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The Soul of Goethe’s Thought

Goethe’s philosophical writings all ultimately stem from his efforts to understand the creative act, which he experienced as essentially the same in all the various forms of activity he engaged in, the writing of his poems, novels and plays, his scientific investigations, his service to the Weimar state and participation in the life of its court. In contemplating his creative experience, he developed a unique conception of the soul, which this article seeks to analyze.

The Soul’s Ideal Potential

For Goethe, the soul (Seele) is the “starting point” of an individual’s development and activity in the world and the means of realizing the ideal of his existence in activity. It is that in terms of which the individual’s inner life (Gemüt) is latently a whole (Ganzes) or world (Welt), a “circle” (Kreis), with the soul as its center; and it is the power or faculty enabling an individual to act as a whole and express his realized inner wholeness in a created work that is itself a whole:

[S]tarting points . . . that I term souls . . . [They] are wont to pull . . . everything that approaches them into their circle and transform it into something that belongs to them. They continue this

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process until the small or greater world, whose intention lies spiritually within them, also appears outwardly in bodily form.¹

Both as inner potential, eventual inner reality, and as outer concrete manifestation of the individual's inner wholeness, "the whole becomes visible only in the . . . soul."²

Goethe terms the "material out of which the soul is constructed and in which it lives a purgatory, where all infernal and heavenly forces are interwoven and active together."³ In this statement it appears that the soul is constructed (gebildet) out of opposing forces of the inner life, but in fact it indicates that the soul is initially only a latent power or faculty, not yet active in unifying them. Or in other words, the inner life—as consisting of "the necessary, immediately given limited individuality of a person pronounced at birth . . . in terms of which the individual . . . differs from (others),"⁴ inborn characteristics such as talents and abilities, as well as all manner of inclinations and passions, from nefarious ones to spiritual ones, that have been acquired in the course of the individual's development in the outer real or empirical world—is not yet a whole. It is then the *soul*, when active in living fashion, that "weaves" the elements of the inner life together in its purgative activity, constructs or makes of them a unified multiplicity or whole in accord with its ideal potential.

¹ J. D. Falk, Jan. 25, 1813 (22 673–674).

The author's translations of Goethe's statements are based on the Artemis edition of his works, letters and conversations: J. W. Goethe, *Artemis Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche*, vol. I–XXIV, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zürich 1948–1954). In each case, statements are cited according to the volume and page number of the Artemis edition, with 22 673–674 here, for example, referring to volume 22, pages 673–674.

Further, it is to be noted that conversations are cited by the name of the person who recorded them (e.g., J. D. Falk, Eckermann) and that all ellipses, italics and parenthetical emendations in the quotations are the author's.

² *Xenien*, 47 (2 504).

³ Letter to Lavater, May 7, 1781 (18 587).

⁴ "Primal Words • Orphic" Commentary (2 617).

Essentially the same conception of the soul is reflected in Faust's famous lament, where he sighs:

Two souls live, alas, in my breast,
Each seeks to separate itself from the other;
The one cleaves to the world with its organs,
The other raises itself forcibly from the dust
To the realm of its high ancestors.⁵

The one soul, i.e., the multiplicity of Faust's limited particular individuality and experience of the world in relation to which the soul proper for him is at this point in the drama still only a latent potential, cleaves to the sphere of the senses, the earthly real or empirical world. The second soul, i.e., the soul proper as eventually active for Faust, forms his inner life into the wholeness that is then expressed in his works, and that thereby raises (erhebt) both Faust himself and his works "from the dust" to an otherworldly realm of "high ancestors." The whole as Goethe conceives it is not an ideal rational order transcending or negating the limitation of the individual and of his existence in the real or empirical earthly sphere, but a concretely existing human creation in which that limitation is elevated to something higher.

Thus when Goethe asserts that "in the psychology of man we are concerned always only with one and the same soul,"⁶ he does not mean that the real existence of every individual's soul is one and the same. Rather, he means that the striving of individuals to realize their ideal potential is always the same, regardless of the limitations of their particular individualities and existences in the empirical sphere. For while truth (Wahrheit) for Goethe, i.e., inner and outer appearances of the soul as wholes, "is simple and always the same, however it appears," error (das Irrtum) "is varied to the highest degree, different in itself and

⁵ *Faust I* (5 177).

⁶ Letter to F. Förster, May 1829 (23 586).

struggling, not only against the good and true, but against itself, opposing itself.”⁷ The individual’s particular nature, his peculiarities and his experience of the empirical world are, relative to the whole of the inner life and the whole in which they are expressed, “erroneous facing without, but true facing within” and are “forms of the living existence and activity of particular perfect, but limited beings.”⁸ In this sense, “every form,” that is to say, every created whole, “has something untrue in it; however, it is once and for all the glass by means of which we collect holy rays of light . . . for a glimpse of fire”⁹—that fire or flame being the act of acting as a whole when creating a whole:

The circle of the years has quietly been rounded,
The lamp awaits the flame that is lit.¹⁰

Goethe also holds that actually existing individual souls differ as to the degree of their strength (Kraft) or power (Macht):

I assume different classes and hierarchies of the . . . starting points of all appearances that I term souls, because the animation of the whole proceeds from them. . . . Now some of these . . . starting points are . . . small, . . . negligible, . . . others, on the other hand, are strong and powerful. . . . Strictly speaking, I prefer to term only the latter souls.¹¹

It is this strength or power determines the relative capacity of an individual to assimilate from and develop himself in terms of the outer world and then express his assimilation as a whole in his works:

The objects that we perceive are a vast multitude . . . Souls that have an inner strength to unfold themselves begin ordering, in

⁷ *Maxims and Reflections* (9 630).

⁸ “The Court Lady” (14 352).

⁹ “From Goethe’s Pocket Book” (13 48).

¹⁰ “Primal Words • Orphic” (1 523).

¹¹ J. D. Falk, Jan. 25, 1813 (22 673–674).

order to facilitate knowledge, begin matching and uniting, in order to achieve satisfaction.¹²

On the other hand, in the poem “Monologue of a Connoisseur” Goethe holds that all works of art and the legacy of culture (Überlieferung) generally, as well as nature itself, are “useless” to the individual in their earthly or empirical aspect, without true significance, prior to the individual’s assimilation and transformation of them in activity, or unless “loving power of creation” fills his soul:

What use to you is glowing nature
Before your eyes,
What use the objects
Of art all about you,
If loving power of creation
Does not fill your soul
And is not productive again
In your fingertips?¹³

Or, as expressed by the chorus representing the ideals of ancient Greek culture in response to Phorkyas (Mephistopheles) in the third act of *Faust*:

Let the sun’s radiance vanish
When day breaks in the soul:
We find in our own hearts
What the whole world is denied.¹⁴

Leonore in *Torquato Tasso* characterizes the poet in like fashion, while adding that his poems, imitating the “harmony of nature” in their wholeness, animate (belebt) or give life to the created works of the legacy of culture that the poet’s soul has transformed or recreated in his works:

¹² “Study after Spinoza” (16 842).

¹³ “Monologue of a Connoisseur” (1 392).

¹⁴ *Faust II* (5 448).

His eye hardly rests on this earth;
 His ear perceives the harmony of nature;
 What history offers, that gives life,
 He willingly takes it up at once:
 His soul collects what is widely scattered
 And his feeling breathes life into what is unanimated.¹⁵

Considering now Goethe's philosophical understanding of the creative process in its universal import for mankind generally, his early remark in a letter to Jenny von Voigts is of seminal importance:

I try daily to develop myself further according to the best traditions and the always living truth of nature, and let myself be led in each of my efforts, acting, writing and reading, by the goal of coming closer to that which hovers above all our souls as the highest being, although we have never seen it and can't name it.¹⁶

In the further course of his philosophical development, Goethe maintains then that the highest being, God, or the world soul (*Weltseele*), as he also terms it, is the foundation of an actually existing ideal world, the whole of all works that are wholes, his world of culture (*Kulturwelt*). Goethe thereby conceives morality, the philosophy of right and proper conduct, in terms of the creative life of the individual in relation to the divine being underlying his ideal world:

[The moral life came into the world] through God Himself, as all good things. It is not a product of human reflection, but rather it is acquired and inborn beautiful human nature. Possessed more or less by man generally, it appears to a high degree in a few particularly gifted souls, whose beautiful appearance captured the love of others and drew them irresistibly to reverence and emulation.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Torquato Tasso* (6 218).

¹⁶ Letter to Jenny von Voigts, June 21, 1781 (18 598).

¹⁷ Eckermann, April 1, 1827 (24 614–615).

—and asserts that “if a poet’s soul has a high inner content . . . his effect on others will always be a moral one, however he presents himself.”¹⁸ Similarly, Goethe conceives the beautiful appearance of art works to be produced by “a few particularly gifted souls,” souls that are themselves beautiful:

You can see [in Lorrain] a perfect human being, . . . who thought and felt beautifully and in whose inner life there lay a world. . . . [His] paintings have the highest truth, but not a trace of reality. Claude Lorrain knew the real world in the smallest of details by heart, and he used it as means of expressing the world of his beautiful soul. And this is the true idealism that knows how to so employ real means that appearing truth produces the illusion that it is real.¹⁹

Two of Goethe’s late poems of a philosophical nature not only summarize the preceding analysis of his conception of the soul’s ideal potential, but express the points considered artistically as a whole—first “One and All,” and then “Testament:”

World soul, come and fill us!
Struggling then with the world spirit
Will be the high calling of our powers.
Good spirits taking part and guiding,
Highest masters gently leading
To Him, who creates and has created all.
And unending, living activity works
To recreate what was created,
In order that it does not become lifeless.
And what hasn’t been, now it wants to become
Pure suns, colorful earths;
In no case may it rest.
It shall move itself, act creatively,
First form itself, then transform itself;

¹⁸ Eckermann, March 28, 1827 (24 607).

¹⁹ Eckermann, April 10, 1829 (24 355).

It only seems for moments still.

The eternal is ceaselessly active in them all . . .²⁰

The individual “struggles” with the world soul or world spirit in the sense that his individuality, existence and strength or power to assimilate from the world of culture in realizing his soul’s “high calling” are limited relative to other individuals and the highest being itself, but remain necessary moments of the concrete wholeness of his actions. The works of previous creative individuals or masters inspire or animate his creative life and gently lead him “to Him, who creates and has created all.” And the individual’s own works recreate and animate their works, in such a way that the ideal world continues to have life and exist.

“Testament” amplifies on these themes, while focusing more on a given individual’s experience of the ideal world and the truth of individual actions in their membership within that whole:

Truth was found already long ago,
It united a noble community;
Ancient truth, seize hold of it!

.....

Now turn within at once:
You will find the center there inside
That no noble soul may doubt in.
You will miss no rule there:
For an independent conscience
Is the sun of your day of virtue.

.....

With fresh gaze observe with joy
And stroll confidently but impressionably
Across meadows of a richly endowed world.

.....

The past is lasting then,

²⁰ “One and All” (1 514).

The future living in advance,
The moment is eternity . . .

The true works of the individual's "high ancestors" united a "noble community," i.e., served to make that community an ideal whole or world. In so far as the onlooking individual "seizes" or appropriates it in his development and finds the center of *his* circle, expresses his latent and realizable wholeness in relation to that community, he will find the sun of his moral "day of virtue" despite, but only in terms of, the particularity of his individuality and existence, his "independent conscience." If he is then successful in acting as a whole, he will be able to "examine the universal dominion," know himself to be participating in the ideal world's eternal life, and know his works to be true or beautiful in inspiring others to act in similar fashion:

And if you are finally successful,
And full of the feeling:
Only what is fruitful is true—
You will examine the universal dominion,
It will rule in its own manner,
Join the smallest company.
And just as in former times, secretly,
A work of love in his own manner
Was created by the philosopher, the poet,
You also will achieve most beautiful favor:
For feeling ahead of noble souls
Is a most desirable calling.²¹

Realization of the Soul's Potential

It is not yet clear how the soul realizes its ideal potential in Goethe's thinking. For though error or falsity have been shown to be possible for him in terms of an individual's limited individuality and experi-

²¹ "Testament" (I 515–516).

ence in the world prior to the wholeness that the soul achieves, it has not been shown how an individual can fail to realize the soul's ideal potential. Or though Goethe concedes that "the soul loses the consciousness of itself in pleasant and good circumstances,"²² it is also not clear how in his view the individual can become conscious of his soul if he isn't already conscious of it. And why for that matter does Goethe write "if you are finally successful" in his "Testament"? In short, if "the circle of the years has been rounded," if "the lamp awaits the flame that is lit,"²³ how does an individual light the flame?

Goethe provides an answer to these questions in *Faust*:

[W]hen in our narrow cell
The lamp burns brightly again,
There will be light in our breast . . .²⁴

—and in this passage from *Torquato Tasso*:

O, that we forget so much to follow
The pure and quiet wink of the heart.
Wholly silently, a god speaks in our breast . . .²⁵

For when, he says, the individual seeks to create a whole, he must concentrate both on his projected work, his plans and intentions with respect to it, the traditions and conventions of his form of activity, the works that he has assimilated from the world of culture, *and* this point in his breast (Brust). Only then is he conscious of the "starting point" of his soul from which "the animation of the whole proceeds,"²⁶ will he find that a "pure middle point" arises in his breast and will the multiplicity of his inner life become a whole "moving in circles" about that point:

²² Letter to Lavater, Oct. 4, 1782 (18 700).

²³ J. D. Falk, Jan. 25, 1813 (22 673–674).

²⁴ *Faust I* (5 179).

²⁵ *Torquato Tasso* (6 261–262).

²⁶ "Primal Words • Orphic" (1 523).

How can the individual stand before the infinite being, unless he collects all of his spiritual powers, pulled as they are in many directions, in his inmost, deepest being, unless he asks himself: can you even think of yourself as standing in the middle of this living order, if something constant and moving in circles about a pure middle point does not arise in you? And even when it is difficult to find this middle point in your breast, you will recognize it by the fact that a benevolent and beneficial effect proceeds from it and gives witness to it.²⁷

The physical existence of this point in the individual's breast, though "difficult to find" or having a "secret existence," *can* be found—but only during the creative act:

In the human spirit, . . . nothing is above or below, everything demands the same right in terms of a common middle point, whose secret existence manifests itself precisely in the harmonious relation of all its moments to it.²⁸

How this recognition takes place, how the "multiple confusing relations" of the inner life are unified by the soul in creative activity, is incomprehensible to the individual's rational understanding, "seems a spontaneous and special gift of God," but it can nevertheless be known to take place with complete certainty:

[W]hen men construct a whole according to their abilities, . . . the inner life . . . must become ever simpler, [they] must concentrate on one point and renounce multiple confusing relations, and only then can [they] find [themselves] with all the more certainty in a condition of good fortune that seems a spontaneous and special gift of God.²⁹

Why are there so few and so easily overlooked references to the physical location of the soul in Goethe's philosophical writings? Two

²⁷ *Years of Wandering* (8 131).

²⁸ *Aphorisms and Fragments* (17 778).

²⁹ "Study after Spinoza" (16 843–844).

factors are involved in the author's opinion. On the one hand, since he believed that "it is one's duty to only say to others only that which they are capable of receiving,"³⁰ Goethe sought to avoid confounding or alienating readers and listeners who had not experienced his creative principle with utterances seeming to claim that he himself was in possession of it in some absolute sense. On the other hand, however, he hoped that his utterances dealing with the creative life would encourage or stimulate others to discover the soul and participate in the life of his ideal world. For believing as he did that "philosophers can . . . only offer us life forms" and that "how they fit us, whether we are able according to our individual natures and abilities to provide those life forms with the necessary content, that is our concern,"³¹ Goethe left his readers and listeners such a life form with respect to the soul, "results" of his philosophical reflections that, "since we do not know the occasion of their utterance, . . . *force* us to go backwards by means of reverse discovery and invention and so if possible understand the derivation of such thoughts from a distance, from the bottom upwards."³²



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SUMMARY

Goethe's philosophical writings all ultimately stem from his efforts to understand the creative act, which he experienced as essentially the same in all the various forms of activity he engaged in, the writing of his poems, novels and plays, his scientific investigations, his service to the Weimar state and participation in the life of its court. In contemplating his creative experience, he developed a unique conception of the soul, which this article seeks to analyze.

³⁰ *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Wandering* (8 38).

³¹ J. D. Falk, undated (23 817).

³² *Years of Wandering* (8 137).

KEYWORDS

Goethe, creative principle, soul, wholeness, legacy of culture (Überlieferung), inborn individuality, real world/ideal world, world soul/God.

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