself is the greatest and most precise physical apparatus of all; and what is most harmful about modern physics, is the fact that human beings have to separate themselves from the experiments and allow only the results revealed by artificial instruments to describe nature.*²

Every vintner who smells, tastes and contemplates the wine to assess its maturity and particular quality, uses the sense of smell and taste in a very refined way. The more we can train our senses in this way, the more diverse will be the range of phenomena we can gather about the plant, its environment or its life cycle. It is very helpful to ask the question ‘how?’ By asking ‘how?’ we come into a relationship with the plant’s inner nature which then comes to expression in the way it manifests itself.

In order to take these newly discovered phenomena seriously we need to develop a quality of wonder. Hermann Hesse the famous writer who made a study of Goethe, expressed it as follows:

With wonder it begins and with wonder it ends and yet it is no futile journey. Whether I stand in awe before some moss, a crystal, a flower, a golden beetle, or a cloudy sky, the calmly rolling swell of the ocean, the crystalline network of veins on a butterfly’s wing, its clear-cut shape and colourful edges, its diversity of form and patterning and the endlessly delicate and magically changing

*coloration – whenever I cast my eye upon or experience a piece of nature with one of my other senses, when I feel drawn to and enchanted by it and for a moment open myself up to its presence and what it reveals, in that same instance I forget the entire world of human greed and blind pursuit of objects, and instead of planning or giving orders, instead of procuring or exploiting, fighting or organising, I do nothing in that moment but like Goethe, am filled with ‘wonder’.*³

The question ‘for what?’ or ‘why?’ leads to a causal explanation and a plant becomes reduced to its functionality. A living being however, unlike a machine, is not solely defined by its function. If for example we respond to the question ‘why does the vine have tendrils?’ with ‘so that the plant can climb up more easily,’ this reductionist answer precludes any further considerations regarding the plant’s nature. If however we ask ourselves ‘how does the vine form its tendrils?’ we immediately make connections with other phenomena or aspects such as the vine’s capacity to be open towards its surroundings, to be sensitive throughout its life.

In a similar way the question ‘How does the plant develop?’ leads us into its process of growth in time. Then we are taking seriously its existence as a living being instead of merely seeing it as a finished object.

Expanding consciousness

The following considerations will allow us to know the plant (*we take the vine plant as example*) ever more intimately. It will become clear in doing so that one’s own consciousness has to expand or change. An initial exercise will help make this change a concrete experience. The following sketches show the various growth stages of a developing vine leaf. These six drawings can be looked at in two different ways.



They can be viewed as different individual steps and each one can be given a name or number. This would be a point-focused or non-continuous way of looking at it. Does such an approach, however, do justice to the reality of process? Has the leaf not followed a continuous process of growth?

We can also attempt to follow the process of moving from one stage to the next by inwardly transforming one leaf form into another. Such an approach, requiring a different kind of thinking to the analysis of the first example, is far closer to the reality of a continuous process. We need to slip into the process of leaf formation, in other words we need to follow and recreate the process in ourselves.

Four steps of plant observation

Step one: Factual observation

After a first impression the plant is observed as precisely and in as great a detail as possible using all the senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, etc.). Drawing is a great help towards observing better and with greater exactitude. The ‘sense for facts’ is called for.

Step two: Capturing the time structure of the plant

It is actually quite impossible to capture the growth of a plant in its entirety and without gaps. To do so would mean having to stand in front of a plant and never fall asleep. There is thus no alternative but to observe the plant at regular intervals and then inwardly to follow the processes occurring in between. On the one hand we need to observe the present state of the plant and on the other to remember its earlier forms so that through thinking about the forms, both can come to life. It is in this way possible to capture the various stages of growth – germination of the seed (or opening of the seed pod), development of the stem and leaves, formation of flower and fruit. From the moment of the plant's birth until its death we inwardly take part in a process of transformation. In the subsequent imaginative recreation of the plant an understanding for the specific time dynamic of the species can be attained.

Step three: Capturing the plant's gesture

All the sensory observations as well as the growth dynamics are brought inwardly together in order to discover the plant's overarching ordering principle. This may also be referred to as the plant's 'gesture'. Being receptive to the atmosphere emanating from the plant is also a requirement. This third type of observation brings us even closer to the plant's inner nature.

Step four: Becoming one with the being

The fourth level of plant observation involves trying to erase all preconceptions and inner images in order to grasp what manifests itself in the unimaginable yet specific will impulse or potential of the plant's essential nature.

This step can, for example, provide an orientation for developing a culture that accords with the species' inner nature and offer guidance regarding the appropriate cultivation of the plant or as the case may be, its healing.

These steps are intended as guidelines; they should not be taken as a hard and fast framework nor should the boundaries between them be conceived too strictly. They can, however, be a help when trying to understand the specific nature of, for example, the vine.

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften, Kap. 3: Der Versuch als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Maximen und Reflexionen (Sprüche in Prosa)

³ Hermann Hesse: Über das Glück. Gedichte und Betrachtungen. Berlin 2013