

DAEMONS AND GENIUS: ON THE PLACE OF THE GENIUS IN SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY ACCORDING TO KANT, GOETHE, AND HEGEL

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Abstract: In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant rejected the idea of genius in science. Goethe, in a sense, lifted this ban. Despite his interest in Kant's third critique, Goethean science, by the very nature of the scientist's relation to nature, implies a certain idea of the genius analogous to the one Kant had glimpsed in the realm of art. Thus, in this paper I begin by explaining Kant's refusal of the genius in science, I then explain how Goethe's own approach to science and nature seems to allow such an idea of a scientific genius able to grasp the genius(es) of nature. I then turn to Hegel and his own way to deal with this issue in relation with philosophy understood as a demonstrative science.

Keywords: *Critique of Judgment*; genius; J.W. Goethe; G.W.F. Hegel; I. Kant; theory of science.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although Goethe took great interest in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* "owing to it a truly wonderful period of [his] life",¹ it is difficult not to see their respective positions as diametrically opposed, as Georg Simmel once famously pointed out:

From the scientific-methodological point of view Kant is, of course, the objective, impartial thinker; Goethe is the subjective one, whose conception of human existence is informed by his passionate individuality. Regarding the substantive outcome of their worldviews, Kant is the subjectivist who locates the world within human consciousness, which constitutes its forms. Goethe, in contrast, can accept only the self-sufficient objectivity of existence, within which the subject and his life are but a pulse beat of the all-encompassing life of Nature.²

This opposition is certainly related to the notion of genius which Kant explicitly rejects from the field of science: "Nature by the medium of the genius

¹ Johann W. Goethe, *Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. 13 (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1963), 27 (hereafter: HA); *Scientific Studies*, trans. D. Miller, (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), 29 (modified).

² Georg Simmel, "Kant and Goethe. On the History of the Modern *Weltanschauung*", trans. J. Bleicher, *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 6 (2007): 167–168.

does not prescribe the rule to Science, but to Art,”³ while it plays a central role in Goethean Science: “Due to a mysterious interconnectedness between the genius and the essence of all Being, their wholly individualistic, self-directed seeing is for themselves [...] at the same time the full depiction of the *objective* content of the subject-matter.”⁴ As such, in direct opposition to Kant, Goethe tends to underline the role of the genius in both the fields of art and science to the point where the aesthetic and the epistemic judgments appear to overlap. Again, in Simmel’s words:

Goethe finds in beauty the unfailing hallmark of the validity of a cognition. The moment that the external or internal analysis of an object leads an object to lose its beauty also directly indicates the invalidity of its findings. Any approach that dismembers Nature is theoretically invalid because it is wrong in aesthetic terms.⁵

This probably makes of Goethe the paradigmatic example of that romantic biology captured by the historian of science Robert J. Richards in his book *The Romantic Conception of Life*:

Romantic biology came to regard these two kinds of judgment [the aesthetic and epistemic ones] as complementary approaches to nature, approaches that penetrated to the same underlying object. This meant that artistic experience and expression might operate in harmony with scientific experience and expression.⁶

In this sense, while Goethe is certainly not the first to admit that scientists, just like artists can be considered geniuses in their respective fields—Helvetius in *De l’esprit* notes that it is a common assumption to place “among the geniuses the Descartes, Newton, Locke, Montesquieu, Corneille, Molière, etc.”⁷ of this world, i.e., philosophers, scientists and artists alike, and Kant himself is often placed, by Fichte and Schelling for instance,⁸ alongside them as a *philosophical* genius—, the

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften “Akademieausgabe”*, vol. 5 (Online edition: [<https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/>]), 308 (hereafter: AK); *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, (New York: Dover, 2005), 113 (modified). See also Kant, AK 5, 317; *Critique of Judgment*, 121: “If (...) we look back to the explanation given above of what is called *genius*, we find (...) that it is a talent for Art, not for Science”. Kant later admitted, in his *Anthropology*, the possibility of a genius in “various fields”, like Leonardo da Vinci for instance, but as it remains unclear whether those fields are merely within the realm of fine arts or not, it could be interpreted as consistent with his earlier view on the matter, see Kant, AK 7, 224.

⁴ Simmel, “Kant and Goethe”, 170 (my emphasis).

⁵ Simmel, “Kant and Goethe”, 177.

⁶ Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 12.

⁷ Claude A. Helvetius, *De l’esprit*, (Verviers: Marabout, 1973), 375.

⁸ Johann G. Fichte, *Fichtes Werke*, vol. I.1, (Berlin: Walter der Gruyter, 1971), 110; *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. D. Breazeale, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 96; F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1856–1861), 163; *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, trans. F. Marti (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 120.

quasi-identity Goethe established between the artist and a proper scientific approach certainly sets him apart however from this common view. For Helvetius, the common point between all these different geniuses is the idea of *invention*, the word ‘génie’ (in French) “derives from *gignere, gigno, I breed, I produce*,”⁹ it is, as Hamann remarks in a 1760 letter to Herder, intimately (!) related to the *genitalia*¹⁰. But in Helvetius’ case, this ‘invention’ aspect is immediately downplayed. Sure it marks its time, and the genius’ name remains linked to that period and that creation: Cartesian Geometry, Newtonian Physics, Corneille’s classicism, etc., but Helvetius insists on the fact that this ‘invention’ is merely the synthesis of previous efforts and discoveries in their respective fields. There is no overlapping, as with Goethe, between the aesthetic and the epistemic, no extra-individual dimension in which the genius entertains a specific relation to nature, nothing of the sort. Helvetius’ genius is closer to a form of ingenuity (from the Latin *Ingenium*¹¹) which brings together various discoveries, codes, tendencies in a same field into a consistent whole. But as we shall see, Goethe’s notion of genius has a much more profound metaphysical or ontological meaning and goes beyond the issue of one’s individual contribution to a field of human activity or knowledge to deal with our very interaction with nature¹².

So, in this paper, I want to clarify through an examination of the notion of genius the specificity of Goethe’s approach to science and contrast it with Kant’s and Hegel’s respective positions.

To do so, I will first explain the reason why Kant refused the idea of genius in science, I will then explain how Goethe’s own approach to science and nature seems to allow such an idea of a scientific genius able to grasp the genius(es) of nature. And to carry this out, we need to look at the polysemy of the notion of genius itself. I will then turn to Hegel and his own way of dealing with this issue in relation with philosophy understood as a demonstrative science.

2. KANT’S REJECTION OF THE SCIENTIFIC GENIUS

It is somewhat ironic that Kant, who had specifically reserved the category of the genius to fine arts, was himself often coined a ‘philosophical genius’ in post-Kantian philosophy. But the question is, why does he limit the scope of the genius

⁹ Helvetius, *De l’esprit*, 375.

¹⁰ Quoted in Alain Pons, “Genius”, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, ed. B. Cassin, trans. E. Apter, J. Lezra & M. Wood, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 383.

¹¹ The concept of *Ingenium* which “refers both to a certain penetration of the mind and to a synthetic faculty for comparing ideas that are distant from one another” (Pons, “Genius”, 380) may be at play in the artistic creative process through the production of metaphors and image, but it is, in science at least, less a power of creation, than of synthesis, of being able to make the connections between various discovery, rather than of having the inspiration to produce new discoveries.

¹² Even the aspect of creativity and invention appears as secondary to a certain extent in Goethe’s conception of the genius. It is nature that rather expresses itself *through* us, as natural beings. And if this expression of nature can take the form of poetic or scientific writings, it could just as well express itself through the making of pots and pans, see Johann P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. A. Blunden, (London: Penguin, 2020), 132; Simmel, “Kant and Goethe”, 186–187.

to the realm of art only? Without going into too many details, it follows directly from Kant's concept of beauty, whose rule cannot be derived from any determining principle. Otherwise, we could simply *know* something to be beautiful and produce beauty *ad infinitum* following such a determining principle. But as Kant argues: "fine art cannot itself devise the rule according to which it can bring about its product", it can only establish "the way in which the product is possible" (AK 5, 307; *Critique of Judgment*, 112). It is the artist's *genius*, or better yet the masterpiece itself—'das geniale Kunstwerk' one could say—that sets the rule of art: "*Genius* is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*), writes Kant, *through which* Nature gives the rule to Art" (AK 5, 307; *Critique of Judgment*, 112). In the specific case of art, when it is a matter of beauty, no rule exists prior to the genius' expression and one might add that it doesn't really survive *past* this expression. Re-doing Beethoven or Picasso is not doing art, and just like an artist trying to reproduce its past success and unable to renew herself is not an artist *per se*: "beautiful Art is only possible as a product of Genius" (AK 5, 307; *Critique of Judgment*, 113) which is characterized by its *originality*, its *exemplarity*, and the inability to "describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products" (AK 5, 308; *Critique of Judgment*, 113).

And this is specifically where the difference with science is most striking:

Even if a man thinks or invents for himself, and does not merely take in what others have taught, even if he discovers many things in art and science, this is not the right ground for calling such a (perhaps great) *head*, a genius (as opposed to him who because he can only learn and imitate is called a *shallow-pate*). For even these things could be learned, they lie in the natural path of him who investigates and reflects according to rules; and they do not differ specifically from what can be acquired by industry through imitation. Thus we can readily learn all that *Newton* has set forth in his immortal work on the Principles of Natural Philosophy, however great a head was required to discover it; but we cannot learn to write spirited poetry, however express may be the precepts of the art and however excellent its models. The reason is that *Newton* could make all his steps, from the first elements of geometry to his own great profound discoveries, intuitively plain and definite as regards consequence, not only to himself but to everyone else. But a *Homer* or a *Wieland* cannot show how his Ideas, so rich in fancy and yet so full of thought, come together in his head, simply because he does not know and therefore cannot teach others. (AK 5, 308–309; *Critique of Judgment*, 113)

Why is it so? Well, because the rules of science, its method, the logic of inference, etc. are established not by the scientist herself. She merely applies them better or to a new material or with ingenuity (*ingenium*) that may or may not be innate, and through which she is able to link and synthesize the different aspects of a same domain of knowledge. But this is not the case with fine arts. Nature transmits the rule of art through the *genius* who herself cannot explain the process through which she has created her masterpiece or her work of art. She can explain her technical process, but not the result, not the inspiration (which is, in itself, a religiously-charged expression).

The interesting point about that contrast is the fact that the element of ingenuity (*ingenium*) often associated to the modern concept of *genius* (see Helvétius) appears as far less important to Kant's argument than the more antique—and religious—conception which makes of the *genius* “that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to a man at his birth, [and] from whose suggestion the original Ideas proceed” (AK 5, 308; *Critique of Judgment*, 113). Indeed, a scientist can be ingenious, she can put together better and faster than others what is needed to solve a problem, but the process itself can be taught and therefore the steps could have been made, at a slower pace, through laborious work by a lesser mind.¹³ Here, Kant is not far from the French tradition best exemplified by Helvetius that downplays the ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘ecstatic’ (again two religiously-charged expressions) dimension of the genius. But what Kant rejects from the field of science, he defends in the field of art. Here, the artist is not her own master, she cannot explain the origin of her inspiration, teach how to produce great art, she appears merely as the vessel of nature in a sense, which speaks to her and through her by means of this intermediary which is her *genius*. As we shall see, this reiteration of the old idea of the genius—or the *daimon* or the *djinn*—as an intermediate divinity acting as a proxy—traditionally for God or the gods, but in the modern setting of eighteenth-century aesthetics, for nature—is also central to Goethe's and Hegel's conception of the genius.

3. GOETHE'S REHABILITATION OF THE GENIUS IN SCIENCE

Goethe's approach to science could indeed be interpreted as an extrapolation of the aesthetical function of the genius to make it part of the scientist's work as well. Just as nature, through the genius, establishes the rule of art for Kant, it establishes the rule of science for Goethe, which implies and explains in a sense Goethe's general rejection of Kant's theoretical framework as it takes place in the *First Critique* and as we saw with Simmel's earlier quote. Just like the artist and her work acquire aesthetic value by the genius which depends, in the end, on nature and which serves rather as a spark for genius to come than as a model to imitate; for Goethe, the scientist's intuition certainly likewise possesses this genius-aspect, which implies a certain acute sensibility toward nature, the gift-giving power which is responsible both for our artistic and scientific discoveries.

The scientist is as much a genius as the artist for Goethe, as she is “focused on the task of listening to nature to overhear the secret of her process” (HA 13, 37;

¹³ This entails no depreciation of the “great men” that the scientists can be according to Kant (AK 5, 309; *Critique of Judgment*, 114). While they cannot be geniuses since the rules that govern their practice are given and shared by any finite intellectual being as established by Kant's First Critique, “the human race owes [to them] much gratitude” (AK 5, 309; *Critique of Judgment*, 114) for the progress they make in various fields of human activity. They are, nonetheless, not “nature's favourites”, handpicked and acting according to rule they cannot themselves transmit. See Christoph Tobler's “Nature” in Goethe, HA 13, 46; *Scientific Studies*, 4. See also Plato's *Ion*.

Scientific Studies, 44), which allows the production of (new) knowledge hardly reducible to the mental and cognitive processes of the Understanding. As such, Goethe's theory of science insists on the role of intuition and even inspiration, which is at play both in the artist and the scientist (HA 13, 30–31; *Scientific Studies*, 31–32). Beyond the technical know-how of their respective trades, the talent of the artist and the scientist for Goethe is also the ability to see and hear what nature is showing us, to cultivate, as “unbiased hosts¹⁴”, a certain openness to the genius of nature¹⁵. The only difference perhaps is that the object of an artist's inspiration is nature's *beauty*, while the scientist seeks its *truth*. Now, we saw that aesthetic and epistemic judgment are sometime intertwined in Goethe: there is a certain beauty to his *Morphology* and contrariwise something distasteful in the way mechanism dismembers an organism in order to understand it. Yet, one could argue that in science, beauty is subordinated to truth, whereas in art it might be the opposite. As Goethe argues in his essay “Experiment as Mediator between Object and Subject”, while there is something pleasing in the work of art or in the beauty the artist seeks to grasp:

A far more difficult task arises when a person's thirst for *knowledge* kindles in him a desire to view nature's objects in their own right and in relation to one another. On the one hand, he loses the yardstick which came to his aid when he looked at things from the human standpoint; i.e., in relation to himself. This yardstick of pleasure and displeasure, attraction and repulsion, help and harm, he must now renounce absolutely; as a neutral, seemingly godlike being he must seek out and *examine what is, not what pleases*. (HA 13, 10; *Scientific Studies*, 11; my emphasis)

This kind of *epochè* where the subject suspends her own interests and inclinations, her practical relation to the object and so on, allows her to see and examine what *is*, what nature is *telling*. And the issue is not primarily the discovery itself (HA 13, 12–13; *Scientific Studies*, 12), since nature can reveal itself and aspects of itself a number of time. In this regard, the stories surrounding the discovery of the vertebral theory of the skull are interesting if we set aside the polemic that ensued between Oken and Goethe.¹⁶ What is interesting is how similar the stories of the discoveries are. Goethe would have had the intuition in 1790 or 1791 while tumbling across a battered sheep's skull in a Jewish cemetery near Venice, while Oken would have had a similar intuition while traveling through the Harz mountains and coming across a deer's skull. Now, if we disregard the

¹⁴ Goethe, HA 13, 104; *Botanical Writings*, trans. B. Mueller, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1952), 169 (modified).

¹⁵ See Christoph Tobler, “Die Natur,” in *Gedenkausgabe*, by Goethe, vol. 16, (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), 923; Goethe, *Botanical Writings*, 243. The sentence referred here was cut out by Goethe in the published version of the poem, which appeared in the *Tiefurter Zeitung*. See Goethe, HA 13, 46.

¹⁶ On the polemic between Goethe and Oken, see Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 491–502.

possibilities that Goethe reinterpreted his own memory or that Oken somehow forged the story after having gained access to Goethe's unpublished papers, what we may see, from what I take to be the perspective of Goethean science – even though it wasn't Goethe's perspective at the time – is how given similar circumstances, nature can reveal its secrets to individuals of similar disposition. The genius is not something that is merely individual, it speaks of a certain relation towards nature. And just as we might say that, for Herder, the genius “is not a purely individual phenomenon, but only expresses the ‘mind’ or, if you like, the ‘genius’ of a people.”¹⁷ Likewise, we could say that the genius in Goethean science is not purely individual, but expresses the genius of nature. And this is where the idea of the *genius* as a divine entity comes in. In a letter to Hegel dated April 13, 1821, Goethe defines the *Urphänomene*, the archetypal and primordial phenomena, which are precisely at the heart of his scientific approach, as “*dämonischen Wesen*”, “demonic beings”.¹⁸ This is interesting, because according to Van Eynde: “In Goethe's theory of the genius, the use of the word ‘demonic’ means the submission of the artist, in the act of creation itself, to nature's donation.”¹⁹ But precisely, in his letter to Hegel this ‘demonic’ dimension relates not to Goethe's aesthetics, but to his scientific theory.

Here, one can easily make a connection with the classical figure of Socrates's *daimon*, his good genius to which he submits himself, just like the artist submits herself to the demonic influence of nature for Goethe. This should come as no surprise. Hegel will explicitly make that connection in his 1827-28 *Lectures on Subjective Spirit*,²⁰ but, as we saw, it was already implicit in Kant's *Third Critique*. We also find it of course in Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*²¹ and in Jacobi's *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza*, where he writes that:

We have a friend in us – a delicate sanctuary in our soul, where God's voice and intention has long since resounded, sharp and clear. The ancients called it the *daimon*, the *good genius* of man, whom they revered with so much youthful love, and obeyed with so much respect. This is what the Christ meant by the *clear eye* that is the light of life and enlightens the entire body. David asks for it in prayer, as the *Spirit of Life* that leads him on the straight and level

¹⁷ Pons, “Genius”, 383.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, vol. 2, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1969), 257; *The Letters*, trans. C. Butler & C. Seiler, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 693. On the ‘demonic’ in Goethe's thought, see Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 392, 394–395; Angus Nicholls, *Goethe's Concept of the Daemonic*, (New York: Camden House, 2006) and Angus Nicholls, “Dämonisch, das Dämonische (Daemonic, the Daemonic),” *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, vol. 4 (2024), [<https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/70>].

¹⁹ Laurent Van Eynde, *La Libre raison du phénomène*, (Paris: Vrin, 1998), 63 (my translation).

²⁰ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 25.2 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–), 693 (hereafter: GW).

²¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, online edition: [<http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Schiller,+Friedrich/Theoretische+Schriften/%C3%9Cber+naive+und+sentimentalische+Dichtung>]; *Essays*, trans. Anonymous, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1910), 272sq.

path, etc. Let's call it *conscience, inner sense, reason, the logos in us, or what you will*.²²

It is what grants us knowledge for Jacobi and constitutes an intermediary between the divine (God) and ourselves, just like it appears in Goethe or Kant to act as an intermediary between nature and us. The difference being that, according to Kant, it plays no role in science. In other words, one could say that Goethe, *contra* Jacobi, would say that the genius does not originate from God or any divine entity beyond nature. This is precisely the reason of his falling out with Jacobi after the publication of the latter's *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung* (1811) (HA 12, 365; *Scientific Studies*, 303). On the other hand, against Kant, he would say that the genius cannot be confined merely to the realm of art.

As 'demonic beings', the *Urphänomene* allow us to know and comprehend nature in its becoming, as something living and changing. We do not contend ourselves with merely describing its appearance, or with merely trying to deduce the laws behind its appearance, we seize through the appearance, through observations, its very life. The *Urphänomen* being this archetype that manifests itself within all particular instances without being reducible to any particular. But if I am correct, the conditions by which one can grasp such *Urphänomene* which are neither mere sensible nor merely conceptual realities depend both on our natural disposition or inclination to intuition and a donation *from* nature²³ that gathers at one point in time and space the necessary condition for a scientist to intuit the reality about nature. This is why the genius is not merely an individual phenomenon, but a kind of communion with nature. Now, we can certainly try to train our mind to be open to this potential donation of nature,²⁴ but we cannot provoke nature into revealing its secret. Nothing is more foreign to Goethe than Schelling's interventionist comparison between experimentation and prophecy.

Nature, [Schelling writes in his *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*], must [...] be compelled to act under certain definite conditions, which either do not exist in it at all, or else exist only as modified by others. – Such an invasion of Nature we call an experiment. Every experiment is a question put to Nature, to which it is compelled to give a reply. But every question contains an implicit *a priori* judgment; every experiment that is an experiment, is a prophecy.²⁵

²² Friedrich H. Jacobi, *Werke*, vol. 1.1, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 142–143; *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. G. di Giovanni, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 247–248.

²³ What Goethe also calls a "gift from above" (HA 13, 35; *Scientific Studies*, 43) (translation modified). We see a similar formulation in Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 546, where the relation between these gifts "as pure children of God" and the "daemonic" is made.

²⁴ See Goethe, GA, Bd. 16, 857.

²⁵ Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke* 3, 276; *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. K. R. Peterson, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 197. In a sense this conception of experimentation as prophecy is based on the idea of nature as an *a priori* system which could be grounded on certain principles. Such a conception based on a transcendental understanding of nature is however largely foreign to Goethe who would perfectly share Olaf Breidbach's critique of Schelling: "The experiment is a 'prophecy' for him; I can't ask about what I don't know. But it is therefore prophecy in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecy. Every question to nature arises from the systematic relation with a structure of knowledge" (Olaf Breidbach, *Das Organische in Hegels Denken*, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1982), 155 [my translation]).

On the opposite, Goethe writes that “The phenomena must be freed once and for all from their grim torture chamber of empiricism, mechanism, and dogmatism” (HA 12, 449; *Scientific Studies*, 309), for “Nature will reveal nothing under torture” (HA 12, 434; *Scientific Studies*, 307; see also HA 13, 37; *Scientific Studies*, 44). It does not mean however the utter rejection of experimentation *per se* as it has sometime been suggested. On the contrary, as we can see from Goethe’s correspondence with Hegel for instance, in which they discuss the experimental protocol that could help sustain Goethe’s theory of colour, and in which we see Goethe sending some *Urphänomene* as he calls them (scrambled glass, glass rod, prisms, etc.) to Hegel in order for him to reproduce the observations which Goethe describes in his *Treatise*, Goethean science *does* rely on repeatable observations and experimentation. In his book, Richards insists on this aspect of Goethe’s thought,²⁶ it wasn’t the experimental aspect of Newtonian science *per se* that bothered Goethe, but the fact that it appeared to him to be done merely in order to confirm rather than infirm or ground his theory.²⁷ Experimentation is then no less essential to Goethean science than it is to modern mechanistic science, although Goethe argues for a protocol that would leave the phenomenon itself free to answer in its own way without being constrained to live up to *our* expectations.

This approach will thus imply a certain openness to nature, which in a sense speak of its own voice through its ‘demonic’ figures (HA 13, 31; *Scientific Studies*, 33). This openness which is the subjective disposition toward an objective donation of nature takes the form of an intuitive rather than discursive process. The “attention is awakened” (HA 13, 12; *Scientific Studies*, 12) so to speak, which incidentally brings us close in a sense to Schiller’s depiction of the naïve genius (which Goethe took to designate himself in his friend’s text). In “*die Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien*” for instance, Goethe writes that:

Because they may be grouped under one concept, it gradually became clear to me that the intuition (*Anschauung*) could even be valid in a higher sense [...] I followed (*ging nach*) the variations of all forms as they appeared in front of me (*wie sie mir vorkamen*) [...] the original identity of all plants parts completely shone upon me (*leuchtete ein*). (HA 13, 164; *Botanical Writings*, 162 [modified])²⁸

But it is precisely this intuitive dimension of the genius that Hegel will criticize, if not in science in general, at least in the philosophical sciences.

²⁶ See Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 436.

²⁷ Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 437.

²⁸ The choice of verbs in this passage particularly underlines, in my view, the active character of nature and the somewhat passive character of the observer.

4. HEGEL'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN NATURAL SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Responsive to Goethe's scientific works, Hegel seems *prima facie* to agree with the possibility of geniuses in both science and art, Goethe being a prime example of such an accomplishment in actually both fields. Yet, intuition remains, for Hegel, embedded in the arbitrariness and contingency of a proper disposition and donation that needs to be superseded in the end by discursive thought to properly ground itself on the necessity of reason.

Making science rest on the primordial donation of nature means making science rest on the contingency of such a donation, on the existence of genius-individuals to whom nature reveals the truth about itself, without mentioning the unjustified presupposition of a certain congruity between the rationality at play in the natural phenomena and our own ability to rationally grasp them through the work of intuition. Unless we justify such a presupposition and demonstrate its legitimacy, it can only serve as the spark of a scientific project, but never as its ground. For a systematic science—and following Kant, all sciences need to be systematic for Hegel as well (GW 13, §7, 19)—must constitute itself as a totality in which every proposition, every principle, etc. must in the end be justified through its syllogistic articulation with the whole. That means that while intuition may play a determinate role in the production of a rational knowledge, it cannot serve as its grounding principle. But this is precisely how Hegel understands the role of intuition and the genius in Goethean science.

This seems to lead to a certain difficulty. On the one hand, Hegel supports Goethean science, at least in the fields of life sciences, meteorology and theory of colors against what he calls the science of the Understanding (which constituted Kant's own paradigmatic model of science). On the other hand, this time with Kant and against Goethe to some extent, Hegel argues for a discursive conception of science that needs to be explainable, presented through a syllogistic structure or at least a demonstrative one.

On the one hand, he writes that: "Goethe's *Metamorphose der Pflanzen* marks the beginning of a rational conception of the nature of plant-life, in that it has forced attention away from a concern with mere details to a recognition of the *unity of life*²⁹". Or that "It is to *Goethe* we owe the *theory of colour adequate to the Notion*" (GW 24.3, 1355; *Philosophy of Nature*, 206). He decries the reception of Goethe's work by the academic *milieu*:

Goethe has been assailed for being a poet, not a professor. Only those who espouse certain jargon, certain theories, belong to the guild; what others say is quite ignored as if it simply did not exist. Often, such people want to form a caste, to be in exclusive possession of science and let no one else form a

²⁹ Hegel, GW 20, §345, 349; *Philosophy of Nature. Being Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 311.

judgement [...] In such a caste (*Klasse*), certain fundamental conceptions are developed which mould everyone's thinking. If anyone does not speak as they do, he is supposed not to understand the subject; as if only the brethren of the guild had understanding of it. They are right; we do not grasp the subject in terms of *these* categories of the *Understanding*, in terms of this metaphysics that they think should govern our thought on the matter. (GW 24.3, 1362; *Philosophy of Nature*, 211)

And this defense is done despite the fact that Goethe's science relies heavily on a certain notion of intuition, that is often conceived as antinomic with Hegel's own approach. Although, Goethe's scientific work seems to rely on his "great flair" (GW 24.3, 1355; *Philosophy of Nature*, 206), that is, on his genius and ingenuity, it often presents a more interesting approach of nature and science than its *verständliche* counterpart.

On the other hand, however, Hegel is closer to Kant's—or Schiller's perhaps—rejection of the genius and intuition in science when he writes that:

The naïve mind (*der unbefangene Geist*), when it vividly contemplates Nature, as in the suggestive examples we often come across in Goethe, feels the life and the universal relationship in Nature; it divines that the universe is an organic whole and a totality pervaded by Reason, and it also feels in single forms of life an intimate oneness with itself; but even if we put together all those ingredients of the flower the result is still not a flower. And so, in the *Philosophy of Nature*, people have fallen back on intuition (*Anschauung*) and set it above reflective thought; but this is a mistake, for one cannot philosophize out of intuition. (β) What is intuited must also be thought, the isolated parts must be brought back by thought to simple universality; this thought unity is the Notion, which contains the specific differences, but as an immanent self-moving unity. (GW 24.3, 1183; *Philosophy of Nature*, 11–12)

One way we can reconcile this tension is by making the distinction between the empirical sciences and the philosophical sciences. And while Goethe is interested in the firsts, and his approach, for Hegel, seems indeed to offer certain insights that make his approach superior to the science of the *Understanding* as it actually grasps the truth of the matter, the unity of life or the identity through difference, etc.,³⁰ for Hegel, such an approach cannot be imported into the realm of speculative or philosophical science. And this is not a problem, to the extent that Goethe doesn't claim to do philosophy. I think it only becomes problematic for Hegel when the romantics adopt a position similar to Goethe's, but in the realm of philosophy. This, I think, is Hegel's point. But to go back to the figure of the genius, this means that for Hegel, it seems possible to have geniuses in (empirical) sciences, but not in philosophical sciences.

³⁰ Hegel, GW 24.3, 1355; *Philosophy of Nature*, 206: "It was Goethe's great flair which led him to say of this notional union of different, *This is so*; only the thinking consciousness can reckon with the fact that reasonableness means identity in abiding difference."

Why? To answer that question, I propose to look briefly at Hegel's own notion of the genius. Like Kant and Goethe before him, Hegel's notion of genius refers back to its etymological origin as this "divinity presiding over an individual's birth" and acting as its "guardian divinity".³¹ As I have shown elsewhere,³² this concept, at least in the way Hegel uses it in his *Anthropology*, is quite complex, and its meaning somewhat fluctuates. However, it is possible to say one thing: the genius acts as a heterogeneous force. It imposes itself from the outside and therefore constitute an obstacle to the fulfillment of one's autonomy.

In the *Encyclopedia*, the genius is defined in the following terms: "by genius we commonly mean the total mental self-hood, as it has existence of its own, and constitutes the subjective substantiality of someone else who is only externally treated as an individual and has only a nominal independence."³³ Accordingly, it seems to imply a relation between two distinct subjectivities, one of which is actively influencing if not dominating the other, as in Hegel's example "of the child in its mother's womb" (GW 20, §405, 404; *Philosophy of Mind*, 94).

Now, as we saw, this is congruent with the way Kant conceives the genius in the realm of art, where nature dictates through the genius the rule of art in a way the artist cannot herself explain. It is a dull influence, just like the one a mother exerts on her yet-to-be-born child for Hegel. But in the process of knowledge, which grounds science for Kant, such a passivity is not at play. Quite the contrary, we *actively* organize the diversity according to the transcendental categories of the understanding following Kant's Copernican revolution.³⁴ With Goethe, on the contrary, both aesthetic and epistemic judgments appear to have a similar general structure, although important distinctions occur precisely because the aspect of nature we seek to grasp within science and art is quite different. Yet, in both cases, the possibility of a great work of art or a scientific apprehension of the truth depends on a certain donation of nature, a certain openness of the artist/scientist and a certain relentlessness to pursue one's intuition. But for Hegel, if nature's tendency to gift certain individuals with insights on its quintessence may exist precisely in the realm of natural science, which is after all stuck in the realm of contingency that is nature for Hegel, it cannot be applied to philosophy without jeopardizing its very foundation as a science. Philosophy is bound by the laws of logic and consistency, it is demonstrative in nature, however complex and difficult the demonstration can be. As such, it cannot rest on the contingent ground of the genius.

³¹ Pons, "Genius", 380.

³² See Emmanuel Chaput, "Is the Psychiatrist a Good or Evil Genius for her Patient According to Hegel?", *Studia Hegeliana*, vol. 10 (2024), 131–149.

³³ Hegel, GW 20, §405, 404; *Philosophy of Mind. Being Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace & A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 95.

³⁴ Kant, AK 3, 11–12; *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer & A.W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 110.

5. CONCLUSION

Naturally, the issue is far more complex than the reconstruction I can offer here. It would basically require to differentiate Kant's conception of science from Goethe's and from Hegel's. But what I wanted to point out here was merely the role the concept of genius plays, despite a very similar understanding of its nature, in the very different conceptions of art and science of our authors. For Kant, the genius can simply not enact epistemic judgments about nature, only aesthetic ones, precisely because of the distinction he makes between judgment of beauty and knowledge. For Hegel, however, Goethe's approach actually gets something right and allows us to go beyond the Kantian distinction between the realm of *Erscheinungen* and the thing in-itself. But as Goethe's conception of the genius in the realm of science rests on the contingency and arbitrariness of nature's donation, it cannot be suited for any given science. It may work in the realm of natural sciences, since nature is itself the realm of contingency, but a philosophical system must rest on a self-determining necessity that is precisely incompatible with Hegel's conception of the genius as an externally-determining force. To the openly conflicting views that oppose Goethe to Kant, we can thus oppose the idea of a 'cold-peace' between Hegel and Goethe: as long as Goethe's view does not infringe on the realm of philosophy and remains within the bound of natural science, it is a welcome contribution to the critique of the shortcomings of a mechanical and *verständliche* conception of empirical sciences. And I think that Goethe would probably agree with such a delineation of his project, not because he had no interest in philosophy, nor because his views would be devoid of any philosophical interest—far from it actually—but simply because he never conceived, as Simmel rightly notes,³⁵ his own intellectual project as a philosophy in any formal sense of the word.

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³⁵ Simmel, "Kant and Goethe", 162–163.

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