Whatever one thinks of philosophical hermeneutics, there is enough truth in it to remind us that questions always arise within a horizon of our concerns. The question of what it was to be a philosopher in another century is inevitably marked by what it is to be a philosopher now.

It is likely that all the contributors to this conference are alert to the importance of masks, roles, and personae in being a philosopher in the first decade of the twenty-first century. There is little doubt that to be a philosopher today is to be a professional philosopher. One becomes a professional philosopher by following a university curriculum and becoming socialized in a school and practice followed by one’s advisors, one’s Doktorväter and –mütter, then working one’s way toward a position in a department of philosophy at a research university. Most of those who manage to get jobs will spend their time at minor universities or (in the United States) private liberal arts colleges teaching a wide range of courses. The lucky ones—they might be called the most gifted—will rise quickly and be able to concentrate on research and writing while teaching a narrow cycle of specialized courses.

Doesn’t this description also work for the eighteenth century? Only in part. One would of course have to dispense with the Doktormütter, the geographically relevant area would be almost exclusively European, the philosophical Wanderjahre would often begin in secondary rather than higher education, the types of institutions would show a different mix (more theological institutes, for example), the disciplinary articulation and the corresponding institutional segmentation would differ, the sense of the historical continuity of philosophizing might be stronger, the importance of original research less, and the degree of specialization in research and teaching reduced. And, as in every century, there will be some philosophers who are outliers in a manner unique to the period. These are not small matters. But I will not be the first to remark that the way to philosophy in the eighteenth century is recognizably like our own.

Another lesson of hermeneutics is that with understanding comes the fusion of horizons. This is not quite the same as “expanding horizons,” a notion that found its
proper home in college recruitment literature (but is becoming somewhat more problematic wherever students, their parents, and some politicians want a higher education that tends to confirm sectarian views). Horizon fusion does not imply intellectual imperialism because it does not presuppose subordination, nor that one has command of what lies within the horizons. ‘Horizon’ implies an expanse far beyond the neighborhood one inhabits. One can venture far out from that neighborhood, but the horizon is unattainable. ‘Horizon’ stands for the limits of what is conceivable, much less knowable. Learning does not per se bring with it a fusion or expansion of horizons. For instance, one might be just filling in a gap, or better articulating a space that was already partially developed (think of a philosopher of mathematics who decides to catch up on the last few decades of research in topology, or a comparative literature critic who needs to add another language).

The metaphor of horizontality brings with it the implication that the “realm” of one’s experience will always have a near, a far, and a highly differentiated ground in between. Although it does not entirely escape the conceptuality of the subject facing the object, it at least weakens that conceptuality’s claim to substantive primacy. Before a subject can face an object there has to be being in the world, the situated being with others among things that is in large part tacit and pre-articulated by language and practices in innumerable ways. The subject and the object take up their positions within this situation, to which there is always a foreground, a middle ground, and a background—including the deepest parts of the deep background. And, quite clearly, this model conceives these terms not just in a literal spatial way but also in a way that includes time: time understood not just as present and past, but also as futural.

I raise these issues for two reasons. One is that it is easy to find some strong affinities between hermeneutics and Goethe’s conception of the situated growth of human knowledge and experience, and these affinities can be useful for more clearly specifying in what senses Goethe may be called a philosopher. The other is that hermeneutics can be helpful in quickly locating the concept of persona in an ampler context than sociology or drama theory allows. And this turns out to be useful as well for highlighting another affinity between Goethe and hermeneutics, and for understanding the bearing of the
concept of persona in what, for the time being, I shall call Goethe’s theory of knowledge. Which is not simply to say his epistemology!

The historical-biographical basis of Goethe’s claims to philosophy

By the standards of professional German philosophizing at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was not a philosopher. He acknowledged this: in “Einwirkung der neueren Philosophie,” an essay published in 1820 that looks back on the 1780s and early 1790s, he remarked that he did not have an “organ for philosophy.”¹ Perhaps, then, I ought to do the honorable thing and at this moment declare that I have no business being here, at a conference dedicated to the persona of the philosopher in eighteenth century Europe. Perhaps I should disown any intention to continue that branch of the Goethe industry that for more than a century and a half has produced lectures and books titled “Goethe and X” and “Goethe as Y,” with X and Y substituted by “philosophy” and “philosopher,” respectively.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, himself no mean scholar, published just such a piece, “Goethe und die Philosophie,” shortly after the Second World War. I cite it here at the outset and frequently recur to it both because it is one of the best of the genre and because it legitimates Goethe’s claim to the title “philosopher,” at least in a provisional way.² Yet we should also acknowledge at the outset that the question of whether or not he was a philosopher has been of far more interest to professional philosophers of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century than to Goethe himself. Indeed, his remark about lacking an organ for philosophy suggests that he would have considered it a simple matter of fact that the term ‘philosopher’ should be left out of descriptions of who and what he was.

Why professional philosophers have worried about the question might be a topic for a conference that considers the persona of the philosopher in nineteenth-century


² First published, as “Goethe und die Philosophie,” in Humboldt Bücherei 3 (Leipzig: Volk und Buch Verlag, 1947), reprinted in Hans-Georg Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, vol. 2, 82-96. The piece was first presented as a lecture, in 1942.
philosophy. My intention here is to keep to the letter (or numeral) and the spirit of this conference on the persona of the philosopher in the eighteenth century. I shall focus on Goethe’s encounters with philosophy in the 1780s and 1790s, with just a few glimpses beyond 1800. My principal texts are the previously noted “Einwirkung der neueren Philosophie” (“Einwirkung,” as I shall refer to it henceforth) for Goethe’s own view of these two decades, and Gadamer’s lecture-essay for the insight it gives into what should and should not be implied by calling Goethe “philosopher.”

Before taking these up, it will be useful to give a brief sketch of Goethe’s relationship to philosophy and philosophers before 1800. In his last year of preparatory school (1764-1765) he read widely in classical Greek and Latin philosophy and literature; he also read contemporary works in his father’s collection, including Lessing, Bayle, and Rousseau. He wanted to pursue classical and belle-lettristic studies, but his father insisted he follow the law curriculum (Leipzig 1765-1768, then a licentiatius juris at Straßburg 1770-1771). But he also took a wide variety of courses and on his own read in contemporary aesthetics, physics, chemistry, medicine, and neoPlatonic alchemical and mystical-wisdom writings. He took an intense dislike to the materialism of the later French Enlightenment (in particular Helvetius and d’Holbach). A decisive moment in his life was meeting a young man five years his senior with whom he would have a decades-long friendship, Johann Gottfried Herder, who came to Straßburg for seven months of medical treatment in 1770-1771. Herder introduced him to the writings of Hamann and perhaps also to the work of the newly appointed philosophy professor in Königsberg, Immanuel Kant. In 1773 he became an enthusiast for Spinoza’s Ethics; he was particularly inspired by the grandeur of Spinoza’s vision of the calming of the passions and the practice of unselfishness. This enthusiasm was developed further in conversations with another new acquaintance with whom he would have a lifelong relationship, Fritz (Friedrich Heinrich) Jacobi, who would later play a central role in the controversy over Lessing’s putative atheism and would invent the concept of nihilism in his polemics against Kant and Idealism.

After accepting, in autumn 1775, the invitation of the newly-installed Duke Carl August of Saxony-Weimar to join the court in Weimar, Goethe quickly won the trust and friendship of the Duke, became his chief adviser, and gradually assumed official
administrative duties. At his suggestion Herder was named the General Superintendent of (Lutheran) Clergy early in 1776. By the middle of that year Goethe became privy councillor, with membership on the duchy’s highest executive council. His personality, his wide acquaintanceship, and his fame as a poet, novelist, and playwright made all the more attractive to other artists and intellectuals the idea of moving to Weimar or Jena (only twenty kilometers away and home to the duchy’s university), and as government official he began explicitly pursuing a policy of making the land an outstanding intellectual and cultural center.

When his duties were extended to include responsibility for the duchy’s parks, roads, and mines he began to study botany and geology; soon he added anatomy and color theory for artistic reasons, and saw the opportunity to make original scientific contributions of his own. He started to develop his own notions about scientific method and undertook philosophical studies to help organize his thinking. As privy councillor he had a certain responsibility for the operations of the University of Jena, and both as exercise of his official duties and in order to escape the administrative and social pressures at the Weimar court he began to spend several months there each year. He took an interest in the recruitment of faculty, first in the sciences, and later in other disciplines. His writings in botany, anatomy, and color theory included reflections not just on method but on disciplinarity and the nature and limits of knowledge.

Goethe began intensively studying Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1788-1789, and to understand better he turned for instruction to Carl Leonhard Reinhold, the author (beginning in 1786—they appeared serially in the *Teutscher Merkur*) of *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, which not only brought Kant’s work to the general public but also established Reinhold’s reputation as his leading interpreter. Reinhold had been appointed extraordinary professor of philosophy at Jena in 1787 and was promoted to ordinary professor in 1791. When Reinhold left for the University of Kiel in 1794 Goethe was determined to hire the best of the younger Kantians to replace him. (“Younger” was important because it meant “relatively cheap”; Goethe was rarely extravagant in disbursing funds of the duchy.) When Fichte came to his attention Goethe began a quick, successful campaign to woo him. Goethe rarely failed to meet with Fichte when he was in
Jena, at least in Fichte’s first years there. When Schelling’s early attempts to develop a philosophy of nature along transcendental lines came to his attention he worked to add the young Swabian to the philosophical faculty (in 1798). Goethe played no particular role in bringing Hegel to Jena in 1801—it was primarily at the behest of Schelling and, to a lesser extent, Hölderlin, who of course had been Hegel’s roommates at the Tübinger Stift (he came not as a professor but only as a docent). But Hegel too eventually became a conversation partner, and for the rest of his career made explicit declarations of the importance of Goethe’s example, poetry, and thought for his philosophizing.

In fact during the decade of the 1790s Goethe assembled such a distinguished group of professors that Jena became recognized as the premier university in the Germanies, among the best in the sciences and without match in philosophy and letters. If one adds to this the intellectuals and artists who made the duchy the destination of frequent visits or even their home, one might go so far as to say that the cultural community of mid-to-late 1790s Weimar/Jena should be compared less to the Vienna or Paris or London of the day than to peak moments in the histories of Renaissance Florence, medieval Paris, or Athens in the fourth century B.C.E. But it would be completely uncontroversial to say that Jena and Weimar are where post-Kantian Idealism was born, where German and European Romanticism developed a philosophical program and began to thrive as a literary movement, where the polymathic scientific project of Alexander von Humboldt took flight as well as the scientific and parascientific work of the Naturphilosophen, and where the modern German ideals of scholarship and Bildung were formulated. That is not even to mention the peak of German literary classicism represented by the work and program that Schiller and Goethe began to develop just a few years earlier. But virtually none of it would have happened were it not for the presence and even more the policy and activity of Goethe.

Perhaps it seems that I have lost the thread of my inquiry, about Goethe as philosopher. Yet it may be that I have in this introduction already reached a conclusion about an important aspect of Goethe’s philosophical character. Around him gathered a universe of studies, just as had happened around the liberalized cathedral chapter schools

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in the major cities of the middle ages to form the first European universities, just as had happened around the founders of schools in ancient Athens. This is philosophy, the passionate inquiry after wisdom, on a very ample scale, understood as a quest that is not simply personal but that by its nature needs, even begs, to be shared.  

One of the many achievements of Nicholas Boyle’s two-volume (but still incomplete—it has reached 1803) biography of Goethe is that it shows his constant inventiveness in creating institutions and fostering cultural interaction. Almost from the moment when the young Goethe recognized the extent of his poetic and intellectual gifts, he employed them in the task of building a community that addressed the problems of how to live well in the modern world. One of the aims of his early poetic work was to help establish a national German culture; when he arrived in Weimar he thought that, with the support of Duke Carl August, there might be hope of a political and technical remaking of enlightened aristocracy into a model for all the Germanies. His first Italian journey in 1786-1788 was in part an acknowledgment that his original hopes had failed; but after the spiritual and poetic regeneration of Italy he turned his attention to a more strictly cultural and intellectual cultivation of Saxony-Weimar. Thus the opinion common in contemporary Germany and even more predominant outside it, that Goethe was a representative of a conservative, even backward-looking ideology, is so fundamental a misreading that it should make us wonder about what ideologies gave rise to it.

The tragedy, if I may call it such, of Goethe’s life is that circumstances and events constantly frustrated his political goals just as they seemed to be within grasp. As Boyle shows, after returning from Italy Goethe had little confidence in the ability of Germany, and especially a minor German duchy, to adapt to the exigencies of the modern world. The little remaining hope was shattered by the retrogressive politics and the disastrous warmaking of the anti-French alliance and by the Revolutionary government’s demagogic destruction of republicanism. The only political efforts that seemed worthwhile were to support and to build cultural and scientific institutions, and, personally, to build a family, and to do his scientific and poetic work, to perform the

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\(^4\) I recall here the efforts of Pierre Hadot to recognize the continued presence in Western history of the tradition of pursuing philosophy as a way of life among others pursuing the same way of life.
administrative tasks that had a chance of prospering, and, of course, to respond to the Grand-Duke’s occasional demands for special efforts in his or the duchy’s behalf.

But even this phase of limited culture-building collapsed. By the first year of the new century the Weimar-Jena community was rapidly dissolving. Other universities were making offers to the Jena professors that Goethe could not match; professional conflicts and especially personal jealousies were causing dissension among the artists and intellectuals; and the pressures of German and European politics were destroying the liberal atmosphere that had made the duchy so attractive. A critical turning point was the Atheism Controversy of 1798-1799. The proud Fichte was the source of a series of provocations, not all intentional, that won the admiration of students but also criticism from the governments of surrounding principalities, for some of which Jena served as the local university. By all accounts Goethe tried to resolve matters in a way that would allow each of the actors, especially Fichte and the Grand-Duke, to save face, as well as to hold onto current students and to assure the continued influx from other places. But when Fichte directly challenged the authority and integrity of the Grand-Duke and one of the other ministers involved, the case became hopeless, and Goethe had to let the events play themselves out to the bitter end of Fichte’s forced resignation. He recognized that these events would undermine the university’s ability to hold and recruit good students and faculty, but he could not prevent it. The decline was swift, and by the middle of the next decade it had once more become largely an educational backwater. And for the medium of his cultural hopes Goethe had to retreat again, to his scientific work, to his poetry, and to his friends and family.

A critical basis for Goethe’s claim to philosophy?

So far all I have established is this: if philosophers had patron saints, Goethe might be the patron saint of university administrators favorable to philosophy. Given his track record of hiring, any philosophy department chair would love having a person like him in the position of provost or dean. He would not be a candidate for chair of the

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5 As Boyle shows, Goethe’s conception of the still existing possibilities for a German political and cultural community was increasingly expressed in his literary works.
philosophy department proper, however: philosophically well informed, but no philosopher.

It is time to return to Gadamer’s essay on Goethe and philosophy. Gadamer finds there to be two major traditions of interpreting Goethe’s philosophical character, one that was established by Friedrich Schiller during Goethe’s lifetime, another that gradually emerged in the course of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

Schiller presented Goethe as an unconscious or instinctive philosopher. This comported nicely with his interpretation of Goethe’s poetry as naïve, that is, opposed to the poetry he labeled sentimental. According to this conception, Goethe had a spontaneous, unmediated relation to the world of nature and of men, just like the early Greek epicists and rhapsodes of the pre-Classical archaic period. This contrasted with classical and almost all subsequent poetry of developed cultures, which is reflective and thus mediated by abstract thought. Calling Goethe an unconscious philosopher thus would align neatly with Schiller’s categorization of Goethe’s poetic mind. Unfortunately, since the very medium of philosophy would seem to be reflection, the Schillerian assessment and its variants come very close to saying that Goethe was not really a philosopher at all, but instead a happy accident of nature, a kind of philosophical and poetic idiot-savant who managed to escape the influence of more than two thousand years of intellectual history.

The second tradition was more extensive and various than the one begun by Schiller. Members of different philosophical schools asked whether Goethe’s thought was more or less aligned with their school’s philosophy and with their master. This was true especially of followers of Kant, Schelling, and Hegel (and, more recently, Husserl). I would describe the general tendency of this work, especially in the nineteenth century, as reciprocally honorific. By that I mean that the followers wanted more to capture for their schools the prestige endowed by Goethe’s iconic cultural status than to justify Goethe as a philosopher in his own right, but contrariwise also to offer yet another reason for admiring this giant of German culture, in that his thought or his way of life explicitly or
tacitly followed the master’s teaching, or at least that Goethe’s way was compatible with it.\(^6\)

Gadamer, with due respect to Schiller, quickly sets aside this diagnosis of Goethe’s philosophical abilities. He acknowledges that Goethe had a well-attested reluctance to follow “the philosophical speculation of his contemporaries,” but it was due not just to a spontaneous poet’s hesitancy to question what nature offers our unaided sense powers or to subject the powers of artistic synthesis to abstractive analysis. As for the varieties of the second tradition, Gadamer thinks that their efforts to assimilate Goethe to their schools lead to their overlooking something else even more essential: Goethe was actually the first significant critic of Idealism. This is something that (at the time of Gadamer’s essay) more than a century of reevaluations of Idealism has made clearer. What is more, after Nietzsche, who taught us to look at the entire Western philosophical tradition with a newly suspicious eye, he thinks that Goethe might appear as an even earlier “critic of the concept of philosophical or metaphysical truth.”\(^7\)

When Gadamer delivered this as a lecture he was known chiefly as a classicist, and he was still nearly two decades away from publishing the first edition of *Truth and Method*. He suggests that, if we are going to compare Goethe to any other philosophers, we should look to ancient Greece, specifically to Socrates, or rather to Plato’s Socrates. He presents an analogy: Goethe’s distance from the abstract speculation of Idealism is like Plato’s distance from the ancient Sophists’ vision of paideia. Plato saw in Socrates the person who, through dialectic, brought education to a focus in the care of the soul. The Sophists’ approach proceeded in any and every direction but did not have a focus, and thus the only authority they could appeal to was opinion, even if that opinion was expert knowledge. The dialogues that Plato’s Socrates engaged in used the medium of conversation to search out and then to analyze—that is, to distinguish by taking apart—the presuppositions of what the conversation partners thought was most important for

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\(^6\) Of course some differentiation between Goethe and the master was always inevitable, especially as Goethe receded ever further into the past; Gadamer points to Ferdinand Weinhandl’s *Die Metaphysik Goethes* (Berlin, 1932), which acknowledges affinities to Kant but contrasts Goethe’s “metaphysics” based on morphological dynamism with Kant’s “worldview” based on atomistic classical mechanics. By the way, with the followers of Hegel and Schelling it was the masters themselves who made the comparisons, in fact who acknowledged a deep indebtedness to Goethe’s way of experiencing the world.

\(^7\) And thus we, after more than another half century of criticism, might be inclined to array him among the earliest of the postmoderns. But that would be just another effort to enlist him for a particular school.
knowing and talking about the matters that were dearest to them. “Now Goethe practices
the same rebuff against the abstract speculation of his age, and just this free security in
face of the dogmatism of modernity gives him something ancient. In the sense of
antiquity he too is a philosopher and is nearer the origins than his great philosophical
contemporaries. For he does not share the belief of his age in the autonomy of reason—he
sees its human limitation [Bedingtheit].”

A basically critical—that is, Kantian—basis for Goethe’s philosophizing

As a philosopher who nearly twenty years later would publish a full-fledged
program of hermeneutic philosophy in Truth and Method, Gadamer was likely to find
attractive a thinker for whom a fundamental feature of humanity is its finitude. Yet he has
remarkably little to say about specifics, and he prescinds almost entirely from a field of
cognitive endeavor to which Goethe devoted some of his most prolonged and intensive
study, the natural sciences.

For brevity’s sake I am going to use a symbol of Goethe’s scientific approach.
What I mean by ‘symbol’ needs some explication, and I shall at the end explain
something of its specific meaning for Goethe. For the moment all I mean is this: a symbol
is a sign that shares in the character of what is signifies.

At the end of 1788, about the time of his first intensive reading of Kant’s first
Critique, Goethe was invited by the editor of the Teutscher Merkur, Christoph-Martin
Wieland (1733-1813), to comment on what he had learned since his departure for Italy
two and a half years earlier. One thing he decided to include in his January 1798 article
were developments in the science of nature (Naturlehre), in the course of which he
evaluated the observations and speculations concerning ice formation that their common
friend Karl Ludwig von Knebel (1744-1834) had recently undertaken. Before leaving for
Italy, Goethe had encouraged Knebel to devote himself to studying nature. Knebel
followed the advice; he observed the forms that appear in water as it freezes and
compared them to shapes in plants and bird feathers. Knebel shared his results with
Goethe shortly after the latter’s return from Italy. Goethe cited them as a careful study
that was marred by fancifulness. When Knebel reacted with outrage, Goethe
acknowledged that his criticism had gone too far, and with Wieland’s mediation they agreed that Goethe would qualify his initial remarks in a subsequent essay.

Goethe clearly felt the need to use the opportunity to distinguish his own practice from Knebel’s. He had devised a method of dynamic genetic comparison in the essay on the (concealed) presence of the *os intermaxillare* in human beings that he had had printed and distributed to anatomy experts in 1782. At the time of the conflict with Knebel he was extending the approach in his study of dicotyledonous plants that was to culminate in early 1790 with the publication of *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. (And, unbeknownst to him at the time, yet another adaptation of the method, to the physical sciences, would commence with his initial researches on optics and color in 1790-1791.) Although it is not hard to imagine why Knebel was offended, Goethe nevertheless does not appear to have meant to attack him. Rather, from a more experienced position he wanted to caution Knebel and his other Weimar/Jena friends about the risk of the imagination running wild whenever widely disparate phenomena are compared. It is more important to differentiate than to assimilate things, he had argued in the first letter, and he ended with this advice: “Science is really the intrinsic privilege of man.” If in practicing science the human being is recurrently led to “the great concept” that everything is “a harmonic unity, and he [the human being] too is a harmonic unity: then this great concept will exist far more richly and more fully in him than if he should rest content in a comfortable mysticism that agreeably hides his poverty in respectable obscurity.” As Dorothea Kuhn points out, these words express “one of Goethe’s great principles that he never surrendered and that preserved him from falling prey to an uncritical Naturphilosophie.”

The conciliatory reconsideration of the follow-up essay softened the conclusions of the earlier piece. In place of the sharp dichotomy between making careful distinctions and drawing remote analogies, Goethe now identified himself with the standpoint of the amateur, of the dilettante. He spoke approvingly of the need for imagination and wit as aids (*Hilfsmittel*) to science. Imagination and wit are what allow the genius to go beyond the common run of discoveries; they are related to intuition (*Anschauung*), and are

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9 Ibid.
invaluable for recognizing the forms, or types, of the phenomena. Science thus has a threelfold basis: the work of researchers (1) who make exact observations, (2) who order and determine what has come to be known, and (3) who take the first two kinds of work as results and, using imagination, add to them something new. The powers of imagination and wit, though problematic, are capable of anticipating more remote relationships, both theoretically and practically. Applied to Knebel, this means that he did well in his initial observations, but that from Goethe’s perspective he had moved too quickly to try the third, more speculative task, before the second was firmly in place.

I cite this example of Goethe’s reflections on method and its implications not because it is sophisticated but because it is simple but typical, and also because it adumbrates developments that were to come in the following decade because of controversies over his morphology and especially color theory. The starting point is experience, indeed almost a rigorous inductive empiricism: exact observations and careful descriptions. But everyone knew that an excessively empiricist approach leads to a limitless accumulation of facts. Francis Bacon himself, in the second part of the New Organon, had insisted that one must progress from the observation of instances to their organization in tables that would reveal the concomitance, the augmentation, the remission, etc., of natures. Goethe’s second stage is a reminder that reason must work to place order and organize objects and phenomena taxonomically, according to near and distant relationships. Imagination and fancy are put off as long as possible. But when the work of second-order organization stops, the mind needs to imaginatively add something in order to see remoter connections.

There is little doubt that from a very early point in his career as a poet, much less as a philosopher and scientist, Goethe conceived nature as infinitely productive and creative.\(^{10}\) The cognitive and pragmatic human corollary was that human beings, although themselves part of nature, will never encompass it. Yet they could grown in knowledge and power by investigating and understanding what was accessible, and knowledge and perhaps wisdom by trying to understand these things in relation to what was more remote. Ultimately he determined that what was remote might in fact be

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\(^{10}\) See, for example, his comment on the prose fragment (written in the 1780s but of uncertain authorship, although from among his circle of friends), “Die Natur,” HA 13: 45-49.
accessible only in a symbolic way. The meaning is expressed aphoristically in two “Maxims and Reflections,” the first of which dates from around 1801, the second 1826:

Symbolism transforms appearance into idea, idea into an image, and in this manner, that the idea in the image remains always endlessly effective and unreachable and, even if spoken out in all languages, would remain inexpressible.

That is the true symbolism, where the particular represents the general, not as dream and shadow, but as vitally momentary revelation of the unexplorable.\(^{11}\)

The illumination of Kant

I have introduced Goethe’s responses to Knebel’s work on ice formation, and also his aphorism on symbolism, as symbols. In the spirit of the second aphorism, though with an ironic literal twist, I can say that they are particulars that express something general about Goethe’s cognitive efforts, and that this expression is not vaporous or dreamy but a vital revelation of something that it is impossible to explore further, at least here. I shall list a series of things that are revealed or at least suggested, with short comments.

1. Goethe was open to the attractions of speculative thinking, but only when it had in view the hard preliminary work of the careful observation, description, and organization of relevant phenomena—that is, the first and second levels of scientific work he had presented to readers of the Merkur. Take the example of his research into the os intermaxillare: The essay he published in 1782 only went so far as to announce that the bone is present in human beings. The essay comes to this conclusion by summarizing and sequencing the relevant work Goethe had done in the preceding years. He studied the jaws and skulls of mammals and nonmammals, both at first hand and through the medium of anatomical drawings, at various stages of their development. In particular he studied the fetal development of the jaw and skull. This allowed him to recognize that in human beings the bone is identifiable at early stages but gradually fuses with surrounding bones. There is, however, a suture visible in human jawbones that reveals where the developing intermaxillary attached itself. The form and sequence of presentation of the

\(^{11}\) In the 1907 Hecker edition these are numbered 1113 and 314, respectively; see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen, nach den Handschriften des Goethe- und Schiller-Archivs, ed. Max Hecker, Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft 121 (Weimar: Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907).
richly illustrated essay provided a lesson and training in a morphogenetically revealing way of assembling the evidence. The scientific work of level 1, the facts observed, described, and drawn by investigators anatomizing real jaw bones and skulls, had been organized in the work of level 2. Two principles guided the level 2 work: the notion that mammalian skulls (and perhaps nonmammalian ones as well, though this remained to be shown) are governed by a type, that is, by a typical enumeration and arrangement of bones, and the notion that the type is varied in all the individual species of mammals by the bones’ patterns of growth and development.

The third, imaginative and speculative level of scientific work was not even broached in this essay. It would of course be present wherever one greatly exceeded the direct evidence that had been gathered and arranged, for example if one began speculating about the ultimate source of the type or if one tried to represent the process of bone development in terms of some encompassing natural principles like expansion and contraction. In this sense his 1790 essay on the metamorphosis of plants added level 3 work to levels 1 and 2. His first two essays on optics and color science, the *Beiträge zur Optik* parts 1 and 2, were once more exemplars of scientific work restrained to levels 1 and 2. During most of the 1790s his scientific work avoided high-level speculation. Its most adventurous aspect was the attempt to integrate the researches of different scientific disciplines upon a common focus, first in plant and animal morphology and then in color science. Thus the easy assimilation of Goethean science to Schelling or Naturphilosophie—the kind of assimilation that has been common till quite recently—is completely oblivious of the true center of gravity of Goethe’s work. They are almost two decades too late to be of fundamental influence on Goethe’s method, and if they are extensions of Goethe’s method they are one-sided (that is, they try to work at level 3 without tightly tying it to levels 1 and 2).

2. Goethe’s explanation of the three levels of scientific work shows that he was primed for the encounter with Kant that was just under way, and it also helps make clear why it was the Third Critique that was especially productive. The rough outline of this encounter—nothing more detailed is possible here—would consider how, in the First Critique, Goethe would have been intrigued by Kant’s twofold invocation of imagination in the transcendental sense. First, what appears to the human being through sensibility is
pre-structured as a differentiable whole (according to the transcendental synthesis of space and time), and the initial articulation of what appears is pre-conceptualized and temporalized by the transcendental instantiation of the pure concepts of the understanding. It does not matter that Goethe made inference from these things that went beyond Kant, for whom the immediate consequence of these syntheses was the mathematization of space and time, the provision of the fundamental data that is propositionalized in the forms of general logic, and the establishment of the empirical basis for the science of mechanics. Goethe must have been especially struck by the schematism of the understanding, which is the bridge between concepts and images/forms of appearance and which is a necessary function if conceptuality is to be embedded in sensible intuition rather than simply superimposed on it by hypotheses and models. It is true that, in the first instance, Kant introduced schematism in order to account for how the pure concepts of the understanding (that is, the categories) are connected to the forms of the appearances—as schemata or schemas. But the examples he uses—the schema of ‘dog’, the schema of ‘triangle’—demonstrate that precisely the same schematizing function is at work at a higher level of complexity in every empirical concept.

I want to point out here that the disagreement between Goethe and Schiller that paradoxically triggered their deep, lasting friendship needs to be interpreted quite differently from the way conventional scholarly wisdom has it. In Jena, in July of 1794, immediately following the inaugural lecture of August Batsch’s society for natural history, Schiller, who wanted to enlist Goethe’s participation in several of his projects, managed to arrive at the exit door simultaneously with Goethe. On the street they struck up a conversation about the obscurities of the lecture. Goethe argued that there were better and clearer methods of exposition available, and by the time they reached the door of Schiller’s residence he had explained how his morphological method worked for botany. Schiller seized the moment and invited Goethe to come in. There he took pencil and paper and sketched his Urplant: the dynamic morphological type of dicotyledons. Goethe presented it as a phenomenon, Schiller called it an idea. According to Goethe’s

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12 Another example of the direction of Goethe’s practical efforts to build institutions of culture and higher learning: although he was not the originator of the idea he immediately supported it and joined in the planning.
account twenty years later, they battled to a draw, neither having convinced the other. Goethe remarks that this was, in nuce, the substance of the fundamental disagreement that had for years been brewing between them. Then, in a wonderful moment of ethical graciousness, facilitated also by Schiller’s desire to win Goethe’s cooperation, they decided that if they could agree on so much and then at a crucial point describe things so differently there must be a common ground where they could work out the differences. And thus acquaintance gave way to one of the most remarkable (and most remarkably documented) friendships in the annals of intellectual history, which lasted until Schiller’s death in 1805.

Of course what they were arguing about was Kant. It has been traditional to assume that Schiller was the properly informed Kantian, and that over the next few years Goethe turned more Kantian under his persistent tutelage. Perhaps no single episode has so decisively “supported” the notion that Goethe was a philosophical naïf. But this is absurd, not least because Schiller was imposing on nature the terms of his reading of the Second Critique, whereas Goethe was speaking out of his experience of the First and the Third. It does show Goethe’s tendency to read Kant in the vein of empirical realist (and Goethe does acknowledge twenty years later that Schiller gradually pried him away from his stubborn realism). Perhaps what he should have responded is that, properly speaking, the Urpflanze had a conceptual or begrifflich side, because it was a schema in the Kantian sense. If Goethe had an understandable tendency to see conceptuality presented in the manifold of sensibility, Schiller had the opposite tendency of understanding conceptuality as though it were ideal.\(^\text{13}\)

3. It should be no surprise that it was the Third Critique that spurred Goethe into developing the “strange analogues” of Kant that his Kantian companions grudgingly allowed when he engaged them in philosophical discussions. This has nothing to do with loose talk about the Third Critique providing grounds for the unity of the aesthetic and the natural realms—though Goethe had long believed the two to be united. Of course

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\(^{13}\) The point is that, in Kant, the concept is distinct from the idea. Ideas are regulative by their nature, but concepts, which have a much closer relationship to phenomena, are empirically grounded.
Kant himself does very little explicitly in the *Critique of Judgment* that actually brings aesthetic and teleological judgment into single view.\(^{14}\)

Although Goethe’s markings in his copy of the *Critique of Judgment* have been published, the exact nature of what it reveals about his interpretations of Kant remains to be explored.\(^{15}\) But even a cursory survey makes clear that Goethe was drawn to precisely those passages in which Kant suggests the permeability of differences his philosophy had draw and ways in which we can conceive of higher unities than are presented or demonstrated. There are relatively few marking in the first half, with half of those in the preface and introduction; in “Aesthetic Judgment” he marks several passages where Kant compares the interest in artistic beauty with interest in natural beauty and where sensory experience and conceptual forms adumbrate the ideal. The markings from “Teleological Judgment” are more numerous and many are discursive.\(^{16}\) Many of them concern judging natural things as ends in themselves and the compositibility of mechanical and teleological explanation.

Goethe underscored the final phrase in the antepenultimate sentence of §51, “On the division of the fine arts.” The context is the third kind of art,\(^{17}\) “the art of the beautiful play of sensations (that are produced from the outside).” These are produced as “the proportion of the different degrees of attunement (tension) of the sense to which the feeling belongs.” Kant mentions but disagrees with the conception that, because the rapidity of the vibrations of the elastic medium of sound or light exceeds the ability of the sense organ to register anything more than the (un)pleasant effects of this vibration rather than the beauty of its compositions. Music, he counters, is about the proportion of those waves, and color has qualitative distinctions (presumably of hue) that are analogically related to tonal proportions. There are tone-deaf or colorblind people with otherwise excellent hearing or vision—which suggests that there is more than just the pleasure of

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\(^{14}\) It is of course no minor qualification of this statement to point out that Zweck and Zweckmäßigkeit (purpose and purposiveness) are the major exception, though Kant might easily have devoted more space to precisely how they effect the link.

\(^{15}\) See Géza von Molnár, “Goethes Studium der Kritik der Urteilskraft: Eine Zusammenstellung nach den Eintragungen in seinem Handexemplar,” *Goethe Yearbook* 2 (1984): 137-222. Most of the markings are underlinings or vertical strokes in the page margin; only a few are comments.

\(^{16}\) There is only a single comment among the markings of the preface, introduction, and aesthetic part; see Molnár, “Goethes Studium,” 179 and discussion.

\(^{17}\) See A 208-210. The other two kinds discussed in the section are the speaking arts of rhetoric and poetry and the constructive arts.
organ stimulation for those who are not lacking in the ability to detect tone or hue. Finally, he notes that the numbers associated with tonal and chromatic differences “are determined for conceptual [or conceivable] differences: so one might be compelled to see that the feelings of both are not mere sense-impression but to be looked upon as the effect of a judgment [Beurteilung] of the form in the play of many feelings” (A 209-210). Goethe underlines the last clause beginning with “but to be looked upon,” and he double-underlines “judgment.”

Most commentators of the Third Critique nicely explicate the judgment of beauty and judgments related to purposiveness, some of them noting certain formal similarities to the production of the intellectual feeling of respect in the Second Critique. What Goethe seems to have noticed is that the principle on which these judgments-cum-feeling are based, the interplay of the faculties, might easily be extended to a very large, carefully differentiated range of judgment-feelings. He would have been especially sensible of this possibility given his scientific and aesthetic interest in colors. Although there is an ineliminably subjective character to such judgments, they are nevertheless connected to, though not always expressly articulated by, conceptuality, a conceptuality based on a shared human nature (viz., the sensus communis) and therefore communicable. Here Goethe would have found support for the conception of his understanding of true symbolism, in which ideas can be active in the particular image without being fully achievable or expressible, and thus it also reveals but does not comprehend what can never be fully understood.19

4. In the early 1790s Goethe took to making frequent use of the word “Vorstellungsart,” “way of (re)presenting [things].” It is probably not possible to determine whether his usage of the word was inspired by or connected to encountering it (and the related “Denkungsart”) in Kant. But by the late 1790s Goethe began using it as a “term of art,” especially in the work leading up to Zur Farbenlehre (published in 1810). A crucial stage in this work is his correspondence with Schiller in January and February 1798, as he made detailed plans for the didactic and historical parts of Zur Farbenlehre. He remarked to Schiller that, once one had achieved insight into the various ways of

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18 See Molnár, “Goethe’s Studium,” 184.
19 Goethe also marked one of the passages in which the beautiful becomes the symbol of the good; see Molnár, “Goethes Studium,” 178.
human conceiving, it was possible to sketch out a priori a history of how scientific researches would progress in a field, by a kind of dialectic between the different Vorstellungsarten.

If Schiller awoke Goethe from his realist slumbers, the latter’s concentration on Vorstellungsarten was the foremost sign of it. What they indicate is that each human being develops, through native disposition, through the contingencies of autobiography, and through education, particularized ways of taking hold of experience—both in immediate apprehension and in conscious efforts of inquiry. Someone like Goethe perceives nature as intrinsically dynamic and then asks questions about the genesis of phenomena, another like Descartes perceives each thing as mobile and divisible and analyzes it accordingly, a third like Newton perceives it as consisting of particles and regards them as subject to fields of force. All these tendencies become second nature, and some of them are embedded in first nature. All such tendencies are permanent possibilities of human experiencing, if not in each and every individual, in the human race as a whole. And if it is by no means assured that there is a principle according to which all Vorstellungsarten can be schematized, it is possible for an attentive investigator to identify and typify many of them, especially in a particular field of inquiry.

It seems to me that the Vorstellungsarten are Goethe’s creative extension of implications of the Third Critique to a kind of naturally-based sociology of knowledge. Consider: The First Critique itself already adumbrated the notion that experience is not just a product of a transcendentental imagination and an understanding that issue in a mathematically and scientifically known manifold. Most of what we experience is not understood. The Third Critique began to scratch beneath the surface of what we do not understand. In the case of teleological judgment we can recognize, through the interplay of our faculties, that living things must be subject to mechanical law but also that, as far as we can see, they can never totally be reduced to mechanics, and from this recognition of the failure of that way of conceiving things we come to see the (subjective) necessity of understanding the living thing as an end in itself. This does not block further progress in mechanical understanding, of course, but it also presents us with a different kind of conceptuality (that does not, however, possess the same objectivity because an end-in-itself does not present directly in experience). In the case of aesthetic judgment we do not
through the interplay of the faculties even reach the point of arriving at a concept that can organize for us the experience of beauty—if it did, we would not have an aesthetic judgment proper. What we arrive at is an inchoate experience of beauty and the famous disinterested feeling that is so characteristic of Kant’s “beauty.” What few interpreters seem to have noticed is that for this experience to be anything more than merely subjective (as with the interested feeling of pleasure) is that the interplay of the faculties (viz., of imagination and the understanding) must fall into an organized pattern. That is, the dynamic interplay of the faculties must be organized and to some degree repeatable in order for it to be communicable. A further point is that there must be such patternings of experience beyond the initial syntheses of the manifold of appearances according to space and time and the categoriality of the pure concepts of the understanding if Kantianism is going to be able even to conceive of the phenomenological richness and variety of human experience.

Goethe seems to have recognized this, and to have recognized further that there is an articulable continuum of such experiences between that of the judgment of beauty and the judgment of an end. There might well be, for instance, differentially articulable experiences of colors that are humanly shareable, that is, communicable. There might well be dynamic organizations of the totality of experience besides the mechanical and the teleological. And any future sciences of nature must take these things into account. This is not to say that every way of conceiving things is equally justified for every purpose. As Goethe rightly pointed out, the theory that color is due specifically to the corpuscles of light that are reflected from objects to the eye is inadequate for explaining most of the phenomena of color (especially of what he called the chemical and physiological colors and the psychological experience of colors)—and that theory is grounded in a way of experiencing and conceiving color phenomena, a Vorstellungart. What was truly remarkable to Goethe was that so few investigators had any inkling that they had acquired a conventionalized way of experiencing things that closed them off from wider (and also from alternative) ways of seeing and experiencing. He had tried to counter this one-sidedness in the Beiträge zur Optik in the early 1790s, when he still held to the essential separability of the scientific tasks of basic observation and description.

20 One of the first to recognize this was Fichte, in the earliest versions of the Wissenschafislehre.
organization, and hypothetical speculation. Presenting the basic phenomena of prismatic colors in a carefully organized way produced nothing but asseverations by physicists that is had already all been explained. Goethe knew otherwise, and thus he started out on a path to figure out why and how the learned had difficulty seeing things in an ampler way. In the last analysis—as he discovered through his intensive studies in the history of the sciences—it is not possible to entirely separate the three phases of science. “The highest thing would be: to grasp that everything factual is already theory....Do not search for anything behind the phenomena: They themselves are the teaching.” “If ultimately I rest content with the Urphenomenon, it is, after all, but a kind of resignation; yet it makes a great difference whether I resign myself at the boundaries of humanity, or within a hypothetical narrowness of my small-minded individuality.”

Perhaps, then, we see a Kantian ground for Goethe’s interest from the middle 1790s to cultivate interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research into color and biological morphology, and for his practical efforts to build in Jena and Weimar a universe of diverse studies. Human beings are naturally endowed with basic forms of experience, but no human being can develop more than a few aspects of it. Through proper education, however, one might at least be sensitized to alternative ways of experience that have a prima facie justification. Any such education was not merely a formation of one’s own subjective spirit. It was also the acquisition of a deepened sense of the varieties of human experience and of the possibilities of encountering the infinite diversity of nature. Knowing one’s place in the universe presupposes becoming acquainted with multiple manifolds: the manifold of phenomena, the manifold of objects natural and artificial, the manifold forces at work in nature, the manifold of subjectivity, and the manifold forms of subjectivity that establish intersubjectivity.

A concluding but not final judgment

Gadamer was not wrong to claim that Goethe was the first, or at least one of early great, critics of Idealism, although this essay has not concerned itself with the question except incidentally. Goethe had great esteem for Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, but he was uneasy, and sometimes simply irritated or even infuriated, by their tendencies to

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21 See Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen, nos. 575 and 577 (ca. 1829).
universalize without a sufficient empirical basis. Even if in the last analysis one cannot separate into pristine domains the descriptions of things, their careful organization and systemization, and their speculative extension through imaginative conception, one still had an obligation to face things and give as conscientious account of them as possible, and to postpone as much as possible speculation about them. By in essence ignoring his scientific work and his philosophical reflection about it, Gadamer almost inevitably overlooked the ways in which Goethe speculatively extended Kant’s First and Third Critiques for the purposes of becoming ever more deeply acquainted with nature and human nature. That includes, but is not exhausted by, understanding and scientific knowing.

Gadamer is also right, I think, to suggest that, rather than look to his contemporaries, we can find even better models for Goethe as philosopher in ancient Greece. I do not, however, wish to indulge overmuch in an explication of my conception of Socrates and pre-Socratic philosophy. I would end by instead looking chiefly in the other direction, from Goethe’s age toward the future, especially in light of the theme of this conference. It seems to me that the two principal horizons within which the concept of ‘persona’ functions as basic are drama and sociology/social psychology. Within both horizons the persona is a played role, one that is in some ways predetermined by the myth or story that is being presented to an audience. Personae are both masks and persons, persons by way of masks. The use of masks in drama and ritual is not specifically Western, and is in fact very nearly universal. Masks both hide and express. In a very basic sense, the actor or impersonator needs to conceal the accidents of his own person in order to be the person of the drama or rite. The personae or masks are not anonymizers but particularizers. The words spoken will be taken as the words of a particular person—typically inflected, inflected by the character that is native but also acquired and very specifically contextualized by time and place.

I should say much more, but that little is enough to frame the final remarks. As dramatist, Goethe had more than a knowledge in passing of persona in the dramatic sense. What I have said about Vorstellungsarten suggests further that he had a well

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22 And if we are to take Boyle seriously, Goethe’s dramas, novels, and dramatic poems are peculiarly and precisely organized by the nature of their persons and their social and cultural roles.
developed grasp of the cognitive relevance of social psychology. (This is in fact too narrow a way of formulating the point, but let it suffice for now.) Let me make that very much more specific: He understood that understanding itself has a history and is a human, all too gloriously human practice. Modern cognition is haunted by a fiction: knowledge comes to exist without a knower. (Think of Popper’s Third World—though I don’t mean to imply that Popper is a villain. This is a typical symptom, not a cause.) This notion, more inarticulately presupposed than articulately defended, is in large part a consequence of the antipsychologism that has gone through waves of greater radicalism ever since Kant. Contexts of discovery, if Goethe is even partially right, are not mysterious accidents but highly articulable. Perhaps all one has to do here is to coin a phrase to make give this nascent form: not contexts of discovery, but personae of discovery, understood according to the typical Vorstellungsarten, is the way to make sense of discovery—even to begin to grasp where and how new discoveries might inevitably emerge within a science’s horizons.

But of course philosophy is a cognitive activity as well. Yet philosophers are even more resistant than scientists to the idea that anything sociological, subjective, or even intersubjective governs their thinking, or that there might be different personae of philosophical inquiry. They are resistant not least because of a meme that began in antiquity and is no less vigorous today: that the persona of the philosopher is fundamentally defined by rationality, and that the native element of that persona is rational argument. I do not wish to be taken as someone who presumes he is dancing on the grave of logic and rationality. I have had sufficient schooling and, more important, experience to understand how jejune this is, even as a fantasy. Yet rationality is not, and has never been, sufficient for defining the philosophical person. (I allow Hegel as a true exception, precisely because his philosophizing began in earnest with the recognition of the inadequacy of traditional logic and propositionalizing.) It is a characteristic, not a character, a trait of the person, not a full persona. Put in its simplest, almost simpleminded form, the objection runs like this: by all means be and act rationally; but rationality is not exhausted by logic, and neither rationality nor logic can, by themselves or together, provide the grist for their mills. This is a homely way of putting a thought that is appears differently in different thinkers, from (to take two examples, not quite at
Aristotle’s distinction between nous and dianoia to Kant’s between general and transcendental logic.

There is one last point to make about the limits of rationality. One lesson to be learned from the example of Plato’s Socrates, one derivable from both his words and his actions and that I think is intended by Gadamer’s comparison of Goethe to him, is the insufficiency of knowledge. Socrates’ disclaiming knowledge is an element (and unless we think he is a liar—for instance, by misconceiving the nature of Socratic irony—we should take the disclaimers seriously): properly speaking, whenever and wherever we claim knowledge, there are reasons to think that our knowledge does not extend as far or as deep as we believe. But it can be put even more baldly in a context that is larger than the cognitive: wherever we are, whatever we have in mind, we never have everything we need to think or act with full knowing. We may have the best science in the world, but that does not tell us how and where to apply it, much less whether to apply it—and even much, much less what direction we should give our lives and how we should act toward others.  

There is a quote attributed to Goethe that I have found online but have not yet tracked down. I hope it is real, since it is too good to pass up! “The philosophers can, as far as they are concerned, offer us nothing but forms of life. How these fit us, whether we, according to our nature or our talents, are in a position to give them the required content, that is our affair.” The philosophers give us forms of life, they give us personae that particularize the way we stand in the world but for which we need to write the lines and produce the stage props and other characters. That is not a limitation of the human being, that is his or her indefeasible prerogative.

Even if these are not Goethe’s words, they apply to philosophy the lessons that he learned from his work in the sciences. And they illustrate the multiply appropriate

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23 The work of Pierre Hadot is a constant reminder that the tradition of philosophizing that progressively gave birth to all the sciences is not the only tradition of philosophy. See, for example, his Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

24 The source is given as J. D. Falk, Goethes Letzte Lebensjahre, by which I believe is meant Johann Daniel Falk, Goethe aus näherm persönlichen Umgange dargestellt : Ein nachgelassenes Werk (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1832).

significance of his inclusion in a conference on the persona of the philosopher in the eighteenth century. He allows us to see more clearly the multiple philosophical personae of his age; he presents in his own person a persona that is unique; he outlines in his conception of cognitive personae new tasks for human cognition henceforth; and he provides us with a conceptual typology that allows us to see more clearly the present tasks of philosophers. Not bad for a mere poet.  

Perhaps every poet has a special logical (logos-related) gift. Goethe is exceptional in the extent and intensity of that gift, but also in the degree of reflection he brought to it and to the remarkable gifts of the great poets who were part of his heritage and his contemporaries—many known to him personally. It is thus always dangerous for a later thinker to find Goethe wanting in his understanding of how language works, both cognitively and poetically.  

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