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The Depth of Colour

/ Paul Carter

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to contrast two methods with colour as a focal point. The first is what I call the *standard method* of investigation, where we begin with 'what is known about a phenomenon' and end with a 'finished conceptual understanding of a phenomenon', the directionality of which is linear and the defining quality of which is one of abstract inertia. By outlining the standard method, its delineation will serve as a springboard into what I call the *dynamic method* of investigation, which begins with 'the phenomenon' and ends with 'the phenomenon', the directionality of which is one of dynamic reciprocity, the defining quality one of living depth.

Both methods are valuable, yet the directionality particular to each is of significance. This is because when we commit to a particular path, any problems we encounter therein are entirely endemic to that path. Thus, if we stop committing to that path, its problems will cease.

The standard method reflects our tendency to focus attention on what we already know. This is so in that phenomena in our field of perception appear as *known* because we have already successfully grasped them *conceptually*. Without the necessary concept to grasp something in this manner, that thing fails to have meaning for us, and consequently we cannot say that we know it. It could be said then, that a basic function of conceptual formulation is that it is a container for the meaning of things.

2. Goethe

Goethe is often considered as being one of the great Romantics, which is an interesting association: while he was of this era, there is nothing to suggest that he embraced Romanticism. Goethe's practical capacity as a functional member of his society provided the foundation for his prolific creative output of plays and poetry. Practical aptitude rails against Romanticism. It is ironic then that Goethe's artistic persona and the connections thereof have occluded this crucial aspect of his life, as well as its significance in terms of his desire and ability to influence society. Indeed, Goethe was the 'antidote to the sting of Romanticism'[1]. His competent, purposeful engagement with society shows no sign of a man self-obsessed with suffering the burdens of unrealisable ideals.

1. Henri Bortoft used this analogy in a lecture at Schumacher College 2011.

Scientific investigation appealed to Goethe because of its grounding in close and persistent observation of phenomena. This offered a way to counter one of the prevailing sicknesses of the time – Romanticism, the spirit of which was one of '*Go inwards, my friend; and discover your true nature*!' Hence, Romantics made suspect scientists simply because their focus was not really the phenomenal world, but instead was groping in the dubious depths of their inner most recesses. Any ability to observe things accurately was lost behind the veil of this pseudo higher pursuit. Because of its introspective orientation, the Romantic attitude produced an unstable psychology, and this is the very thing Goethe warns of in *The Sorrows of Young Werther:* self-obsession leads to instability, which leads to suicide.

3. Theory of Colours

Goethe's practical study of colours spanned over two decades. His activity was driven by a desire to find and understand a natural relationship of colours, or indeed whether or not such a thing could be discovered. This project arose from the practice of mixing colour pigments for painting. Goethe wished to *deliberately* – not haphazardly – produce specific colours in a definite way, so as to help improve the quality of his paintings. Such an understanding, he thought, could facilitate the comprehension and communication of phenomenal reality through art.

With this aim, Goethe familiarised himself with the existing body of scientific research devoted to colour. It was in this way that he found Newton's work, available in textbooks at the time. Goethe was well informed of historical developments in natural philosophy, and readily apprehended the widespread prioritisation of quantitative properties over the direct experience of qualities. This was a view he not only thought to be a serious limitation – he considered it to be a complete degradation of the senses. Thus, Goethe's scientific work strove to re-establish the senses as central to scientific investigation.

The goal of *logical certainty* necessitates the simplification of phenomena in that the terms employed in this search discern 'sameness' and 'difference' by an *external relationship.* According to this approach, phenomena are categorised by distinguishing features which are present or in absentia. If we translate these terms and conditions into the logic of the part and the whole, there are two organising directions which are possible. Either the part is identified as exclusively essential (atomism/reductionism), or the whole is identified as exclusively essential (Neo-Platonism/holism). In either approach, one aspect dominates the other. Any logic that does not entertain paradox would seem to have this basic pattern built into its syntax.

Standard logic functions in terms of statements in tune with certainty, where certainty is usually conceived of as being *singular* in nature. This is a Judaeo-Christian idea of certainty, as epitomised in *statements of truth*. Thus in Judaeo-Christian cultures we predominately posit things as either wrong or right, black or white, for or against, this not that – which is entirely useful, up to a point.

We are not however, taught to entertain paradoxes, i.e. that things could be *both,* or *pluralistic* in terms of existence. We are conditioned to accept one thing, or the other, or we may attempt to make a diluted compromise between two extremes. But compromise also has a singular nature. This predominate pattern of thinking emphases one-sidedness, and makes it difficult to appreciate the *intrinsic relationship* between two or more elements. It is this relationship that I believe is vital. In simple terms, this is because when one element of a given polarity is eliminated, the counterpart thereof would also cease to exist. In other words, without *difference* to provide definition and contrast there can only be a singular, self-same state – a state of total oblivion in which no thing can exist in terms of relationship.

History is full of examples illustrating how concepts are not very good candidates for holding multiplicity together. This is so because when concepts are applied in standard logical fashion, they initially serve to separate things. By separating things, we seem to be left with multiplicity that requires relating or unifying. So, in turn, a unifying concept is sought to organise these disparate fragments. However, concepts conceived to unify multiplicity actively exclude difference, functioning as they do by *eliminating diversity* in search of unity. Conceptual unity therefore tips unavoidably towards a state of self-same, one-dimensional unity, and that is what many recognise as counterfeit unity. While this approach may initially lead us in interesting directions, its failure is inescapable because any conceptual unity is limited in it appropriateness – things change.

4. Paradox

A way out of this pattern is to entertain paradox – which is the principal characteristic of the dynamic method. This method is holistic in the sense that the two poles of a dichotomy can be apprehended as *intrinsically co-dependent, co-defining, and co-creating*; and as such the cul-de-sac of self-sameness is avoided. This is why Goethe is our contemporary. I believe that for Goethe science was what we could call a precise intuitive activity, one in which phenomena are brought clearly and completely into one's perceptual discernment, not by theoretical explanation, but by experiencing things accurately in their multifarious dynamic manifestations. This goes in the opposite direction to which we are accustomed. Here we are not interested in reducing phenomena to an arrangement of externally related parts. On the contrary, we set out to observe how a phenomenon *manifests in different forms under different circumstances and yet remains the same*. This practice could be called *finding the intrinsic unity of diversity*.

In the dynamic approach, diversity does not need relating together as if one thing were separate from another. Instead, diversity can be experienced as intrinsically unified *by difference*. In other words, the transformation and/or contradistinction of one element in complete relation to another is inherently related by their difference. Perceiving this dynamic within multifaceted relationships is the aim of the dynamic method, the experiential basis of which permits what is observed to be brought into ever-deepening comprehension.

If this doesn't sound like science, it is because the dynamic method doesn't entertain conceptual abstractions as a primary source of certainty. Instead of looking for an underlying mechanism which can be posited as reality, this method remains focused on whatever arises and dissolves in the sense fields. Because of its openness and unfamiliarity, this method is susceptible to misinterpretation. For instance, when looking for a 'primary expression' of a phenomenon, there is the tendency to construct this in terms of an 'archetypal form', as evidenced in many interpretations of Goethe's work on plant morphology. This however, would be a Neo-Platonist interpretation of the dynamic method, and I believe that such interpretations have little in common with Goethe's intended direction.

Goethe's theory of colours is based on a thorough exploration of how colours manifest from the interplay of darkness and lightness. Understanding colour phenomena precisely in qualitative terms can be honed by engaging with a systematic series of prism experiments. This stage of the theory is, however, as Goethe acknowledged, artificial – we are looking through a purpose-made wedge of glass (which we don't really know the workings of) at purpose-made templates. After gaining a basic insight into colours with these instruments – namely that colours arise at the boundary of light and dark – we can set about looking for instances of this in the phenomenal world, from which we can comprehend the intricate workings of this interlay in an entirely accurate way.

The interplay of light from the sun with the darkness of space is a primary expression of colour. However, this interplay is entirely dynamic and paradoxical: the two elements, light and dark, co-mingle, co-define, and co-create one another in a subtle and complex manner, the likes of which I believe can only be comprehensively approached *perceptually,* as opposed to conceptually. To concretise this dynamic in intellectual terms, while a potentially useful exercise, would be considerably limited. This is because linearity cannot succinctly contain simultaneously arsing and dissolving multiplicity. Standard logic is limited because it can only contain things separately, singularly. This is precisely why Goethe used imagination as a tool for accurately visulising a phenomenon, as opposed to emphasising conceptual analysis thereof. Unlike logic, imagination can accommodate the intricate, complex flux of multiplicity as a dynamic whole.

Of course, we can describe the interplay of colours conceptually, but our language begins to take on a different hue contra to that of conventional logic. For instance, we can say that the darkening of the light of the sun by space gives rise to yellow; and that the lightening of the darkness of space by the sun gives rise to blue. For mainstream physics, however, this does not qualify as an explanation of the workings of colour. It is understood to be merely descriptive. And yet this conclusion completely misses the focus of the dynamic method, because the dynamic method concerns the *direct observation of colour* and the relationships therein. For this reason, no explanatory mechanisms are sought in the dynamic method. This opens the possibility that colour phenomena are experienced as having a *natural logic,* and therefore explanatory theories are somewhat superfluous. Any account of our findings can be no more than a stepping-stone to further, precise apprehension of the dynamic of colours.

5. Seeing

It may be useful to introduce a template for thinking that can help us traverse between the standard method and the dynamic method. The duck/rabbit turns conventional logic inside out. We cannot say that the image is either a duck or a rabbit, because that would require two elements that are *separate* from one another, and clearly, they are not. Paradoxically, this image is both singular element/two distinct elements. If we drew another duck/rabbit next to it and said 'there's the duck and there's the rabbit,' we would still not have a duck *and* a rabbit at all. They are two and yet one; yet they are not two subsumed under one.

I believe that this conveys the principle at the heart of Goethe's theory of colours. Moreover, this is a principle which can be readily observed in the luminous display of the sky, wherein colours arise and dissolve from the interplay of the two indivisible, co-determining, co-creating elements of light and dark. To study colour in this way – to begin to observe the dance of light and dark in the sky, in shadows, on asphalt, or whatever the perceptual predilection of the moment, is to enter into the living depth of colour.