

## THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL,

A REPLY TO MR. THADDEUS B. WAKEMAN.

BY THE EDITOR.

SOME time ago, Dr. Isaac K. Funk, of the well-known publishing firm, submitted to us evidences of spirit communication concerning an ancient Hebrew coin called "the widow's mite," which had been used by Funk & Wagnalls for illustration in their *Standard Dictionary*. Dr. Funk was reminded of the coin in a spiritualistic *séance* of an unprofessional medium who spoke in the name of the late Henry Ward Beecher, claiming that it had never been returned to its owner. The medium's claim (or shall we say the claim of Mr. Beecher's spirit) was substantiated, for the coin was discovered in the safe of Funk & Wagnalls, where it had lain unheeded for nine years, and it was now duly returned to the owner or his heirs.

Dr. Funk submitted the case and its value as evidences of genuine spirit communication to a large number of scholars, scientists, experts, psychologists, etc., and then published the whole account, together with these opinions in a book called *The Widow's Mite*. The case was also referred at the time to the editor of *The Open Court*, but his reply was too uncompromising to recommend itself for publication. It admitted the strangeness of the occurrence, provided that there was neither error in the facts, nor fraud, but it declared that a cross-examination of the several persons involved would be indispensable, and this being excluded we had to abstain from giving a definite verdict on the merits of the case. The book now lies before us, but the evidence being still hedged in with "ifs" and "buts" we cannot regard it as convincing. Considering the unsatisfactory character of a negative verdict, we delayed our review and kept the book on our shelf without being able to sum up the case in

a statement which would do justice to Dr. Funk's zeal and circumspection, yet also point out the weak spot of his argumentation.

At this juncture Mr. Wakeman's article came to hand and forced the issue again upon our attention. His verdict is very direct and simple. Quoting Hacckel he denies the possibility of the occurrence, and hence refuses to consider the argument. There must be an error somewhere, and thus the case is disposed of.

Now we agree with Mr. Wakeman on the main point. We, too, believe that there must be an error somewhere; but we think it equally certain that there must be a truth in a theory which, in spite of its crudity, exercises an enormous influence over multitudes of people, among whom we encounter men of business sense like Dr. Funk, and scholars such as Hyslop and James. There is a deep seated natural longing for immortality and we believe that although untenable in the shape in which it is commonly held, it is based upon fact. There is an immortality of personal character—different though it may be from the popular conception.

Prof. Haeckel's argument that there is no immortality, is wrong and can easily be refuted. He declares that soul is a function of the brain: accordingly the soul is lost with the decomposition of the body.

Now, it is true that the soul is our thinking, feeling and willing. But we must bear in mind that the soul is not the brain, but the purpose we pursue in life and the meaning which our thoughts possess, both being represented in certain forms of brain operation. There is no thinking without brain, but the brain is only the material condition in which thinking is realised. The thoughts themselves are not material.

Let us use the analogy of a book. The book itself or rather the soul of the book consists of ideas which are expressed in the printed words. Ideas cannot be communicated without some sensory means and a material of some kind is needed as a substratum to render them somehow actual and to convey them. We can burn a book but we cannot burn the ideas expressed in it. If a poet writes a poem on a sheet of paper the writing may become illegible, but the poem need not be lost; it can be copied and it remains the selfsame poem.

The same is true of the soul of man. Soul is the meaning and purpose of some living substance. It is not the substance but that unsubstantial something which gives character to it and anyone who declares that it is non-existent because it is purely formal and relational, and not material, would be driven to the paradoxical conclusion that the non-existent is more important in the material world

than all the innumerable concrete material objects. The essential part of our own being is not the material aspect of our cerebral activity, but the contents of our thought, the purpose of our will, the leading motive of our sentiments, which factors in their bodily actualisation are of course always of a definite structure.

Now Professor Haeckel will not dispute this point, but he insists that this cerebral structure which is the physical aspect of the soul will be destroyed, and being destroyed the soul is lost and gone forever. But we claim the same kind of a brain constitutes the same kind of a soul; and that the reappearance of the same form of brain functions denotes the rebirth of the same soul. Professor Haeckel's arguments would be correct if identity of soul depended upon an identity of the bodily elements, but that is not so.

We ought to grant that we are dying at every minute and that a new soul is being born in place of the other, for our cerebral substance is decomposed in the very act of thinking and the particles that are now functioning are at once changed into waste matter and are discarded from our system. In a certain sense it is quite correct to say that life is a constant dying—*media in vita nos in morte sumus*;—but in another sense, and with no less truth, we can also say “there is no death; what seems so is transition.”

It is well known that all the atoms of which our bodies are composed will change in the average within seven years. If the material elements and not the form in which they are grouped, be the essential part of our existence, we ought to consider ourselves new personalities as soon as the last atom of our former existence has passed away. The transition is slow and almost imperceptible, but it takes place none the less, and that after all we recognise our identity throughout all these changes is the best evidence that the material portion of our being is of secondary consideration.

Birth and death are the limits of individual existences, but we know perfectly well that we have not risen from nothingness and in the same way that we originated from prior conditions and are the continuation of former soul-life—so we are not annihilated in death and shall continue in the life of the generations to come.

Neither is birth an absolute beginning nor death an absolute finality. They are the limits of a series the character and form of which is determined by former lives, and our life is again determining the life of the future. Every individual is a link in the great chain of the whole life of mankind. The life of the individual is formed and in its turn is forming again, so as to produce a continuity in which the old forms of life are preserved, being modified

only by receiving new additions and being enriched with further details. Thus the soul of Christ is a living presence in all Christian souls, and Christ's promise is literally fulfilled when He says: "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." But in the same sense a father and a mother live on in their children, a teacher in his pupils, each one in the memory of his friends, martyrs and heroes in their cause, etc. And this immortality is not an illusion, nor a mere phrase, but a living power exercising a decisive influence upon the actions of mankind.

If Professor Haeckel were right, if the dissolution of the body ended all, constituting death a finality, we would not care what might occur when we are gone. The truth is that people are not indifferent to what will happen after their death. According to their different characters they endeavor to perpetuate their souls—and in this they succeed. Whatever a man does lives after him according to the nature of his deeds, and these deeds, the traces which they produce, the memories which they leave, the effects in which they are perpetuated, are nothing foreign to him, but in them dwells the quintessence of his soul. It is he himself.

Just as an inventor who has built up a factory to actualise his invention, is a living presence in every department of the plant, although bodily he may be absent, so the soul of man remains an efficient factor in life although he may be overtaken by death and rest from his labors.

Now, we grant Mr. Wakeman that from our standpoint a communication of a spirit through a medium in the way described by Mr. Funk should be considered an impossibility, but far from ridiculing Mr. Funk's attempted investigation I feel grateful to him for having ventured into the desert of vain speculations—only to find out the uselessness of his labors. He may not see the result himself as yet, but others do; and it is certainly necessary that all avenues of advance should be reconnoitered, even those which a sound scientific prevision condemns as hopeless. Those who undertake this thankless task are naturally enthusiasts and believers in the improbable. Their work is certainly not useless, for they call attention to the one-sidedness of the opposite view, and certainly deserve credit for the apagogic proof of an untenable position.

Mr. Funk's hope may prove an illusion, but Mr. Wakeman will pardon us for saying that his venture of establishing a proof of immortality—albeit of a counterfeit soul—should not be branded as a "joke." I, myself, made investigations along the lines of the Society for Psychological Research in what now appears to me an immature

period of my life; but though I have surrendered the expectation of finding anything in that waste and sterile field, I deem it wise from time to time to study critically the work of others and see whether they have furnished the world with new facts that would necessitate a revision of our present views. Their views may be untenable from the standpoint of science, yet our own view may also stand in need of emendation, or at least modification.

As to Mr. Funk's book I can only say that I fail to be convinced by his arguments. I will grant that the proof would be fairly complete if there were not ample scope for doubt on many points where a cross-examination of the persons involved would throw new light upon the case. I feel convinced that though it will impress the believer favorably, it will never convert the scoffer; and whether the impartial reader standing between the two opposite positions will be affected, remains to be seen.

I have learned from the book to appreciate the power of the belief in immortality, prompting a business man to go out of his way and collect the minute of so slender an evidence. This yearning for a personal immortality is as deep rooted as are the instincts of animals and I believe, as set forth above, it is well founded. Man feels that death does not end all, and so he expresses the truth of immortality in a mythical form, inventing the ideas of heaven and hell and representing the soul as a concrete being, built of some mysterious spiritual substance.

Upon the whole it is even better that man should believe in a mythical immortality than that he should deny the truth of the myth itself, for the idea is not without importance and exercises a practical influence upon our actions and our general attitude in life. We conclude, therefore, with the question: Is it better and wiser, or, even merely, more advisable that a man should always act as though the end of life were an absolute finality, or, on the contrary, should he so act as constantly to consider the part which his life and all the results of his life will play in the world when he is gone? I know that Professor Haeckel himself cares very much for the after effects of his life.

The period after death is certainly longer, as Antigone says, than the brief span of our earthly career.

"For longer time, methinks, have I to please  
The dwellers in that world than those in this."

And yet the mere duration is less important than the dynamical aspect of our soul-life after death. There is reason enough to say that

if the idea of immortality deserves any consideration, it should furnish the ultimate tribunal before which all questions of importance should reach their final decision. Indeed, I can give no better rule for testing the correctness of moral actions than that a man in doubtful cases should ask himself: "How would you wish to have acted if your life were completed and you had passed away from the world below?" Anyone who is influenced by such a thought believes in fact in the immortality of the soul, though in his words he may flatly deny and ridicule it.