

Publishing Goethe's Theory in English

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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.

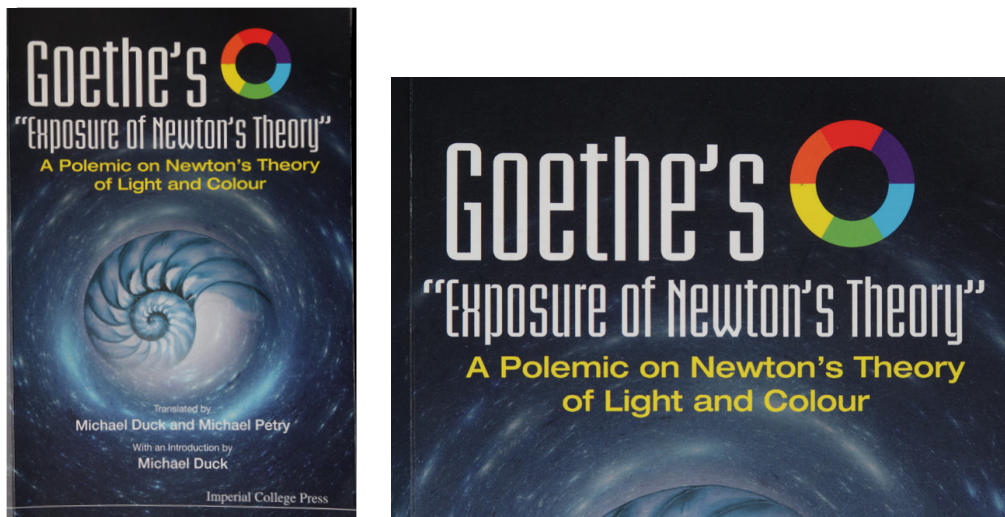


Fig. 1: The cover of the recently translated Polemic Section (*Imperial College Press*, 2016)

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.

Charles Lock Eastlake, Fellow of the Royal Society and later to be Director of the National Gallery in London, was the first to publish an English translation of the main Didactic Section of Goethe's theory in 1840. He made some extensive supplementary endnotes, but he largely avoided intervening over this colour naming problem – apart from a few brief footnotes. However, Eastlake or the publisher John Murray did make one larger intervention with respect to one of the colour plates in the book. This plate is much more than an illustration – it is intended to be a piece of apparatus for experiments.

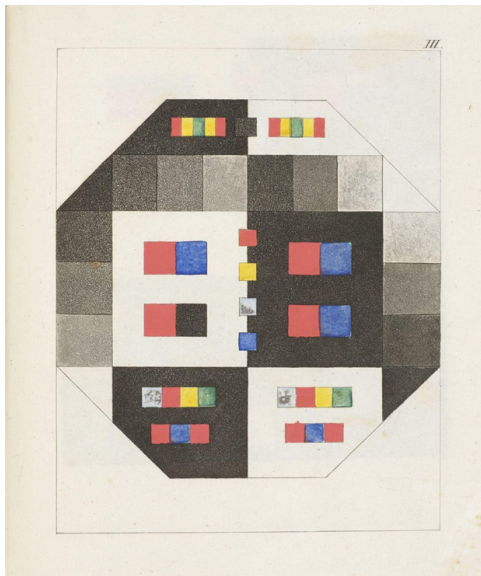


Fig. 2: Plate III from Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (1810) © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

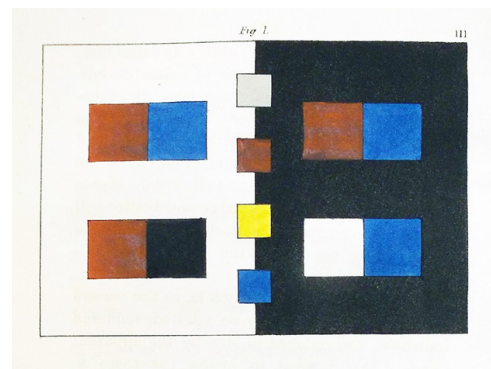


Fig. 3: Plate III, Fig. 1 from Eastlake's English translation (1840) Photograph from copy of book in Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast Library

On the left (Fig. 2) is Plate III from Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (1810) while on the right (Fig. 3) is the 'cropped' Plate III from Eastlake's English translation *Theory of Colours* (1840). The heavy cropping of the image in Eastlake's version follows a suggestion from Goethe himself in the German original, that the reader should make an enlarged version of the central coloured squares region, for easier viewing with a handheld prism. The reader is intended to look through a prism at the coloured squares.

Visually cultured readers may note a few other differences in comparing the two images. First is that the 1840 version (on right) has white/blue adjacent squares bottom right while the original 1810 version (left) has red/blue – that particular red square was probably coloured by mistake by the person hand colouring the copperplate engraving, in this specific copy

of the 1810 edition (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Secondly, the vertical line of four small squares straddling the black and white border also differs between the two versions. Eastlake/John Murray publishers have intervened to add a pale grey square mentioned in the text, which would not otherwise be present with the cropped image. Thirdly, the full 1810 plate bears a remarkable resemblance to 20th century optical test card images and in fact, this is what it is – possibly the first ever test card image.

Another more recent problem in the publishing of Goethe's theory is the flooding of the market with poorly produced facsimile copies of the 1840 English translation by Eastlake. Without copyright restrictions, there has been a free-for-all in publishing copies of varying quality. At present (August 2024), there are about nine different versions available. The covers of three of the versions are reproduced below.



Fig. 4: Three recent versions of Eastlake's 1840 translation of Goethe's theory

The one on the left is the full text of Eastlake's translation, but with no plates at all included and not even a publisher stated. Presumably, this publisher is counting on sales of the book as 'shelf trophies' – intended to be seen sitting on the shelf, but not necessarily studied.

The central image is the cover of Dover Publications version of the 1840 translation, while the image on the right is the version by M.I.T. Press. Both of these editions do have colour plates included, but each publisher has followed a very different path in handling the reproduction of the colour plates. To understand these different approaches, which can

be broadly categorised as ‘faithful to the original’ or ‘interventionist’, it may help to see photographs of Plate III from two separate library copies of the 1840 book.

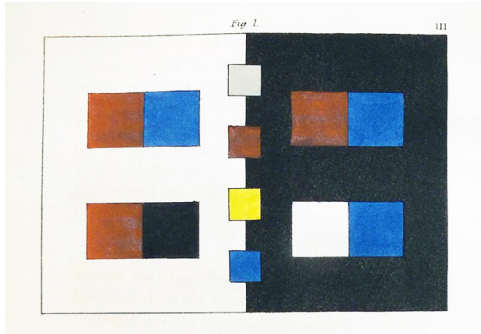


Fig. 5: Plate III, Fig. 1 from copy in Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast Library

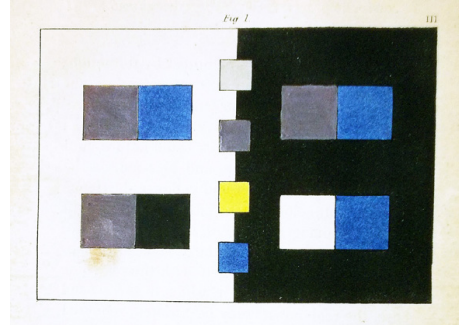


Fig. 6: Plate III, Fig. 1 from copy in University College Dublin Special Collections. Image courtesy of U.C.D. Library

Authenticity or Intervention

As the reader can hopefully see, the red pigment in the squares in the right copy (Fig. 6) has degraded so much that these squares just look grey. As with the 1810 German version, these squares in the 1840 versions were probably hand painted, but what we see here in Fig. 6 is not a mistake on the part of the colourist(s), it is a gradual degradation of the red pigment (probably red lead) over time. A third copy of the original 1840 book held in the National Library of Ireland (not illustrated here) shows a transitional stage of pigment degradation from red to grey. Therefore, the even grey in the squares in the right copy looks very likely to be due to a pigment degradation/transformation process, not a mistake in hand colouring.

Dover Publications, probably the world's leading publisher of facsimile versions of classic scientific works, has chosen to reproduce something very similar to the fully degraded version of Plate III on the right. Arguably, they could claim to be producing a faithful reproduction of an original 1840 edition of the *Theory of Colours* but the problem here is that anyone studying the book is likely to find it very difficult to follow the description of this plate in the text and worse still, if the reader tries to view this plate through a prism, the observed phenomena would be very far from what Goethe describes in the text. Such problems would likely severely interfere with any reader's attempts to understand Goethe's unfamiliar concepts about prismatic colours.

If you look again at the cover of the Dover edition (the one with the portrait of Goethe), strong pigment degradation is also to be seen in the

upper image of a developing spectrum – what should be orange is mostly black. Dover Publications were informed of these problems many years ago.

On the other hand, the M.I.T. Press version follows a fully ‘interventionist’ approach. They took the original plate and basically reconstructed a new version of it utilising evenly toned squares of printed colour (not illustrated here). By following this approach, they could adjust the colours to be the right kinds of red and blue so that the phenomena seen through a handheld prism broadly matches what Goethe describes. M.I.T. Press have departed from ‘historical authenticity’ to make a new version of this plate – but to good effect. It helps readers who want to use this plate as ‘apparatus’ in their own prism experiments.

Not mentioned thus far in this article, there is a much more recent translation of the Didactic section of Goethe’s theory, translated by Douglas Miller. It is contained in a collection of Goethe’s work entitled *Scientific Studies* (1988), along with many previously untranslated essays on meteorology, morphology, botany, zoology and other subjects, including what would be called today philosophy of science. Princeton University Press published this book in paperback in 1995 but sometime in the first decade of this century, supplies dried up and ever since it has been difficult to obtain, often selling for many times what it should cost. Princeton University Press were licensed (by the German publisher Suhrkamp) to make this translation available to the English speaking world but they have inexplicably sat on the work and withheld it from continued availability. Financially speaking, producing a new print run of this book should be a ‘no brainer’ – it would sell consistently for decades in museum and academic bookshops. Therefore, the reason(s) for the lack of action appear to be more in the cultural sphere. It should be remembered that the publishing business occupies a strange borderland which straddles cultural and economic interests. Here is a quote from Raymond Chandler contained in a booklet entitled *Bluffer’s Guide to the London Book Fair* (given to attendees at the 2018 fair): “The minute you try to talk business with [a publisher] he takes the attitude he is a gentleman and a scholar, and the moment you try to approach him on the level of his moral integrity he starts to talk business.”

The present author did go to the Fair (in 2018) and did follow up on some written correspondence with Princeton University Press to encourage them to reprint this book – but no new edition as yet. To be fair to Princeton University Press, they have produced a large collection of over 1000 pages entitled *The Essential Goethe* (2016) with many of Goethe’s essays on science contained in it, along with poetry and other literary works. However, it only contains two small parts of the new translation of the Didactic Section of the *Theory of Color* (title as translated) and this book also suffers from its own interdisciplinarity – it doesn’t easily appear on internet searches for books on Goethe and science. Without appropriate

marketing and advertising, it therefore largely remains hidden to most readers who wish to study Goethe's work in science.

Unfortunately, some anthroposophical publishing houses have not given a good account of themselves in relation to publishing Goethe's scientific work in English. The present author was given permission by Suhrkamp to seek a new publisher for Douglas Miller's translation of Goethe's *Scientific Studies*. All the main U.K. anthroposophical publishing houses declined the invitation to publish this book, despite it being a golden opportunity to make an important work available again, an opportunity for long-term steady sales of books and an opportunity to widen their readership beyond mostly anthroposophical circles. One small U.S. anthroposophical publisher was approached and they did express an interest, but Suhrkamp by then had independently found an English/German publishing house who agreed to take on the task, but that publisher then later pulled out of the project. This book still awaits to be published again.

It probably seems too obvious to state that if a publisher wishes to make available a new edition of an old scientific work, it needs to be done properly. As readers have hopefully seen in this article, Goethe's theory continues to be undermined by poor practice in the publishing world. Even apparently insoluble problems like Goethe's own colour naming inconsistencies could be remedied without interfering unduly with the text – by, for instance, including a 'Colour Language Bookmark' which could travel through the book with the reader, explaining the naming issues as they occur. Recognising problems makes space for solutions to appear, but publishers need to care about their standards and produce a quality product.

Acknowledgement

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