

## GOETHE'S SOUL CONCEPTION.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE present number of *The Open Court* contains an article "What is God?" by Orlando J. Smith, and I heartily recommend to our readers a careful consideration of the ideas there presented. I do not hesitate to say that Mr. Smith's God-conception is the same as my own. In fact he uses quite similar arguments, in one case the very same in almost the same language as I do myself;—I refer to the one based upon the eternity of such truth as is represented by the multiplication table.

Our differences begin when he discusses the nature and immortality of the soul. To him the soul is a monad, a unit, a certain something which migrates from one personality to another and is reincarnated again and again. This view is untenable from my conception of things spiritual, because spiritual things are not entities. They are not substantial, and they can never assume the forms of monads. If the soul is not a substantial entity that originates; if it is form and not matter or energy, its continuance can not depend upon the identity of a substance of any kind but must be a preservation of form. This in fact is the real state of things, for a preservation of form actually takes place in our bodily constitution. There is a preservation of our bodily appearance under constant slow modifications; we retain the structure of our sense organs, and especially of our memory. The continuity of our life is simply due to the preservation of form in the constant flux of the vital functions which constitute life. The changes, growth, and all the various fluctuations of our body account most easily for those of our consciousness.

The fundamental problem of psychology has found its classical formulation in the contrast that obtains between Brahmanism and Buddhism, the former set forth in the philosophy of both the Vedanta and the Upanishads, and the latter in the *Questions of King Milinda* and other Buddhist books. Brahmanism asserts, Buddhism

denies the separate existence of a soul entity, called *atman*, i. e., "self,"—an immutable eternal self. And if the Vedanta view is taken seriously, there is no middle ground. Either the soul is or is not a concrete substantial thing. *Tertium non datur*. There is but the one alternative of yea or nay, and we must accept either horn of the dilemma. The only way to reconcile the two views would be by taking the Vedanta view as a poetical allegory invented for the purpose of driving home to the people the truth of the actuality and importance of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

The assumption of a soul-entity not only conflicts with facts that are well established by science but also leads into innumerable complications. For these reasons we reject the Vedanta view of an *atman*, and side with the Buddhist doctrine of the *anatman*, the non-existence of a special self. Nevertheless the soul remains as real as ever, and the rules of morality gain rather than lose in significance; for we must insist that the actions of man are even more important if they mould the soul, than if we assume it to be an immutable entity.

Having repeatedly discussed the problem of the soul, both in articles and books, (for instance *The Soul of Man* and *Whence and Whither*), we will not enter here into the subject again, but we will say that Mr. Orlando J. Smith's view of the soul is of great interest to us, on account of the similarity which it bears to Goethe's view.

Goethe had a dislike for abstract considerations. He was too much of a poet and liked to think even spiritual truths in such a way as to let them assume a definite and concrete shape. He was too human not to prefer the sense-perceptible image which is palpable, to the formula which is general and devoid of all tangible elements, and so if certain views became too abstract for him he clothed them in poetical allegories.

As to his view of the nature of the soul Goethe was careful not to commit himself definitely in his writings, but in conversation he now and then uttered ideas which indicate that his views of reincarnation resembled strongly the Vedanta view and also the theory here presented by Mr. Orlando Smith.

The main tenets of immortality, and even of reincarnation, are repeatedly expressed in Goethe's own writings and in his letters. We have collected the pertinent evidences in an article on the subject

<sup>1</sup> The subject has been treated in an article "Brahmanism and Buddhism, or the Religion of Postulates and the Religion of Facts" in *The Open Court*, Vol. X, p. 4851 ff.

which has appeared in *The Open Court* (Vol. XX, p. 367 ff.) under the title "Goethe's View of Immortality."

In his writings Goethe abstained from committing himself to the belief in a soul-entity, and his views are stated in such general terms that they might suit either the Buddhists or the Vedantists, but in his conversations he went further, taking decidedly the Brahman view, and we will here present those additional expressions of his thought which he mentions privately to Eckermann and Falk.

Goethe said to Eckermann on September 1, 1829:

"I do not doubt our continuance, for nature can not do without continuity; but we are not all immortal in the same way, and in order to manifest himself as a great entelechy, a man must first be one."

Here Goethe falls back upon a technical term of Aristotle which denotes that something which makes things actual. The word "entelechy" means the quality of having become complete, of being perfected, or having attained its purpose,<sup>2</sup> and is used in contrast to "dynamis,"<sup>3</sup> i. e., potential existence, which is the idea of a thing, its possibility, its mere potentiality. Accordingly, entelechy denotes that principle or factor which renders things actual.

The idea of an entelechy as a separate being is decidedly metaphysical and, if taken seriously, would lead to dualism. There is not reality and a principle that makes reality real. There is not motion, and an agent of motion, a being that makes motion move. There is not actuality and a thing that makes actuality act. The actuality of things and also of living beings is their existence itself and living beings (i. e., organisms) originate in a slow process of evolution by a combination of their parts, or as we had better call it by organization. We may regard them as actualizations of eternal types, but in that case we can only mean their potential existence, which is the possibility of their special combinations, in the same sense as mathematical truths are eternal and exist even before any mathematician has discovered and actualized them.

Goethe apparently takes the word in the sense of an entity. On March 2, 1830, we find the term "entelechy" mentioned again in another slightly different connection. There he is reported as having said:

<sup>2</sup> ἐντελέχεια is derived from ἐντελής, "perfect", and ἔχειν, "to have". The adjective ἐντελής means also "powerful, mighty, commanding"; and the verb ἐπιτέλλειν, from which it is derived, "to enjoin, to command". The root of the latter is the same as that of the noun τέλος, "end", "purpose".

<sup>3</sup> δύναμις, potentiality.

“The persistence of the individual and the fact that man rejects what does not agree with him, are proofs to me that such a thing as an entelechy exists. Leibnitz cherished similar ideas concerning such independent entities, only that what we call ‘entelechy’ he called ‘monads.’”

Almost seventeen years prior to these conversations with Eckermann Goethe used the term “monad” in a talk with Falk who accompanied him on his return from the funeral of Wieland. With reference to the impossibility that Wieland’s soul could have been annihilated, Goethe said:

“There can be no thought of an annihilation in nature of such high psychic powers, nor under any conditions, for she is not wasteful of her capital. Wieland’s soul is by nature a treasure, a real gem. Moreover, during the whole of his long life he did not use up these spiritual and beautiful talents, but increased them. . . .

“A personal continuance of our soul after death by no means conflicts with the observations which I have made for many years concerning the constitution of our own beings and all those in nature. On the contrary, it seems to be an outcome of them and finds in them new confirmation.

“How much or how little of a personality deserves to be preserved, is another question, and an affair which we must leave to God. At present I will only say this: I assume different classes and degrees of ultimate aboriginal elements of all beings which are, as it were, the initial points of all phenomena in nature. I might call them souls because from them the animation of the whole proceeds. Perhaps I had better call them monads. Let me retain this term of Leibnitz, because it expresses the simplicity of these simplest beings and there might be no better name. Some of these monads or initial points, experience teaches, are so small and so insignificant that they are fit only for a subordinate service and existence. Others however are quite strong and powerful. . . .

“All monads are by nature so indestructible that they can not stop or lose their activity at the moment of dissolution, but must continue it in the very same moment. Thus they only part from their old relations in order to enter at once into new ones. In this change all depends on the power of intention which resides in this or that monad.

“Each monad proceeds to whithersoever it belongs, into the water, into the air, into the earth, into the fire, into the stars, yea the secret tendency which conducts it thither, contains at the same

time the secret of its future destiny. Any thought of annihilation is quite excluded. . . .

"Should we venture on suppositions, I really do not understand what could prevent the monad to which we owe the appearance of Wieland on our planet to enter in its new state of existence into the highest combination of this universe. By its diligence, its zeal, its genius, through which it has incorporated into its own existence so many historical states, it is entitled to anything. I should not be astonished at all should I, after millenniums, meet Wieland again as a star of the first magnitude. Then I should see him and bear witness how he with his dear light would gladden and quicken everything that would come near him.

"To bring light and clearness into the nebular existence of some comet should be deemed a joyous task for a monad such as the one of our Wieland! Considering the eternity of this universe of ours, no other duty, generally speaking, can be assumed for monads than that they in their turn should partake of the joys of the gods as blessed creative powers. They are conversant with the becoming of creation. Whether called or uncalled, they come by themselves from all sides, on all paths, from the mountains, from the oceans, from the stars. Who can prevent them?

"I am sure that I, such as you see me here, have lived a thousand times, and hope to come again another thousand times."

There is a great lack of lucidity in these sentences. On the one hand the monads are the simplest realities, a kind of atoms, which belong to fire, water, earth, and other elementary existences; on the other hand, they are psychic agencies, and are introduced to personify the law that sways the formation of a nebula into a planetary system; and again they are assumed to be psychic entities. Perhaps some monads are thought to be chemical atoms and others psychic powers; and the latter, after the fashion of the Greek deities, are expected to do the work of the natural laws. Such thoughts are poetry, not sciencé; fiction, not psychological facts; mythology, not philosophy.

If we knew Goethe from this passage alone we would say that he was a mystic. We grant that he had a mystic vein whenever he happened to speak or refer to the soul, but even here he disliked the excrescences of mysticism. He avoided having anything to do with clairvoyance and other pathological or semi-pathological phenomena. He not only disliked to delve into inquiries of mysterious events, but also to analyze psychological problems in abstract speculations. Thus his views remained hazy and indistinct. He accepted

immortality as a fact, not because it could be proved,—in fact he thought it could not be proved,—but because he could not dispense with an infinite outlook into the past as well as the future.

Goethe's conversation with Falk is perhaps the most important passage to be quoted on the mooted topic, and it may be well to bear in mind that it was Falk and not Goethe who wrote these sentences, and that they therefore must be used with discretion. Nevertheless we can not doubt that Goethe held similar views, and that he believed in the existence of monads or entelechies. Yea the expression was so dear to him that in his first conception of the conclusion of Faust he used the word entelechy when saying that Faust's soul was carried up to heaven by angels. In the printed editions he replaced it by the term "Faust's Immortal."

Eckermann has recorded several of Goethe's remarks which corroborate, at least in general, that he held these notions. For instance under March 11, 1828, we find the following comment of Goethe's:

"Each entelechy is a piece of eternity, and those few years during which it is joined to its terrestrial body do not make it old."

In a conversation with his friends, Chancellor von Mueller and Herrn von Riemer, October 19, 1823, Goethe declared that it would be quite impossible for a thinking being to entertain the idea of its own non-existence or the discontinuance of its thought and life. Accordingly every one carried a proof of his own immortality quite immediately in himself, but as soon as he tried to commit himself to objective statements, as soon as he would venture to come out with it, as soon as he wanted to prove dogmatically or comprehend a personal continuance, as soon as he would bolster up this inner observation in a commonplace way, he would lose himself in contradictions."

In his "Prose Sayings" Goethe says:

"The highest we have received from God and Nature is life, viz., the rotating motion of the monad around itself, which knows no rest nor ceasing. The tendency to preserve and cherish life is naturally and indelibly inborn in every one, but its nature remains a mystery to us as well as to others. The second favor which comes from the Supreme Being is what we call experience in life, our becoming aware of things, and the influences which the living and moving monad exerts upon the surroundings of the outer world. Thereby the monad feels itself as infinite within and limited without."—*Sprüche in Prosa*, 1028-1029.

In a conversation with Chancellor von Müller, February, 25, 1824, Goethe expressed his dislike to investigate the question of life after death.

"To be engrossed with the ideas of immortality is only for the leisure classes, and especially for women who have nothing to do. An able man who needs to make himself useful here, and who accordingly has to exert himself daily, to struggle and to work, leaves the future world alone and is active and useful in this one."

Considering all these quotations it is certain that Goethe assumed the existence of a soul-entity, an entelechy or monad, which in his opinion was necessary for comprehending the nature of the soul and its immortality, and the latter was not the traditional Christian, but an Oriental belief, i. e., a reincarnation or metempsychosis of some kind. He speaks repeatedly of his former existences: so for instance in a poem addressed to Frau von Stein, he declares that in the sympathy which binds their souls, he feels that in "bygone ages she must have been either his sister or his wife."<sup>4</sup>

When he traveled in Italy Goethe declared that he must have lived there, and he went so far as to state that it must have been in the days of the Emperor Hadrian. He wrote on October 12, 1786 from Venice:

"Indeed I feel even now as if I were not seeing things here for the first time, but as if I saw them again."

With all due respect for his greatness, we believe that Goethe has not elaborated his views of the soul nor matured them into clear and scientifically tenable propositions. He was too much of a poet and too little of a philosopher,—in spite of his several scientific labors. He actually disliked explanations in abstract terms. It is, however, interesting to find that Mr. Orlando J. Smith in his conception of immortality is backed by such a great man as Goethe.

<sup>4</sup>"Ach, du warst in abgelebten Zeiten  
Meine Schwester oder meine Frau."