



The Will To Create: Goethe's Philosophy of Nature

By Astrida Orle Tantillo

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Better known as a poet and dramatist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was also a learned philosopher and natural scientist. Astrida Orle Tantillo offers the first comprehensive analysis of his natural philosophy, which she contends is rooted in creativity.

Tantillo analyzes Goethe's main scientific texts, including his work on physics, botany, comparative anatomy, and meteorology. She critically examines his attempts to challenge the basic tenets of Newtonian and Cartesian science and to found a new natural philosophy. In individual chapters devoted to different key principles, she reveals how this natural philosophy—which questions rationalism, the quantitative approach to scientific inquiry, strict gender categories, and the possibility of scientific objectivity—illuminates Goethe's standing as both a precursor and critic of modernity.

Tantillo does not presuppose prior knowledge of Goethe or science, and carefully avoids an overreliance on specialized jargon. This makes *The Will to Create* accessible to a wide audience, including philosophers, historians of science, and literary theorists, as well as general readers.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Tantillo provides a valuable, lucid analysis of Goethe's scientific writings."

--Choice

From the Inside Flap

Renowned for his contributions to the literary world, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) believed his greatest accomplishments were in the fields of science and natural philosophy. In fact, Goethe predicted his scientific works would spark a revolution, eclipsing the theories of Newton and Enlightenment science.

Astrida Orle Tantillo offers the first comprehensive study of Goethe's natural philosophy, analyzing his work in such disciplines as physics, botany, morphology, zoology, and meteorology. She investigates the principles behind his conception of a will-driven nature, and analyzes their significance for such philosophical issues as objectivity, scientific method, and the status of natural law in general. Tantillo also critically examines Goethe's attempts to challenge the basic tenets of Newtonian and Cartesian science and his efforts to found a new natural philosophy.

Goethe offered a dynamic understanding of nature in which its parts, both animate and inanimate, act according to their own impulses. Goethe rejected fundamental behavioral theories such as instinct and divine intervention, and instead believed individual entities possess such a strong will to create that their choices and desires bring about changes in their own forms and modes of existence.

Because he saw nature as constantly evolving, Goethe discounted the possibility of ever discovering permanent truths. He argued that nature could only be studied in action and interaction with all of its parts, and assailed modern science's propensity for conducting experiments in controlled settings. Unlike such philosophers as Descartes, who advocated a complete separation between the thinker and the world, Goethe focused upon the individual's relationship with nature. He questioned scientists' objectivity and urged them to examine their own theoretical perspectives and prejudices while conducting research.

Goethe never achieved the scientific revolution he had hoped to lead. Though he has had his supporters and champions, his scientific works and natural philosophy never drew widespread support, and some of his claims have been proven wrong. His critique of mathematics, analysis, and reductive approaches made him seem unscientific, and his dynamic views of nature made his philosophy appear random especially when compared to the more systematic philosophers of his day. Many of his readers have seen his scientific works as poetic endeavors; some even suggested his writings were symptomatic of mental illness. In Tantillo's examination of Goethe's entire scientific corpus, however, we see his deep commitment to the experimental method, and how in many ways the principles underlying his radical brand of science point the way to modernity, both in the humanities and in science.

From the Back Cover

"Finally, we have a readable work in English comparable to Margrit Wyder's *Goethe's Naturmodell*, Dorothea-Michaela Noe-Rumberg's *Naturgesetze als Dichtungsprinzipien*, and Gunter Schnitzler and Gottfried Schramm's *Ein Unteilbares Ganzes* which encompasses all aspects of Goethe's philosophy of nature.... Tantillo takes the reader on a fascinating and illuminating journey of discovery through Goethe's life as a scientist and poet.... I highly recommend this exciting and incisive study." -John A. McCarthy,

Vanderbilt University

"Tantillo solves the problem of the validity of Goethe's science by reading him as a philosopher of nature. In this bold new reading, Goethe's nature is neither sentimental nor solely a principle of order. Tantillo shows us rather a dynamic, Faustian nature with its own creative will-sometimes brutal, sometimes monstrous.... This eminently readable book is as important for readers of Goethe's poetry as for those of his science." -Jane K. Brown, University of Washington

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Mildred Brummett:

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