Publishing Goethe's Theory in English

Malin Starrett

Today, Goethe is best known for literary works such as his version of *Faust*. However, he also carried out many scientific studies. His *Farbenlehre*, which can be translated as *Theory of Colours*, was his most developed scientific work, first published in German in 1810.

Goethe's theory contains four main sections – the Didactic Section which is the main theory, a Polemical Section which directly challenges Newton's *Opticks*, an Historical Section and a Supplementary Section. Goethe pioneered aspects of contemporary history and philosophy of science within his theory. As he stated in the Preface: "[…] the history of science is science itself."

Goethe's theory was derided and largely ignored on its first publication. There are various reasons for this, such as the widespread perceived scientific sin of challenging/attacking Newton's *Opticks*, but also some less discussed and more subtle reasons relating to Goethe's *style* of science being unfamiliar to many natural philosophers of the time. For instance, Goethe's approach to scientific enquiry is qualitative and he avoids discussion of theoretical entities such as waves or 'corpuscles'. In addition, the fact that Goethe conventionally categorised colour phenomena as 'subjective' or 'objective' but then went much further to show how 'subjective' and 'objective' weave together to produce our full visual experience was just too much for early 19th century science to handle. Later, the 20th century science of colour had to swallow its pride and fully embrace this central element of Goethe's theory – but rarely giving him due credit. Today, every screen image one looks at is utilising this idea of 'subjective' and 'objective' weaving together, but most school and university science education still struggles to even countenance the idea of active interchange between the inner life of the human being and the outside world.

The above mentioned factors have held back Goethe's theory from wider recognition, although it is important to note that the theory has exerted a continuous quiet influence among leading artists and scientists since its first publication. There are popular science pronouncements dismissing lesser known theories and there are the leading edges of art and science, where practitioners often pay little heed to rigid orthodoxies.

The Publishing Process

There is an additional group of factors, relating to the publishing process, which have undermined Goethe's theory since it first appeared. These

factors/problems will be described in the following paragraphs and even if the reader is not particularly interested in Goethe's theory, many of these issues apply more generally to publishing any scientific work.

The first problematic factor is Goethe's use of language in describing colours. Basically, he wasn't consistent in his colour naming throughout the theory and so, for instance, what might be called 'Magenta' in English today was variously named by Goethe as (what can be translated as) 'Red', 'Pure Red', 'Purpur', or 'Peach-blossom'. Such inconsistency has real world effects leading, for instance, to some recent illustrations of Goethe's colour circle having a red sector at the top when that sector should be magenta. See Fig. 1 – the cover of the recently translated and published Polemic Section of Goethe's theory. It looks like the translators, working with the graphic designer(s), collectively got confused and put red in place of magenta at the top of the colour circle.

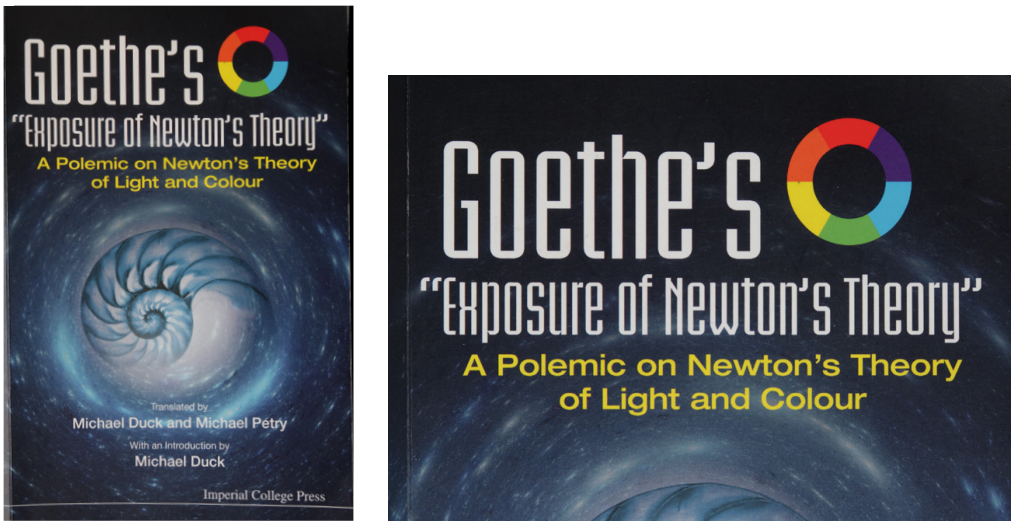


Fig. 1: The cover of the recently translated Polemic Section (*Imperial College Press*, 2016)

The main Didactic Section of the theory is littered with inconsistent colour naming, which does not help readers to entertain unfamiliar ideas about colour. Some likely explanations for Goethe's apparent sloppiness in this regard were that he worked on the theory over many years, with multiple other written works in process in the same period. A first time non-fiction book author might have focused much more attention on overall uniformity in use of language. Other possible factors were that Goethe complained of not having printed proofs to check before publication and also wider environmental pressures such as the nearby conflict of war disturbing his thinking during the final stages of finishing the book.