

# Symbol and consciousness in phenomenology of J. W. Goethe

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**Abstract.** This article is concerned with the prospects of philosophical knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century against the background of “growing incompatibility of consciousness and culture” or “crisis of anthropos in the face of technos”. The article aims to clarify the contribution of J.W. Goethe in phenomenology of consciousness as an advanced field of the philosophical study. Novelty of the research methodology is achieved through the combination of the postmodern approach (“symbolology”) developed by M.K. Mamardashvili and A.M. Pyatigorskiy and “philosophy of symbol” of “the first phenomenologist” J.W. Goethe. The author achieves her research objectives to conceptualize the Goethean phenomenological method and to determine future directions for its application by reviewing the research trends and findings of the current international studies conducted according to the “Goethean method”. This study focuses on the analysis of symbolism of intellectual perception represented in Goethe’s works. The phenomenological awareness of the process of thinking allows for “integrity” of human understanding, eliminates symbolization (superficiality), revitalizes creativity that can “connect all things in one”, distinguish “archetypes”, solve one task in different ways by moving beyond the subject-object relationship. Symbolically understood consciousness allows perceiving dialogic (subject-subjectivity) nature of thinking and constancy of co-existence of the “human-nature” and “human-culture” dimensions. Hence, this scientific method of the prominent German philosopher is otherwise named “eco-phenomenology”. Implications for future research the author of the article sees in a complete reinterpretation of the Goethean scientific and artistic heritage in the vein of his “philosophy of symbol”, which forecasted the advent of the Faustian era as well as suggested the ways to overcome the problem of postmodernist entropy.

## 1 General definition of the problem and its relation to important scientific and practical tasks

M.K. Mamardashvili and A.M. Pyatigorskiy in their work “Symbol and Consciousness” define a major concern in terms of growing incompatibility between consciousness and culture that shall be resolved in order to overcome an “anthropological crisis”, in general, and to provide opportunities for further philosophical knowledge development, in particular

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[1]. “Whenever we observe the phenomenon of cultural development ..., in the same historical period and geographical region we concurrently reveal the recession or regression of the symbolic consciousness and vice versa” [1]. The conditional limit of the progress of culture in such a situation is when a person is no longer included in the picture of consciousness, but this is impossible provided that there is a person for whom the culture, symbol and consciousness are obviously related, mutually indispensable, mutually conditioned structures. Here, it is the symbol that serves as a linking element, a mediator.

Culture gives a shape to human consciousness and defines the results of thinking in the Nietzschean terms as “the Apollonian” principle. Consciousness (mind), in its turn, houses a “boiling cauldron of matters” (J.W. Goethe), archetypes, and “archaic words”, or a reservoir of cultural potencies. If postmodern culture manifests entropy (degradation of creative potential) as an aesthetic principle, then it is a loud statement of an imminent end, a crisis of consciousness, of human being and his culture, which is stated in a dead digital civilization that does not need anthropos, as well as the establishment of a post -cultural state of transhumanism. A horrifying picture, isn’t it? Neuropsychologists (T.V. Chernigovskaya) and theologians (E.I. Arinin) are among the first who warn of the danger of cultural decay. Philosophers, however, have little zest for this issue.

It is the philosophers who shall search for the ways to surmount the crisis related to the advancement of technos, the culture of consumption, on the one hand, and degradation of symbolic thought, dysfunction of consciousness, neuroticism and anaemia of contemporary culture, and unproductive consciousness, on the other hand, since “the whole science itself is intraphilosophic phenomenon” (M.K. Mamardashvili and A.M. Pyatigorskiy). What does philosophy have to offer to overcome the abovementioned crisis? It can offer a new approach to consciousness (thinking) analysis that allows activating reinterpretation, reviving consciousness, and giving an efficient (J.W. Goethe), creative, anthropological impulse to culture. This method is named phenomenology of consciousness.

## **2 Analysis of the recent advances and publications that first addressed the issue of the current study and identification of previously unresolved parts of the general problem, to which this article is devoted**

J.W. Goethe is named the first phenomenologist in the history of science [2]. His works are believed to contain an insight into the specific attitude that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century found its realization in the Husserl’s “realistic phenomenology” with his call to go “back to the things themselves!” [3]. Goethean method itself is named “phenomenology of nature” [4]. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a constellation of scholars demonstrated their interest to “phenomenological heritage” of the great German philosopher: A.Zajonc, D.Seamon, A.Kentsis, F.Amrine, F.Zucker, H.Wheeler, H.Bortoft, R.H.Brady, I.Brook, N.Hoffman, C.Holdrege, D.Sepper, J.Shotter among them. N.Ribe, F.Steinle, B.Bywater, B.D.Robbins, T.Toadvine carried on this tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [4]. These authors were interested, in the first place, in “**eco-phenomenology**” of the great German philosopher as a scientific method. For example, following the scientific method developed by this scientist and poet, Australian scientist N. Hoffman performed a set of experiments to observe the metamorphoses of two Australian plants: *Kunzea Ambigua* and *Banksia Integrifolia* [5]. Even though N. Hoffman had earlier explained the principle of Goethean method as a “union of science and art”, the “philosophical-poetic essence of Goethean phenomenon” remained yet “beyond the scope of research”. It is precisely the domestic researchers who noted the “universal” nature of Goethean method of cognition. Nevertheless, only a small number of them, namely S.V. Laptinskaya [6], K.A. Svasyan [7], and O.N. Shadrina [8],

performed “comprehensive research”. The said complementarity of “art” and “science” does not imply blending of cognitive discourses but facilitates holistic vision. All what a scientist must be able to do is “to look” and “to see”.

It is worth noting that the topical issue of interrelation between philosophy (science) and literature (poetry, language, art) was analysed by the following foreign scholars: J.P. Sartre, H.G. Gadamer, G. Bachelard, R. Barthes, M. Heidegger, C. Wilson, P. de Man, I. Murdoch, M. Blanchot, J.L. Nancy, M. Merleau-Ponty, A. Danto, P. Ricœur, G. Deleuze, and J. Derida. Among Russian researchers who addressed this issue there were M.M. Bakhtin, S.S. Averintsev, M.K. Mamardashvili, N.B. Mankovskaya, M.P. Epstein, A.S. Kolesnikov, V.V. Bibikhin, V.M. Dianova, N.V. Tishunina, A.A. Grykalov, and many more. The Russian and foreign Goethean science includes hundreds of names that may not be all listed here due to the limited size of this article.

### **3 Introduction of the main scope of research, including the full substantiation of scientific findings, and recommendations**

J.W. Goethe was the one who introduced the notion of “philosophy of symbol” with the symbol being viewed as an “archetype”. An archetypal phenomenon is the “creative idea” that engenders phenomenal variety (the highest level of this method is the creative level or the level of “Fire”). It may be expressed in creation, in the holistic art images - painting, poem, and sonata - that are infinitely beautiful and infinitely cognizable through various interpretations. An artistic image is a unity of form and content. It is through the image that the idea is revealed. By observing a variety of forms, we comprehend the unity of ideas.

The “Faustian era”, prophesied by J.W. Goethe, that divided science, culture (art), and religion and “formalized” to maximum each strand of cognition within its own niche specialization, eventually exhausted humanity and resulted in two world wars, revolutions, current cultural and political existential crises. Culture and Nature (“Elective Affinities” by J.W. Goethe) “went into hibernation” (an image of the “glass coffin” in the symbolic novel) until “better days”. Phenomenological “vision” (thinking) allows restoring the “integrity of consciousness”, anthropological integrity, overcoming further “destruction” of the natural-cultural unity of the world and human being, directing the cultural development by its recovered original values (spiritual, symbolic premises), providing for the anthropological prospective, and overcoming entropy. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, it is necessary to realize practicability of the new cognitive methodology and acknowledge another type of knowledge in order to overcome anthropological and ecological crises and maintain Life. This is the so-called “mental ecology” predicted in the works of J.W. Goethe, who was both a poet and a naturalist.

By deconstructing consciousness and expelling “idols” (predefined paradigms) from the process of thinking, phenomenology makes possible to perceive value and genuineness of “another” type of knowledge unfamiliar to positivist science. Phenomenology structures the relations between subject and object, experience and knowledge in a different way. Within the framework of phenomenology, interrelations existing between Art and Consciousness, Science and Creation, Experience and Intuition become obvious.

### **4 Aims and objectives of the study**

The article aims to clarify the contribution of J.W. Goethe in phenomenology of consciousness as an advanced field of the philosophical study that was designed to overcome the anthropological crisis. The main objective is to determine the essence of the Goethean phenomenological method (to conceptualize it) and the directions for its

application. The focus of this study is to analyse symbolism of thinking/consciousness and its difference from semiotic thinking, to comprehend the role of symbol in the process of cognition/understanding and creation and, as a result, to perceive dialogic (subject-subjectivity) nature of thinking and human-nature and human-culture co-existence, which is reflected in the valuable insights of integral individual consciousness (case study of Goethe's works).

Knowledge (rational, true or, in the words of the scientist-poet, "creative", "seminal", and "moral") is not engendered by means of "addition" of the reflected situations. Knowledge is not a quantity; it is a quality; a quality of consciousness. Austrian cultural philosopher H. Sedlmayer uses Pinder's intuition as an example of "creative, true reasoning". By means of intuition the latter managed to "envision" (understand and imagine) and complete the missing part of the Nordling Altar". "His vision was rooted in the clear-sighted tracing of the missing piece" [9]. J.W. Goethe conducted the similar experiment with Strasbourg Cathedral in the 18<sup>th</sup> century [10].

Hence, Art confronts us with the problem of whether science in general can deal not with concepts but with life itself, creativity; whether it contradicts its nature; whether science (s) about spirit is possible in general, different from science (s) about nature; whether such "unscientific" terms as "intuition", "creative fantasy" and "imagination" may be used in the field of science.

J.W. Goethe noted that the most dangerous tendency is to "reinforce a certain view" (accept the "paradigm of consciousness"). By accepting this interpretation, we should be able to freely differentiate psychological, sociological, ethical, etc. descriptions (M.K. Mamardashvili and A.M. Pyatigorskiy). Consequently, "looking" transforms into observation, every act of observation turns into reflection, every act of reflection generates associations, that is, we apparently theorize all the time we closely look at the world" [11]. M. Bakhtin expresses the same idea as J.W. Goethe that "abstract reasoning shall give way to vision". L.A. Mikeshina highlights that in Bakhtin's terms "the role of the "knowing eye" or "**visual thinking**" becomes the main attitude of the contemporary philosophical discourse" [12]. This new method of conceptualization implies the turn towards "humanitarian-anthropological, value-based and cultural-semantic exploration of the world".

In full compliance with Goethe's perspective, phenomenology of consciousness ascertains that a human being shall realize that "one and the same thing may be represented in a completely different way and this allows "to get to the heart" of the problem, penetrate into the symbol (archetype) or idea of the object. The words of Goethe "I see the ideas!" are to be understood in a similar vein since the meaning is the thing (image) itself.

The principle of this "holistic comprehension/consciousness, when an idea is equal to a thing and a process coincides with a result since it is performed by the scientist and, hence, changes, refines the scientist himself, is based on the concept of **Symbol** that "mates one with all" ("One" and "All" in Goethean poetic terms). In the "philosophy of symbol" developed by the great poet, naturalist, and philosopher, symbol is the "hidden openness" or what is named by the poet "öffentlich Geheimnis" ("the sacred open secret" narrating of beauty of divine existence) [13] [Mikhailov, 1991: 52-53]. A symbol may be named an archetype (according to J.W. Goethe). Prototypes of all things are predefined. Human consciousness may perceive them if the universe is symbolically, empathetically, and spiritually understood.

So, symbolism is the main principle of "integral" consciousness. This type of consciousness may be named **meta-consciousness**.

Understanding of symbol similar to the Goethean one also exists in the symbology of A. Pyatigorskiy and M. Mamardashvili. They ascertain that "while speaking about symbol ...

[they] mean such a thing which is inseparable from the act of consciousness” [1], that is, an “object” is simultaneously a “subject”.

A subject-object perspective turned out to be the most persistent “idol of the science” since it underpins “logical” (synonymous to scientific) explanation of the world. J.W. Goethe emphasized that a human being cannot treat the world, the nature, the Other as an “object”. Such an attitude results in the newly built, poorly engineered constructions (“metaphysically flawed” reconstructions) and the landscapes bereft of life that are turned into museums. Conservation will not protect the nature, as it does not protect culture. Reservations did not preserve the Indians. While interacting with the “dead” nature/culture, subject also “becomes dead” (objectified). A human being, first, turns into an object and then into a sign (figure). Knowledge is not to be stored, but to be understood. Understanding comes through symbols. “Acculturated” (decoded) symbols lose their symbolism and become signs [1].

By translating symbols into semiotic systems, we impoverish the world of meanings and provoke the process of “symbolic depletion”. But, in doing so, we can similarly easy convert nature into a sign or figure, depriving it of its essence (akin those trees in the flowerpots in spiritual Castiglia from the novel “The Glass Bead Game” by H. Hesse). J.W. Goethe noted “how hard it is to avoid substituting a thing with a sign, how hard it is to keep existence alive without killing it with a word” [11]. Thus, cognition is meaningful, contextual and symbolic (not semiotic) and no single scientific solution exists for all the problems. “A hundred grey horses don’t make up one single white horse” (J.W. Goethe) [11].

The Goethean method is “exact fantasy”. For J.W. Goethe, the philosopher and author of “Theory of Colours” and “The Metamorphosis of Plants”, who solely but insistently and convincingly criticized “mechanism” of the I. Newton’s worldview and cautioned against the danger of world atomization and laboratory experiments, his method is simultaneously the essence/way/process of true cognition. In practice, a human being constantly tests his “theories” in wildlife, adjusting it in accordance with the predefined patterns. He half-cognizes, half-observes some things and sets aside the other, unique things that “do not comply with the statistic average”. However, when a human being had halted ingenious (ideal, productive, transcendent, creative, spiritual, moral) cognition, he lowered way below the statistical level, “equalling” by means of inclusion the sound and the corrupted and even taking the latter as an example (“positive discrimination” in politics). However, this is not a solution, this is entropy, the declaration of inability to create cultural meanings since symbols of existence (embedded in Traditions, Culture, Nature) are no longer available to most people.

Understanding (universal) is impossible without images (of the individual). I. Kant stated that the process of comprehension, even the most abstract one, is still the process of *concrete imagination*, which is compliant with the notion of “exact fantasy” of the great Poet. The Poet himself claimed that among the fellow philosophers he mostly sympathized with Kant’s ideas. Speaking of which, he coined a categorical imperative as a prerequisite for cognition. Contemplation is impossible without imagination. All the cognizable should have an absolute spiritual perspective (“only ethical is fruitful” (true) (J.W. Goethe)) [11]. This provision is explained by the essence of symbol: “Symbol is a thing that may induce such states of consciousness in which the human mind gets involved in certain mental content (structures) resulting in human transformation [1]. It is to be noted that “metamorphosis of the scientist” is an aim of cognition. J.W. Goethe affirmed that with each thing well-understood, human being discovers a new (cognitive - *author’s note*) organ that serves to augment cognition. Cognition for the sake of cognition is similar to an inventive activity without moral constraints, i.e. a materialistic, unproductive, unethical process that has not “chances” in the future of anthropology. For this reason, the great

German humanist claimed that the simple truth was to be repeated over and over again since in our world the lie was, unfortunately, repeated on an incredibly regular basis.

## 5 Conclusions and implications for further development of the research issue

The following main conclusions were made:

- The principle of “integral” consciousness is its symbolism. This type of consciousness may be named meta-consciousness. Cognition is always contextual, symbolical (not semiotic) and individual. There is no one scientific matrix that could allow to comprehend “all cases” of its template, that could “fit and accommodate” both nature, in general, and human being, in particular, together with intuition, inspiration, uniqueness, spirituality and morality, empathy, religion and art, poetry and mathematics.

- The method of “exact fantasy” (“delicate empiricism”) was evaluated and explained in the Goethe’s scientific and poetical works correspondingly. Contemporary scientists name this method “phenomenology of nature”.

The most important basis of the method is in its spiritual (moral and creative) essence. Hence, Goethean phenomenology is otherwise named as eco-phenomenology, ecology of consciousness, or mental ecology.

This type of rhetoric/cognition is especially valuable and conceptual considering current ecological and anthropological crises.

Phenomenological interpretation of the little known to modern readers, but fundamental for the philosophy of symbol, works of J.W. Goethe, such as “Elective Affinities”, “West–Eastern Diwan”, unique and unreprinted in Russia from the 1950s “Theory of Colours”, and his other scientific and literary works suggests to become an exceptionally promising direction for further research development. It is necessary to analyse Goethean works with the use of the present-day findings in neurolinguistics, psychology and cognitive theory in order to shift understanding of Goethe’s philosophy from philologically-semiotic into philosophically-symbolic area.

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