

The Evolution of World Views

All of this suggests that another, more sophisticated and comprehensive epistemological perspective is called for. Although the Cartesian-Kantian epistemological position has been the dominant paradigm of the modern mind, it has not been the only one, for at almost precisely the same time that the Enlightenment reached its philosophical climax in Kant, a radically different epistemological perspective began to emerge—first visible in Goethe with his study of natural forms, developed in new directions by Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, and Emerson, and articulated within the past century by Rudolf Steiner. Each of these thinkers gave his own distinct emphasis to the developing perspective, but common to all was a fundamental conviction that the relation of the human mind to the world was ultimately not dualistic but participatory.

In essence this alternative conception did not oppose the Kantian epistemology but rather went beyond it, subsuming it in a larger and subtler understanding of human knowledge. The new conception fully acknowledged the validity of Kant's critical insight, that all human knowledge of the world is in some sense determined by subjective

principles; but instead of considering these principles as belonging ultimately to the separate human subject, and therefore not grounded in the world independent of human cognition, this participatory conception held that these subjective principles are in fact an expression of the world's own being, and that the human mind is ultimately the organ of the world's own process of self-revelation. In this view, the essential reality of nature is not separate, self-contained, and complete in itself, so that the human mind can examine it "objectively" and register it from without. Rather, nature's unfolding truth emerges only with the active participation of the human mind. Nature's reality is not merely phenomenal, nor is it independent and objective; rather, it is something that comes into being through the very act of human cognition. Nature becomes intelligible to itself through the human mind.

In this perspective, nature pervades everything, and the human mind in all its fullness is itself an expression of nature's essential being. And it is only when the human mind actively brings forth from within itself the full powers of a disciplined imagination and saturates its empirical observation with archetypal insight that the deeper reality of the world emerges. A developed inner life is therefore indispensable for cognition. In its most profound and authentic expression, the intellectual imagination does not merely project its ideas into nature from its isolated brain

corner. Rather, from within its own depths the imagination directly contacts the creative process within nature, realizes that process within itself, and brings nature's reality to conscious expression. Hence the imaginal intuition is not a subjective distortion but is the human fulfillment of that reality's essential wholeness, which had been rent asunder by the dualistic perception. The human imagination is itself part of the world's intrinsic truth; without it the world is in some sense incomplete. Both major forms of epistemological dualism—the conventional precritical and the post-Kantian critical conceptions of human knowledge—are here countered and synthesized. On the one hand, the human mind does not just produce concepts that "correspond" to an external reality. Yet on the other hand, neither does it simply "impose" its own order on the world. Rather, the world's truth realizes itself within and through the human mind.

This participatory epistemology, developed in different ways by Goethe, Hegel, Steiner, and others, can be understood not as a regression to naive *participation mystique*, but as the dialectical synthesis of the long evolution from the primordial undifferentiated consciousness

through the dualistic alienation. It incorporates the postmodern understanding of knowledge and yet goes beyond it. The interpretive and constructive character of human cognition is fully acknowledged, but the intimate, interpenetrating and all-permeating relationship of nature to the human being and human mind allows the Kantian consequence of epistemological alienation to be entirely overcome. The human spirit does not merely prescribe nature's phenomenal order; rather, the spirit of nature brings forth its own order through the human mind when that mind is employing its full complement of faculties—intellectual, volitional, emotional, sensory, imaginative, aesthetic, epiphanic. In such knowledge, the human mind "lives into" the creative activity of nature. Then the world speaks its meaning through human consciousness. Then human language itself can be recognized as rooted in a deeper reality, as reflecting the universe's unfolding meaning. Through the human intellect, in all its personal individuality, contingency, and struggle, the world's evolving thought-content achieves conscious articulation. Yes, knowledge of the world is structured by the mind's subjective contribution; but that contribution is teleologically called forth by the universe for its own self-revelation. Human thought does not and cannot mirror a ready-made objective truth in the world; rather, the world's truth achieves its existence when it comes to birth in the human mind. As the plant at a certain stage brings forth its blossom, so does the universe bring forth new stages of human knowledge. And, as Hegel emphasized, the evolution of human knowledge is the evolution of the world's self-revelation.

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