

IMMORTALITY: RECENT PRONOUNCEMENTS

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CAN anything new or in the least significant be said on the subject of human immortality?

The present writer would be tempted to answer this question with a sharp negative. Certainly the so called psychical researchers, despite all their industry and earnestness have failed to present a single bit of real evidence in support of the theory of survival after death. They have had every chance; they have received of late much encouragement from men of science and from Agnostics; the old attitude of contempt and scorn toward them and their strivings has been abandoned. But they have brought forth nothing of the smallest value.

We are, therefore, compelled to return for possible rays or glimpses to science and to philosophy, or to common sense. Fortunately, the *New York Times*, on Easter morning, appropriately enough, presented to the public a sort of symposium on the subject of immortality, and that, with some other recent utterances, shows us where we stand.

The conventional, stereotyped, pious opinions or guesses on the matter we may leave on one side. Some of the contributors to the symposium, however, are real thinkers, and what they have to say is not lacking in interest.

Let me quote first the positive and clear expression of Dr. David Starr Jordan, educator, scientist, philosopher and champion of righteousness and peace. He said: "As a scientific man, I know of no test of knowledge, except human experience fully tested and set in order. We are at liberty to guess or think wishfully, if we choose, but I do not choose. Therefore I have no opinion on immortality. We have no experience to fall back upon—at least, none properly tested. If immortality is part of the program of life, let it be so. My hope or faith does not help nor render it more probable."

This is sound, straightforward, refreshing. The more refreshing since certain other contributors assert that the belief in immortality, even though based on nothing rational, helps one in solving the anxious and difficult problems of life. Thus Dr. Charles F. Thwing, president emeritus of Western Reserve University, contends that, "if we are immortal, it is easier to find answers to the problems of suffering and sorrow." Why? Presumably because, *if* we are immortal, we obtain compensation in the next world for the injustices of this sublunar sphere. But, pray, what is the foundation for that assumption? What can we know of other worlds, other phases of life? Dr. Thwing piles assumption upon assumption—something which neither science nor common sense sanctions for a moment. *If* there is life after death, and *if* that other life affords compensation for the unmerited suffering of earthly existence, *then* certain perplexing problems find satisfactory answers! It is hard to believe that this double assumption can help any thinking person in solving any problems whatever. Dr. Jordan frankly faces the fact that speculation or hope concerning a future life for the individual is absolutely barren and cannot possibly influence conduct.

Prof. Robert A. Millikan, the eminent physicist and student of the so called Millikan cosmic rays, says that "concerning what ultimately becomes of the individual in the process of evolution, science has added nothing and subtracted nothing," although the question need not necessarily and always remain outside the realm of science. Prof. Millikan's statement may pass as roughly true, but it is not really or precisely true. Science furnishes methods, tests, as well as theories and definite conclusions. While no particular science has anything to say on the subject of personal immortality, the scientific attitude and point of view militate powerfully against the baseless belief in immortality. Scientific thinkers know that there is no evidence for the belief, and they know that a thousand indirect arguments, analogies and parallels combine to make that belief arbitrary and contrary to probability.

Dr. Clarence C. Little, president of Michigan University, says that the death of his own parents had the extraordinary two-fold effect of "completely wiping out pre-existing logical bases for immortality" and replacing them "with an utterly indescribable but completely convincing and satisfying realization that personal im-

mortality exists." Dr. Watson would rise to remark that the utterly indescribable is also utterly unthinkable, but let that pass. Dr. Little does not and cannot tell us just what he means by personal immortality, and he does not venture to ask anybody else to accept his belief. Yet it would be interesting to know just what it is that convinces and satisfies him of the existence of immortality. Were he to consult psychologists, he might find out that he is misled by his own vivid memories and abiding impressions, and that what he regards as proof of immortality may be nothing more than a natural process within his own mind and body, a process originating in and sustained by phenomena occurring in this world.

Some of the contributions to the Symposium limit themselves to pointing out that *without* the belief in or hope for immortality human life seems futile, empty and irrational, and that since all but the incurable pessimists value life and call it good, it is not illogical to believe in that element in the equation—immortality—which alone gives life meaning. Here, again, we have assumption piled upon assumption.

Life is considered to be good only by those who find it good, who love and enjoy it. These need no other demonstration of the value of life. They seek to live abundantly; they neglect no source of gratification and delight; they cultivate beauty and wisdom; they attain serenity and die without regrets. Ask them what the ultimate purpose of life is, and they will admit that they do not know. Indeed, the conception of ultimate purpose is not at all intelligible to them. What can finite minds know of ultimates? Life, they will say, may be futile in some sense, but it is not futile to those who know how to live and pursue the highest happiness of which human beings are capable.

Besides, if life on this earth is futile and empty, what assurance is there life after death is not equally futile and empty? What reason is there for assuming a radical difference between one life and another? Those who make this assumption unconsciously make other assumptions—for example, a state of bliss for disembodied souls, golden gates, association with angels and archangels. All this is mere superstition, of course, or, if we prefer, mere poetry and symbolism. If there is a future life somewhere in space, or beyond space—if that be conceivable—that life may not be at all idyllic and blissful; it may have its darker sides, its injustices and its woes.

Why not? What is there to preclude such a hypothesis? Certain religions entertain it, and it does no violence to reason or instinct.

There remains, we are reminded by one commentator, the argument for immortality as eloquently advanced by Tennyson in his infinitely pathetic *In Memoriam*.

“Man thinks he was not born to die”!

But men have thought and believed many things that science has disproved. Man is prone to error, to hasty generalization, to misinterpretation of evidence. What ground is there for supposing that what he thinks about death and beyond is in essence true? He has believed in angels, devils, fairies, ghosts. He has believed in a geographical heaven and hell. He has believed in gods and goddesses, in human beings begotten by gods and goddesses. What, indeed, has he *not* believed, and on what seems to him sufficient and convincing evidence?

What credulous, ignorant men believed in the past, matters little. What credulous and superstitious men believe today matters just as little. The fact of importance is that thousands of educated, intelligent, high minded men no longer entertain the belief in immortality or take the slightest interest in the question.

It simply is not true, then, that man thinks he was not born to die. Some men, many men, think they *were* born to die, and the thought causes them no dismay or horror. Personal immortality is not necessary to the good life on earth, and immortality for ideas, for contributions to the general fund of knowledge, to the fabric of civilization and culture, is considered to be sufficient.

Science has shown that some very humble creatures—ants, for example—are more tenacious of life than even human beings. Science is disposed to think that the humblest creatures are intelligent. Science does not belittle instinct, but, on the contrary, regards it as in its way quite as marvelous as intelligence. The bottom has dropped out of the whole case for immortality. Those who say they believe in personal immortality only believe that they believe. The formula is not intelligible. It conveys no meaning to him who utters it. Imagination is unequal to the task of supplying either a meaning or an image for the formula.

Let us face the fact that the assumption of personal immortality is incapable of help or service, and is superfluous from the viewpoint of ethics and conduct.

Just as the foregoing reflections were being set down, the writer's attention was challenged by press reports of a somewhat sudden revival of a controversy over personal immortality in the highest scientific and philosophic circles of Great Britain. Sir Arthur Keith, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, started the intellectual contest in a lecture at Manchester University, in which he declared categorically that the mind or so called spirit had a material basis, could not be separated from the brain and died with the body. Sir Arthur compared the relation between mind and brain to that between candle and flame. Neither men of science nor surgeons and physicians, he said, could find the slightest ground for believing that the brain is a dual mechanism, a compound of substance and spirit.

Sir John Bland Sutton, the distinguished surgeon, hastened to express complete agreement with Sir Arthur. Death, he said, is an endless sleep; it ends all so far as the individual is concerned, and personal immortality is a notion that cannot be supported scientifically. Sir Oliver Lodge, not unnaturally, promptly attacked the Keith-Sutton position, asserting that there was evidence for personal immortality (namely, the evidence of psychic research) and reiterating his opinion that "the brain is an instrument used by the mind"—an instrument beyond our ken at present but no more real than the thing behind the scene, the wielder of the instrument. To smash an instrument is not to kill its product; it may be transferred to some other instrument—as music is transferred from one violin—when it is broken or injured—to another.

This line of argument is familiar, but it requires no examination or refutation here, in view of what has been said apropos of the American symposium. Sir Oliver Lodge's theory rests on no evidence worthy of the name, and the reference to spirits, seances, manifestations and communications with the dead can only provoke a smile. There is absolutely nothing, to repeat, in science of true philosophy to sustain the claim that something called mind uses the brain after entering it somehow and at some time from somewhere in space. Revealed religion may take this view, but that does not render proof unnecessary, and revealed religion itself is called upon to make good its pretensions. You do not prove immortality by making other and larger claims as arbitrary and as incapable of verification.