

MR. SEWALL ON THE PERSONALITY OF GOD.

IN COMMENT ON HIS BOOK "REASON IN BELIEF."¹

BY THE EDITOR.

THE Rev. Frank Sewall is the minister of the New Church at Washington, and is a leader of that branch of Christianity which is characterized by its reverence for Swedenborg as the prophet of the new dispensation. He has written the present book as an exposition of his Christianity, and the burden of his message is given in the sub-title which reads "Faith for an Age of Science." On the one hand he makes an examination into the rational and philosophical content of the Christian faith, and on the other points out the insufficiency of science unaided by revelation. We recognize the spirit of growing intellectuality which is characterized in the motto selected from the Jowett lectures, and reads as follows: "It would save infinite pain and loss if religion could grasp and satisfy men in their hours of intellectual activity, instead of merely finding an entrance through emotion, and being retained because it merely meets the cravings of human nature."

It is not our intention to enter into an exposition of Swedenborgian philosophy as here represented by one of its faithful followers. We will merely limit ourselves to reproducing Mr. Sewall's arguments in favor of the old doctrine of the personality of God. We will not even attempt to justify our own position which he criticizes in chapter V, page 66 ff., but will only limit our reply to a few comments explanatory of our own position. Mr. Sewall's argument is summed up in these words on page 70: "Except God be a Person there can be no science founded on universal laws, because there can be no universal relation, because relation exists in mind alone, and mind exists in person alone. The essence of the idea of person is that of self-conscious, self-active mind."

¹ London: Elliot Stock, 1906.

Mr. Sewall's argument rests on Kant's idea that all formal knowledge is *a priori*, and exists in the mind only and can not exist by itself. This is Kant's theory which the philosopher of Königsberg calls critical idealism. It is a problem which we have discussed at length in our edition of a translation of Kant's Prolegomena. The significance of it is fully recognized, but while we believe that Kant pointed out the way to the philosophical problem, we believe that he did not give us a correct solution, and we will say here that it would not be safe to refer to Kant as a reliable authority, and especially for a Swedenborgian, for Kant's wholesale rejection of Swedenborg and his remarkable visions is sufficiently known.² We reproduce Mr. Sewall's reference to our discussion of the God problem with Père Hyacinthe:³

"I noticed some time ago in a metaphysical journal a discussion between the editor and the celebrated French preacher, the Rev. M. Loyson, known before he left the Roman Church as Father Hyacinthe, on the subject of the Personality of God. The tone of the discussion was most courteous and friendly on both sides, and the views presented were broad and deep, and, therefore, they naturally coincided in many important points; but the one subject on which there seemed to be a very essential disagreement was as to—not the existence of God, for this was emphatically asserted by both—but as to how far personality is a necessary attribute of God. To the claim put forward by the brilliant Frenchman, that to take away the attribute of personality—i. e., of intelligence and will from God is to destroy the idea of God altogether, the editor replied that God may be non-personal without being impersonal: in other words, that God's non-personality may be of a kind to be called super-personal rather than impersonal: admitting that God may have personality of some kind, but if so, that it is a kind entirely above our apprehension or any of the attributes that we attach to personality. His argument to prove this was that there are things anterior to personality—older, therefore, than personality, and that personality is therefore not a proper attribute of the eternal. Of these things which he claimed are older than personality he instanced the law of number or the axioms of mathematics. That two and two are four, he said, is an eternal truth, older than any personal intelligence or knowledge of it.

² See Kant's book on *The Visions of Metaphysics and the Metaphysics of a Visionary*.

³ For further information of the controversy referred to by Mr. Sewall, we will state that it appeared in *The Open Court*, for October, 1897. Compare also the editor's article on "God" in *The Monist*, for October, 1898.

“But Kant has shown that the axioms of mathematics have all their validity in the *a priori* intuitions of succession and extension—or of time and space, which belong exclusively to mind. There is, therefore, no mathematical truth, nor mathematical law, which does not imply the co-existence of mind, or of personality, to comprehend it. I say comprehend it, rather than apprehend it, for the word apprehension applies to things without self, while comprehension means the holding or embracing things within self; and this must that Infinite do, which to borrow Swedenborg’s expression ‘is called infinite because it has infinite things in itself’—*Vocatus infinitus quia infinita in se habet* (D. L. W., nos. 17-22).

“The Divine Personality, the Mind in which alone the universal relations are possible, in which the certain, that is, the mathematical truth rests, is, therefore, the source and cradle of even the axioms of mathematics, and not some outbirth or evolution from them. There would, in other words, be no axioms without the Infinite Mind, the universal synthesis, to first give them birth. There is no relation of any two things in the things themselves. The things are there in their eternal isolation. If anything is between them, such as what we call relation, it is either, therefore, what we call the mind itself, or what the mind puts there. The same is true of the impressions of these things. These are equally, as Hume says, in themselves eternally isolated. It is the mind only that constructs a relation between them.

“When we say, ‘two and two make four,’ we are bringing sets of things wholly without relation in themselves, into a relation which we, in our purely mental, that is personal, capacity, put around them. Even parts are not parts of a whole, except so far as mind sees them in that relation, nor is the whole made up of its parts. There is but one mind that can comprehend the whole, made up of all the parts of universal being. To ‘comprehend’ these parts, to bring them into the relation of a whole, there must be a mind; to bring them ‘all’ into such a relation that mind must be infinite.

“In the light of these deductions from Kant’s doctrine of the *a priori* nature of the mind’s categories of number and relation, it appears how contradictory is the aforementioned editor’s idea of a relation of numbers prior to the mind in which alone such relation can exist, and that there can be any absolute source of things above, or anterior to, that mind in which all things first obtain their distinct existence as forms in relation. Is not this the Logos which ‘in the beginning was with God, and was God,’ and by whom ‘all things were made that were made?’

"Here is that Divine Personality which is something more than an arbitrary creation of man's moral nature, produced in order to satisfy his own aspirations after the good. It is not a projection from the reason, and so anthropomorphic in the intellectual sense. It is rather theomorphic as projecting the reason from itself, or making the human reason possible.

"This then is the infinite knowledge of which Revelation declares: 'Great is the Lord; His understanding is infinite.' This is that Divine Personality which is the source of the axiomatic knowledge of universal relation—i. e., the relation of all the parts which make up the great whole. Hence we see the assent which reason and philosophy must bring, in all humility and reverence, to the challenge of the Scriptures: 'He that teacheth man knowledge? Shall He not know?'

We see that a knowledge of universal relation must lie at the basis of, as giving security for, the finite mind's knowledge of any relation: and the Divine Personality of the Infinite must pre-exist as the final and real basis of human knowledge. For 'Thine eye did see my substance yet being unperfect: and in Thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned when as yet there were none of them.' (Ps. cxxxix. 16.)"

As stated above we do not intend to recapitulate the arguments in favor of our conception of a super-personal God. We will only point out that apparently we use some terms in a different sense from Mr. Sewall and that our conception of mind apparently differs from his. We understand by mind an organism which is characterized by a definite order systematically arranged according to rules of logic, and which has originated under the influence of sense-impressions which are methodically grouped and so arranged as to work like a logical thinking machine, all serving the purpose of adaptation to the surrounding world. According to our understanding, mind is the product of a development, and mind such as we know it exists in an infinite variety graded according to its capabilities from the animal world to the domain of rational thought, as it appears in man, rising even to the height of genius in specimens of extraordinary perfection. It is obvious that according to our definition God is not a mind, but rather the prototype of mind. An animal mind is incapable of thinking in clear abstract terms. It depends mainly on its immediate sense-impressions, and the thought of past and future is only vaguely outlined.

The relations which exist between things are recognized as relations only by mind, but they are of an objective character. They

exist whether or not they are perceived and their existence constitutes the bond of humanity in the objective world. The forms, the laws of form and the whole constitution of their interconnections are not, as Kant claims, "ideal" or subjective but objective. As Kant himself says, they are universal and necessary. Such relations are the omnipresent factors which shape the world and with it all sentient beings, because consciousness of them appears as mind in the animal world, and develops into personality as soon as it rises to the summit of clear abstract thought.

The original world-order from which mind rises is, as it were, the objective norm of all logical thought, and it is this feature of the objective world which the neo-Platonists call the eternal ideas or the Logoi. As soon as the unity of all ideas is recognized this system of the logical world-order is called the Logos, a term which was accepted by the early Christians and has rightly been identified with Christ in the aspect of his eternal character; religiously speaking, as the son of God begotten since eternity. This Logos, however, the aboriginal world order, is not a mind but the prototype of mind. It is the eternal norm from which mind originates.

We are far from denying the usefulness and even the need of mysticism in religion, and we believe we have a sympathetic recognition of the conception of God as held by Rev. Frank Sewall. We do not believe in the advisability of entering farther into a discussion of the differences and will therefore be satisfied with the general comments here given. We will further say that Father Hyacinthe's conception of God will in many respects be found similar to that of Mr. Sewall; but Father Hyacinthe, a man originally trained in Catholic philosophy, would presumably grant more to our conception of God than Mr. Sewall. At any rate we found in a personal discussion of the God problem that we had much more in common than we had originally anticipated. Father Hyacinthe was fully appreciative of broad philosophical thought which would avoid the emotional and almost mythological tendency of the current theology, and he noted in our own position the respect for the right of the theologian to conceive his ideas of God and other spiritual factors, in the allegories of mysticism.