

For Hegel & Religion Conference, Sydney September 2010
Andy Blunden

The *Urphänomen* and the Absolute

A central element of Hegel's view of the relation of man to the Absolute, he appropriated from Goethe's Romantic science. Goethe's Pantheistic conception of *Urphänomen* was the single archetypal phenomena exhibiting the essential features of some natural phenomena. Recognition of the *Urphänomen* constituted a glimpse of the Deity. Although the *Urphänomen* is specific to some given complex, Goethe came to see in it a general principle. Hegel appropriated Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen*, not unlike Herder's *Schwerpunkt*, in the *Phenomenology*, and transformed the archetypal norm of a *Gestalt des Bewußtseins* into the *Begriff* of the *Logic*, as an archetype of the Absolute.

Hegel frequently expressed his admiration for Goethe and was one of the few to unswervingly support Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1988), but he was silent in relation to Goethe's friend, the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Hegel's philosophy owes more than is generally acknowledged to Goethe, but it also owes a great deal to Herder, who maintained a constant correspondence with Goethe, until Herder's death in 1803.

Both Herder and Goethe made their reputation at a young age, and were among the first to take up a critical position in relation to the Kantian philosophy. The Young Hegel's *System of Ethical Life* (1979), with its schema for the mutual subsumption of Concept and Intuition through the use of artefacts and language, the raising of children and participation in normalised social practices is strongly reminiscent of Herder (2004). Herder had made his name with his 1772 essay *On the Origins of Language*, in which he defined thought as working with symbols, and it was Herder who had coined the terms *Zeitgeist* and *Volksgeist* in his philosophy of history. These views would later inspire cultural anthropology, but in the context of Hegel's youth, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that they contributed to his own ideas about the construction of the universal. Also, it was Herder (1940) who, in 1784, not only rehabilitated Spinoza, but criticised Spinoza's mechanical conception of God (or Nature), claiming that Nature was *active*, with contradictory forces striving against one another. It was a kind of Pantheism which left room for indeterminacy and the individual human will.

But it is not such general points of similarity I am concerned with here, but a quite specific concept linking Goethe's scientific work with a concept central to Hegel's whole philosophy. In his effort to understand the character of a people, Herder proposed the concept of *Schwerpunkt*. This is one of those untranslatable German words; it could be 'focal point' or 'centre of gravity'; following the OED (1993), I will call it

‘strong point’. Every people has their strong point, a central form of social practice from which they cannot and must not be moved. It is characteristic of them and everything depends on it. The same idea also applied to an individual person. The character and way of thinking of every people and every person was unique, and could be characterized by this *Schwerpunkt*. This approach to understanding a complex whole: “έν και πάν,” is characteristic of the kind of Pantheism which Herder shared with Goethe, and it is Goethe’s application of the idea to the study of Nature to which I am coming. At the same time that Herder was conducting his critique of Spinoza, Goethe was travelling in Italy, writing to Herder of his progress in understanding the variety of plant forms, his search for the έν και πάν.

Goethe wanted to understand plant life, and his aim was, by patient observation and comparison, to be able to sketch a plant-form (the *Urpflanz*) which had all the essential characteristics which made a plant a plant, but lacked any particular, contingent attributes. Later, in a famous encounter recorded in his Autobiography, Goethe recounted how he showed Schiller, who was an enthusiastic Kantian at the time, a sketch of his idea, and Schiller retorted: “But this is not an empirical experience, it is an idea,” to which Goethe politely responded: “How splendid that I have ideas without knowing it, and can see them before my very eyes.” Thus, Goethe sought the *concept* of a plant, but in the form of a sensual image, given to and comprehensible to the senses. This was, among other things, his response to the Kantian dichotomy of Concept and Sensation. The *Urphänomen* was both idea and image.

Expressed more generally, Goethe’s problem was this: how can we understand a complex process as a whole, as a *Gestalt*? Goethe rejected a number of approaches which are characteristic of what he called ‘Newtonian’ natural science. He rejected the method of hypothesising some force or vibration or principle which controlled the complex whole from beyond the horizon of phenomena. Hegel polemicised along the same lines in the *Logic*. To say that people come to the city because the city exerts a force of attraction explains nothing. Newton’s idea of acceleration being *caused* by gravity simply shifts the problem from understanding a form of motion sensuously given to us, to understanding an invisible and baseless force, known only through its expression for which it is supposed to be the explanation.

Goethe also rejected the conception of a complex whole by collecting things together according to some inessential attribute, as in Linnaeus’s taxonomy. Goethe carried Linnaeus’s book with him everywhere because it helped him identify organisms, but he insisted that it gave him no knowledge of the essential nature of the organism. Goethe also rejected the instrumental/teleological explanation of Nature. The *Urphänomen* was Goethe’s solution to the problem of how to conceive of the *whole*.

This idea of a single, archetypal phenomenon which manifests all that is essential about the larger, complex whole of which it is a part, is recognisably the same as the idea of *Schwerpunkt* which Herder had worked out earlier in his study of *Volksgeist* and Goethe (1989) constantly reported progress in his work on the *Urphänomen* in his

letters to Herder. Not only does knowledge of the *Urphänomen* allow a person to understand the complex whole, by means of a sensuous, even visceral, representation of the process, but it also *constitutes* the whole, because it plainly exhibits the idea which characterises the whole phenomenon as a *Gestalt*. Goethe applied this principle in all his natural scientific studies, his morphology, his botany and most famously, his theory of colours. Each of these processes constituted a whole which could be apprehended and understood through the *Urphänomen* of that process. But Goethe was very much a believer in the idea of Nature as a whole, with man a part of that whole. “Were the eye not of the Sun, how could we behold the light?” he asked (1988: 164). Thus, in the course of Goethe’s life, the word *Urphänomen* took on a more general meaning. Every *Urphänomen* gives man a *glimpse* of the Deity, and so the *Urphänomen* acquired a general meaning resting on the idea of pursuit of the understanding of Nature as a whole through its *Urphänomene*.

Goethe quite explicitly connected his pursuit of the *Urphänomen* with Herder’s critique of Spinoza. He summed up his own conception of God thus:

“As students of nature we are pantheists, as poets polytheists, as moral beings monotheists” (Maxims & Reflections § 807).

This contextual conception of God, as the Absolute within the context of a specific mode of activity or pursuit, is also very Hegelian. As Goethe said: there are many *Urphänomene*, but only one Idea...

“... the Divine, which reveals Itself in *Urphänomene*, physical and moral, behind which it dwells, and which proceed from It” (To Eckermann, February 13 1829, quoted in Heinemann 1934).

I will now turn to the one piece of textual evidence that we have that Hegel not only appreciated Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*, but appropriated the idea behind it. On 24 February 1821, Hegel wrote to Goethe highlighting the importance he attached to the *Urphänomen* and his reading of its place in Goethean science:

“This spiritual breath – it is of this that I really wished to speak and that alone is worth speaking of – is what has necessarily given me such great delight in Your Excellency’s exposition of the phenomena surrounding entopic colours. What is simple and abstract, what you strikingly call the *Urphänomen*, you place at the very beginning. You then show how the intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates the concrete phenomena, and you regulate the whole progression so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite, and so that the complex now appears in full clarity through this decomposition. To ferret out the *Urphänomen*, to free it from those further environs which are accidental to it, to apprehend as we say abstractly – this I take to be a matter of spiritual intelligence for nature, just as I take that

course generally to be the truly scientific knowledge in this field” (Hegel 1984: 698).

Hegel goes on to speak of his philosophical appropriation of the *Urphänomen*:

“But may I now still speak to you of the special interest that an *Urphänomen*, thus cast in relief, has for us philosophers, namely that we can put such a preparation – with Your Excellency’s permission – directly to philosophical use. But if we have at last worked our initially oyster-like Absolute – whether it be grey or entirely black, suit yourself – through towards air and light to the point that the Absolute has itself come to desire this air and light, we now need to throw open the window so as to lead the Absolute fully out into the light of day” (Hegel 1984: 699).

Here Hegel recognizes that in Goethe’s hands, the concept escapes the airless depths of the philosopher’s study and connects up with Nature and the everyday life of the people. And he observes:

“the two worlds greet each other: our abstruse world and the world of phenomenal being. Thus out of rocks and even something metallic Your Excellency prepares for us granite, which we can easily get a handle on because of its Trinitarian nature and which we can assimilate” (Hegel 1984: 699).

The “Trinitarian nature” refers to granite “as a compound of quartz, felspar, and mica” (2009: §126), which Hegel understood as a *necessary*, rather than an accidental compound of different matters. Thus Hegel is here indicating, albeit obscurely, that he assimilates the *Urphänomen* by means of Universal, Individual and Particular, the three moments of the abstract notion, the concept of what is to be the subject matter of a science.

Goethe responded to Hegel’s letter on 13 April, sending him the gift of an optical prism and a stained glass wine glass which Goethe had referred to in the *Theory of Colours*, with a note saying:

“Seeing that you conduct yourself so amicably with the *Urphänomen*, and that you even recognize in me an affiliation with these demonic essences, I first take the liberty of depositing a pair of such phenomena before the philosopher’s door, persuaded that he will treat them as well as he has treated their brothers” (Hegel 1984: 693).

and dedicating the wine glass as follows:

“The *Urphänomen* very humbly begs the Absolute to give it a cordial welcome.” (Breton: 346)

In this way, Goethe acknowledged the compliment Hegel had paid him and gave recognition to this lynch-pin connecting their work. Hegel replied on 2 August: “... wine has already lent mighty assistance to natural philosophy, which is concerned to demonstrate that spirit is in nature” (1984: 699), etc., etc., etc.

The first stage of Hegel's appropriation of this idea is exhibited in the *Phenomenology*. Here Hegel presents his subject matter as a series of *Gestalten des Bewußtseins* (formations of consciousness), that is, a series of complex wholes which have to be grasped conceptually. The *Bildungsroman* that was presented in the *Phenomenology* was narrated from three different points of view. Each *Gestalt* is understood in turn as a way of thinking, a way of living (social formation) and as a constellation of artefacts by means of which people reflect on their activity. At the heart of each *Gestalt* is a concept understood as rules of inference, which is the ultimate standard of truth within that formation, the court of final appeal, so to speak, which must withstand all sceptical attack if the formation is to survive. This concept, the logically most primitive principle and form of practice, characterises the whole social formation. Here surely we see Herder's *Schwerpunkt*, reframed within Hegel's rational conception.

In modern readings of the *Phenomenology*, these *Gestalten des Bewußtseins* are to be understood (Pinkard 1996) as 'projects' rather than something resembling the diverse, multiethnic societies found in modern nation states. Such a concept of a *Gestalt des Bewußtseins* would encompass a branch of science, a school of art, social movement, profession, and so on, any community of practice organised around a concept of itself and pursuing a shared common ideal. Within any such project there is always some concept which finally determines whether some action is consistent with the idea of the project. The implication is that Hegel used the same approach as Goethe, but here applied not to a complex of natural phenomena, but to a cultural whole, an historical social formation. In place of the *Urphänomen* we have a concept of truth.

At this point we can see how Hegel has appropriated Goethe's pantheistic conception of Nature for the purpose of conceptualizing formations of consciousness and their dynamics. Goethe (1988: 13) said: "The greatest discoveries are made not so much by individuals as by the age," and perhaps this kind of Pantheism was simply 'in the air', just a part of the *Zeitgeist*. But when we turn to the Logic, we can see how Hegel transformed Goethe's *Urphänomen* into a very powerful conception which is uniquely Hegel.

The Logic is *the truth of* the *Bildungsroman* narrated in the *Phenomenology*. At the end of the passage from ordinary consciousness to philosophical consciousness, we can look back on the journey and see what was essential in the manifestation of spirit in all the various *Gestalten*. But the logic is not some principle or metaphysical force lying behind phenomena, but is itself a form of spirit, just as are the *Gestalten des Bewußtseins* in the *Phenomenology*. But like Goethe's *Urphänomene*, the concepts of the Logic give us only what is essential, stripped of the particularity of each formation. Although articulated differently, the *Logic* maintains the tripartite structure of the *Phenomenology*, but this can only be made explicit in the Doctrine of the Concept when the concept is self-conscious. Each figure of the Logic is itself the essential concept of a complex whole.

This can be illustrated in each of the three sciences which make up the Logic, although the same applies to the whole of the *Encyclopaedia*. The

Science of Being begins with the concept of Being, from which the whole of the science is unfolded by immanent critique. Essence, which is the science of Reflection, begins with the concept of Reflection and unfolds itself through a critique of the concept of Reflection. The Science of the Concept begins with an abstract concept (*Begriff*). The form of movement in each of these sciences is different, but what they share in common is that each science begins from an abstract concept and develops the content out of that beginning. Here again we have the basic idea of Goethe's *Urphänomen*, the ferreting out of the simplest, archetypal concept which exhibits the characteristics of the complex whole and proceeding from the simple to the more composite. At this point, the similarity of Hegel's method to that of Goethe is evident, except of course that the relevant complex whole is not to be understood as a natural phenomenon but rather manifestations of Spirit, specifically formations of consciousness. Correspondingly, the archetypal form is not an image but an abstract concept. But in the context of the views of both these writers, this difference is not as substantial as it appears at first sight.

At this point we need to look at Hegel's innovation. Goethe (1996) was well aware that 'every observation is already a theory', and although the idea of an *Urphänomen* overcoming the Kantian dichotomy between image and idea was plausible, the *Urphänomen* lacked inherent content from which the relevant science could be scientifically unfolded through self-mediation. Just as it was not truly an image, nor was it truly a concept. Hegel overcame this limitation with an abstract or archetypal Concept whose internally mediated structure was sufficient to generate a complex whole.

If each of the *Gestalten* of the *Phenomenology* had a tripartite structure, then this tripartite structure must be exhibited in its truth, in the Logic, albeit in a logical fashion. Whereas each *Gestalt* is an identity of a way of thinking, a way of life and a constellation of artefacts, the concept of the Logic is the identity of the Individual, the Particular and the Universal. The question here is not of a general triadic structure, but on the contrary, a quite specific relation which cuts across the generally triadic structure of the Logic and allows the concept to function as the archetype for an entire science. The three moments of the Subject from which the Science of the Concept begins, have a quite specific and different place in the Logic from the various phases of the Logic which also have a triadic structure. They reflect the three aspects which constitute a formation of consciousness, but transformed into logical form.

How to explain this relationship, this relationship between the three aspects of a formation of consciousness and the three moments of an Abstract Concept? Hegel transcended the traditional philosophical problems of epistemology and ontology, by making them instead objects of critique, as concepts belonging to one or another formation of consciousness, each of which problematized existence in a certain way. When Hegel talks about a thought-object he makes no commitment as to whether he means a unit of material culture, such as a word, or the thought or image of it or anything in between. But either way, whether

understood as a mental or a material entity, a word or any other unit of material culture, is a Universal. It is the ideal properties of a thing which constitute it as a Universal, and these are not properties inherent in the entity itself but constituted through particularity. The point is that a word or any other Universal is not a concept. On its own, a word is meaningless, like a hieroglyph of a forgotten language. The Universal has to be involved in some form of social practice, in turn some component of some social formation, in which it is constituted meaningfully, and it has to be instantiated in an Individual token, recognised in the thinking of an Individual person, before it can constitute a meaningful and existent concept. How is an Individual 'thought-object' subsumed under a Universal? Only by means of some particular social practice, like pointing for example: "That is a dog." And conversely social practices are instantiated by Individual human actors who use Universal artefacts and constitute them as thought-objects in so doing. But it is not actions as such which constitute a Universal and subsume Individual tokens under a Universal, but only actions insofar as they are normative.

Just as a formation of consciousness can only be constituted by a way of thinking existing in some form of life reflected in and controlled by its cultural products, so no individual concept can exist other than by the identity of Universal, Individual and Particular. It is only in this way, bringing into a single concept social practice, representation and thought, that Hegel could overcome the limitations of Goethe's *Urphänomen*, and form an abstract concept which could function as an archetype for a whole science. A concept is the unit of a formation of consciousness, just as a cell is the unit of an organism. But in Hegel's formulation, the abstract concept is given to the senses just as much Goethe's *Urphänomen*, since both are the truth of objective processes, in one case, the finite phenomena of Nature, in the other case, finite manifestations of Spirit in human life.

I want to return to the exchange of courtesies between Hegel and Goethe quoted above. Both affirmed the identity, not of *Urphänomen* and Concept, but of *Urphänomen* and the Absolute. Some writers (e.g. Heinemann 1934) have been misled by this, so as to miss the connection between the specific content of each idea. Others (such as Butler 1984) have identified the essential correspondence as suggested here, but missed the significance because they dismissed the value of either Goethe's science or Hegel's Logic, or deemed each writer to be concerned solely with limited and distinct domains of practice (Steiner 1988). But to appreciate this relation, we must take into account the relation Hegel saw between the Concept and the Absolute, or one could say, between the Absolute and the absolute Absolute. In elaborating on the meaning of *Gestalt*, Goethe (1996) remarked: "This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* to describe the end product *and* what is in process of production as well." Just as there are many *Urphänomene* and only one Idea, the same applies to Hegel's understanding of "Concept." The Absolute is not distinct from the Concept, but is the concept in its ultimate development, even though

there are many different concepts in the development of the Idea. Conversely, each Concept is a manifestation of the Absolute.

So Goethe and Hegel were right in their exchange, because although *Urphänomen* and Concept are structurally equivalent, each concept constitutes a glimpse of the Deity. Each concept is an essential manifestation of the whole, which Goethe came to call the *Urphänomen* and Hegel called the Absolute.

So both thinkers have the same concept of how a human being may see the Divine, even though Hegel has wrought a dramatic change in the substance of the Deity. The Pantheist-naturalist does not see God in the everyday particularity of experience with the natural world; according to Goethe, this stream of impressions has to be surmounted, and grasped as a whole. This holistic view is not attained by contemplation of the name or the idea of Nature, but on the contrary by contemplation of Nature itself and determination of the archetypal phenomenon, the simplest unit of a complex natural process. This insight is only the outcome of patient, attentive and delicate observation. Likewise, if a citizen of any social formation, recognizes as Absolute the guiding principle of his own activity, Hegel does not suppose that they see in that form of practice a finite manifestation of Absolute Spirit. That is an insight which becomes available only to the philosopher who looks back from the end of the journey of Spirit. Goethe and Hegel shared a common concern, not just for Truth, but for the Spiritual Community. One of the driving forces of Goethe's science was to work out a practice and concept of science which would be accessible to participation by the entire people, something of which Hegel despaired.

But there are obvious differences in the conception of the Deity as well. For Goethe, God is Nature, and insofar as he is engaged with Nature, it is the principle of his relation to Nature. Man is part of Nature, but he cannot understand his literary and social activities Pantheistically. For Hegel on the other hand, Spirit produces Nature and the human world of finite spirit, and out of them produces itself, but it is above all to human affairs that Hegel looks for his glimpse of the Deity. In the human world, Hegel gains insight into the absolute Absolute which manifests in each shape of consciousness. For Goethe we have a reified God/Nature; for Hegel we have Spirit. The crucial innovation made by Hegel is his use of the Triune structure of the concept which transcends the various dichotomies inherited from Kant whilst investing the concept with internal resources for self-mediation.

Nonetheless, in brief, we could conclude that the *Urphänomen* is the *Urphänomen* of Hegel's philosophy.

References

- Breton, A. et al. (1965) *Surrealism and painting*, Boston: MFA Publications.
- Goethe, J. W. v. (1989) *The Collected Works*, Italian Journey, Volume 6, Edited and translated by Douglas Miller, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Goethe, J. W. v. (1988) *The Collected Works*, Scientific Studies, Volume 12, Edited and translated by Douglas Miller, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Goethe, J. W. v. (1996) *Goethe on Science. An Anthology of Goethe's Scientific Writings*, Selected and introduced by Jeremy Naydler, With a foreword by Henri Bortoft, Edinburgh, UK: Floris.
- Goethe, J. W. v. (1964) *Wisdom and Experience*. Selection by Ludwig Curtis, Transl. Hermann Weigand, New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1953) *Reason In History, a general introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Transl. by Robert S. Hartman. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1969 [1816]) *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, London UK: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2009 [1830]) *Hegel's Logic*, Pacifica, Ca.: Marxists Internet Archive Publications.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1971 [1830]) *Hegel's Philosophy of mind: being part three of the 'Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences'*, transl. by William Wallace, with Boumann's zusätze [1845]; transl. by A. V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1979) *System of ethical life [1802/3]) and First Philosophy of Spirit [1803-4]*, translated by T. M. Knox. NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hegel: *The Letters*, (1984) Trans. C. Butler and C. Seiler, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1990 [1817]) *The Philosophy of Spirit*, Part III of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, translated by Steven A. Taubeneck, London, UK: Continuum.
- Heinemann, F. (1934), "Goethe's Phenomenological Method," *Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 9 No., 33, p. 75-6.
- Herder J. G. (1940), *God, Some Conversations*, translated by F. H. Burkhardt, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Herder J. G. (2004), "Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings," translated by translated by I. D. Evrigenis and D. Pellerin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- OED: Oxford English Dictionary On Line (1993)
- Pinkard, T. (1996) *Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Steiner, R. (1988) *Goethean Science*, transl. William Lindeman, NY: Mercury Press.

Links

[Andy Blunden on Germ Cells and Units of Analysis](#)

[Goethe, Hegel and Marx](#)

[Andy Blunden's Home Page](#)