Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: The Life of a Freethinker

The Golden Thread · Part 5

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What happens when one person refuses to split knowledge into separate boxes?

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a minister of state, a theatre director, an anatomist, a botanist, a geologist and a student of colour. People call him a genius of many fields. In this series that is not a list of talents. It is the argument itself. Goethe did not accept that poetry, science and government are different kinds of knowing. He looked at everything in the same way, and that way of looking gave a new picture of the whole.

In The Golden Thread, a freethinker is someone who sees that a shared expectation is failing before others see it, and who gives a new picture of the whole. All facts were checked against at least two sources. Where sources disagree, this is said.

The pattern

Goethe's work looks like many careers. But it follows one pattern:

1. Look at a thing until it shows how it becomes.
2. Find the one form that unfolds into many shapes.
3. Show that the one who looks is part of what is seen.

He did this with bones in 1784, with plants in 1790, with colour in 1810 and with the human life in his novels. The leaf is the form behind all parts of a plant. The bone shows that the human body belongs with the other animals. Colour appears where light and darkness meet in the eye. A person forms himself through what he lives.

The expectation that failed was the idea that knowledge falls apart into specialist fields, that science means measuring and cutting up from the outside, and that art is something else. Goethe's whole life was the answer.

The start: Frankfurt and Strasbourg (1749–1774)

Goethe was born on 28 August 1749 in Frankfurt am Main. His father, Johann Caspar Goethe, was a wealthy man who collected books and paintings and wanted his son to become a lawyer. Goethe studied law in Leipzig from 1765. In 1768 he fell ill and went home to Frankfurt without a degree.

In April 1770 he went to Strasbourg to finish his studies. In September 1770 he met Johann Gottfried Herder there. Herder opened his eyes to Shakespeare, to Homer and to the songs of ordinary people. Goethe took his law degree in 1771, but from now on he was a poet.

In 1774 he published *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novel about a young man destroyed by his own feelings. It made him famous across Europe. In the same years Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi drew his attention to Spinoza.

Step 1: Government as a field of knowledge (1775–1786)

In 1775 Duke Karl August invited Goethe to the small court of Weimar. Goethe stayed for the rest of his life. From 1776 to 1785 he sat on the Duke's privy council. In 1779 he took charge of the commissions for war, mines and roads, and from 1782 to 1784 he was acting minister of finance. He worked on reopening the silver mines at Ilmenau.

For Goethe this was not a break from his real work. The mines led him to rocks. The roads and forests led him to plants. The work of a state became a way of looking at nature.

Step 2: The bone that joins us to the animals (1784)

In 1784 Goethe showed that the human upper jaw has an intermaxillary bone, the same small bone that apes and other animals have in their upper jaw.

The finding was small. Its meaning was large. The human body does not stand apart from the animals. It is one variation of the same plan.

Step 3: Spinoza and the one nature (1785)

In 1785 Goethe read Spinoza's *Ethics* again. In the same year the "Pantheism controversy" broke out. Jacobi made public that Lessing, before his death, had called himself a Spinozist. In Germany this was close to calling him an atheist. Goethe took Spinoza's side.

For Goethe, Spinoza's God was not outside nature. God and nature were one. This gave him the ground for his science: if the whole is one, then every part can show the whole.

This is the first documented trace of Spinoza in the story of German thought that runs through this series.

Step 4: Italy and the metamorphosis of plants (1786–1790)

In 1786 Goethe left for Italy. He stayed until 1788. He later called it the high point of his life. In the gardens of Italy he looked for the "original plant": not a real plant, but the form that all plants share.

In 1790 he published *An Attempt to Explain the Metamorphosis of Plants*. His idea was that all the parts of a flowering plant, from the first leaves to the petals and the seeds, are changes of one basic organ: the leaf. A plant is not a set of separate parts. It is one form that keeps changing.

From 1817 to 1824 he published his studies under the title *Zur Morphologie*: the study of form.

Step 5: The theatre, Schiller and Jena (1791–1805)

From 1791 Goethe directed the court theatre in Weimar. In 1794 Friedrich Schiller offered him his friendship. The two had been wary of each other

since 1788. From then until Schiller's death in 1805 they worked together, and Goethe put Schiller's plays on stage.

Close by, in the university town of Jena, a group of young writers and thinkers began something new. In May 1798 the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel published the first issue of their journal, the *Athenaeum*. There the word "romantic" was first used in print in its new sense. Friedrich Schlegel wrote:

> "The French Revolution, Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, and Goethe's Meister are the great tendencies of the age." (Athenaeum Fragment 216, 1798)

Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) tells how a young man forms himself through what he lives. For the young Romantics it stood next to a political revolution and a new philosophy. According to Andrea Wulf, Goethe was the only major figure who openly welcomed their journal.

In Jena the philosopher Fichte was accused of atheism in 1798. In 1799 he had to leave the university. Goethe, as the minister responsible for the university, was part of the affair. Schelling came to Jena in these years, and Goethe helped make his way.

The story of this group is the next part of the series.

Step 6: Napoleon (1806–1808)

On 14 October 1806 Napoleon defeated the Prussian army at Jena. Weimar was occupied. Five days later Goethe married Christiane Vulpius, the mother of his son, who was born in 1789.

On 2 October 1808 Napoleon received Goethe at Erfurt. "You are a man," the Emperor said. They talked mainly about *Werther*. Napoleon had read the novel several times and had taken it with him to Egypt. He criticised

one passage as "not natural", and Goethe agreed. On 6 October they met again in Weimar, with the poet Christoph Martin Wieland. On 14 October 1808 Goethe and Wieland both received the Legion of Honour.

Here two forms of the self met. Napoleon was the self as will and power. Goethe was the self as growth and form. Goethe admired Napoleon all his life, even though the Emperor's armies had occupied his town. It is a tension the story should not hide.

Step 7: Colour and the eye (1810)

In 1810 Goethe published *Zur Farbenlehre*, the *Theory of Colours*. He considered it his most important work.

Newton had shown in 1704 that white light is split by a prism into colours. Goethe did not accept that colours are simply parts of light. He looked at what the eye sees: colours appear where light and darkness meet. He also studied the colours that the eye itself makes, such as the after-images we see when we close our eyes.

Here Goethe lost. Physics followed Newton, and it still does. But others took Goethe seriously as a student of seeing. In 1816 the young Arthur Schopenhauer published *On Vision and Colours*, built on Goethe's observations. In 1950–51, at the end of his life, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote his *Remarks on Colour*, which start from Goethe. Wittgenstein argued that Goethe's work was not a physical theory at all, but something like a logic of how we see.

Step 8: Faust (1808–1832)

Goethe worked on *Faust* for about sixty years. Part One appeared in 1808. He finished Part Two in 1831, and it was published after his death.

Faust is a scholar who has studied every field and still does not know "what holds the world together at its core". He makes a pact with the dev-

il. What saves him in the end is not knowledge, but his striving itself. In Faust, Goethe's question about form becomes a question about the human life: not what we are, but how we become.

Goethe died in Weimar on 22 March 1832. He was buried next to Schiller.

The question behind the pattern

Year	Field	What he looked at	The one form he saw
1776–1786	Government	Mines, roads, forests, money	The state as part of nature
1784	Anatomy	The human upper jaw	Humans share the plan of the animals
1785	Philosophy	Spinoza's *Ethics*	God and nature are one
1790	Botany	The parts of a plant	Everything is a changed leaf
1795–96	The novel	*Wilhelm Meister*	A person forms himself through life
1810	Colour	Light, darkness and the eye	Colour appears where they meet
1808–1832	Drama	*Faust*	The human being is his striving

The thread backwards: what formed Goethe

Person	Link	Kind
Johann Gottfried Herder	Met in Strasbourg in September 1770; opened his eyes to Shakespeare, Homer and folk poetry	Trace
Shakespeare	Through Herder, who awakened Goethe's love of Shakespeare	Trace

Person	Link	Kind
Baruch Spinoza	Through Jacobi from about 1774; read the *Ethics* again in 1785; one God-nature	Trace
Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi	The Pantheism controversy of 1785	Trace

The thread at the same time: who worked beside him

Person	Link	Kind
Friedrich Schiller	Friendship and joint work, 1794–1805	Trace
Alexander von Humboldt	Talks and joint anatomical studies in the 1790s	Trace
Johann Gottlieb Fichte	The atheism dispute in Jena, 1798–1799	Trace
Friedrich Schelling	Came to Jena; Goethe helped make his way	Trace
Friedrich Schlegel	Fragment 216 (1798): *Wilhelm Meister* as one of the great tendencies of the age	Trace
Napoleon Bonaparte	Erfurt, 2 October 1808; *Werther*; Legion of Honour	Trace
Christoph Martin Wieland	Second meeting with Napoleon; Legion of Honour on the same day	Trace

The thread forwards: whom Goethe formed

Person	Link	Kind
Arthur Schopenhauer	*On Vision and Colours* (1816), built on Goethe's observations	Trace
Charles Darwin	Goethe's work on homology helped frame the questions Darwin answered	Echo

Person	Link	Kind
Rudolf Steiner	Science editor of Goethe's writings in the Kürschner edition (1884–1897); the Goetheanum carries his name	Trace
D'Arcy Thompson, Alan Turing, Robert Rosen	The line of form: from the metamorphosis of plants to *On Growth and Form* (1917), Turing's morphogenesis (1952) and Rosen's living systems	Echo, through Thompson
Ludwig Wittgenstein	*Remarks on Colour* (1950–51), starting from Goethe	Trace
Mikhail Bakhtin	A study of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of formation of which *Wilhelm Meister* is the model	Trace

The thread across the series

Person	Link	Kind
Diogenes of Sinope	Wieland, who received the Legion of Honour with Goethe, wrote the *Dialogues of Diogenes* in 1770	Trace, through Wieland
Jiddu Krishnamurti	Through Steiner, who edited Goethe and broke with the movement that chose Krishnamurti	Echo, through Steiner
Spinoza, Turing and Rosen	Mind and nature as one whole	Echo

Not every link is a direct influence. A **trace** is a documented link: a teacher, a letter, a book that was read. An **echo** is a shared idea without proof that one person learned it from the other.

Goethe is the knot where the lines of the series meet. Through Spinoza, Lessing and Jacobi he stands in the German reception of Spinoza.

Through the metamorphosis of plants he is the root of the line of form that runs to D'Arcy Thompson, Turing and Rosen. Through Steiner the same Goethe leads to the line of direct knowing, to the break with the Theosophists and to Krishnamurti.

The expectations that failed

1. **That knowledge falls apart into separate fields.** Goethe was poet, minister and scientist at once, and he looked at all of it in the same way.
2. **That living form is understood by cutting it into parts.** He saw form in its becoming: the leaf in the flower, the animal in the human jaw.
3. **That the one who observes stands outside nature.** His theory of colour was about the eye that sees. Physics did not follow him; the study of seeing did.

He was not always right. In physics Newton won. And he was not an outsider: he was a minister who admired the conqueror of his own town. But in a time that was splitting knowledge into ever smaller boxes, he kept the whole in view.

The golden thread in Goethe's life is the search for the one form that unfolds into many, seen from within and not from outside. He refused to divide what belongs together. That is what makes him a freethinker.

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