

IMMORTALITY

IS IT POSSIBLE OR EVEN DESIRABLE?

BY JUUL DIESERUD

FUTURE life, or even absolute immortality, is a conception dear to mankind, and hardly any race or people has escaped its allurements. Few individuals get enough happiness out of the short span of life on this little globe, not to crave insistently for a continuation. Even the best among us fail miserably in doing our full duty to our nearest friends and relatives, not to speak of mankind as a whole, and it seems a glaring injustice not to be given another chance to do better, to meet again those to whom we have failed to give the necessary assistance in this life, to be able to ask their forgiveness and turn a new leaf with them in a higher, more advanced sphere of existence.

Most of us, particularly in our younger, more vigorous days, have a strong aversion to the idea of utter annihilation. Dust to dust seems such an unjust, unsatisfactory ending to a conscious life with its failures, disappointments and perhaps even squalid misery, that we cling desperately to the thought of resurrection in a better world with all that this may involve.

Most religions have envisaged this new life as eternal, as without end. Buddhism, it is true, voices a score of lives, with repeated deaths and rebirths, looking forward to a final Nirvana, which probably means a merging back into the All with a loss of real consciousness and memory, an existence comparable to that of a healthy cell in a healthy body. And it is a fact that this creed has furnished millions with sufficient hope and moral stamina to make their earthly life seem useful and endurable. But this modest creed has not satisfied all of humanity. Not all races and peoples have been content with less than an eternity of what they appreciated most in this life. The roaming Indians dreamed of happy hunting grounds, the Jews of the time of pastoral Abraham probably dreamed of endless groves and meadows giving abundant food to their cattle, or at a later more philosophic time they either doubted future life or reduced it to a shadowy existence in Sheol, the counterpart of the Greek Hades. The Arabians envisaged a future, splendid harem with beautiful hours; the Scandinavian and Germanic tribes looked

forward to the tremendous festival hall of Odin, or Wotan, and the wide sporting fields surrounding it. Here they could stage a glorious battle ending in the death of everybody from sheer exhaustion, fortunately only for a brief interval for every night the All-father, extending his magic, reviving wand, conducted them back in merry procession to his festival hall where mead was served in abundance by proud Valkyries.

As a Scandinavian by birth, I am inclined to look upon an existence of this sort with almost as much favor as upon a certain Christian ideal: a life in continuous glorification of a great Divinity and his court, apparently conceived on the pattern of an eastern autocrat. All-father Odin, at least, was not quite so self-centered; and he was a splendid host. He did not create millions of souls to give him personal homage, nor millions to suffer eternally in the fearful establishment of his age-old adversary, the Devil.

When a thoughtful person has passed the noonday of life, when he has to some extent valued the various notions of future life, when with Solomon he begins to realize that happiness is an illusive, ephemeral condition, generally followed by boredom, then the idea of an eternal, restful sleep takes on a less terrifying aspect. If of a reflective mind, he wonders what it really would imply never to be able to escape existence, and what possibility there would be in the universe, as science begins to fathom it, for a happiness that would be eternal. He starts upon an analysis of mind and its contents. He soon realizes that the essential contents of mind, including those that make for beauty and harmony and contentment, are in all likelihood founded upon the illusion of the senses. Take entities like beauty and harmony of sound and vision, and the delights of smell and taste. They are in themselves now considered nothing but wave motions: waves of light, of the air, of the molecules of matter. What then would be left of a disembodied spirit but a colorless, soundless, tasteless dance of electrons, air particles, and molecules?

Instead of the rich variegated spectacle of the world of human beings one would experience a bleak witch-dance of things in motion, and perhaps a faint memory. Unless we posit the possibility of a new incarnation either on this globe or upon one of the numerous planets in space where the conditions are favorable to beings with flesh and blood and the organs of sense. Now the idea of reincarnation certainly has an appeal to active minds. Most of us

crave another chance to make good or do better than we did in this brief earthly life even if that great longing to meet our dear departed should not loom up as a possibility.

The question arises: Is there any such possibility, judging from our present knowledge of ourselves and the universe? It is a fact that no authenticated case exists of a human being that possessed any clear recollection of a previous existence, although there are loose stories to that effect. And then what are the scientific possibilities for any kind of survival of an activity or entity like the human mind when the physical organs are dissolved?

As a critical realist of the school of those sober-minded philosophers, Professor R. W. Sellars and Durant Drake, I have not the slightest faith in the possibility of a survival although I am not ready to contend dogmatically that the question is settled once and for all. There are, it is true, plenty of spiritualistic experiments; but to my notion most of them are involved in dishonesty on the part of mediums, while those that look genuine probably can be explained by our growing knowledge of telepathy, the supposition that the human brain may under certain conditions be a receiving station for thought waves in analogy with the radio.

On careful, scientific analysis, mind or consciousness is a product pertaining to the living organism reaching its culmination in man. The brain might, as in the view of William James and others, be merely a focal point, the individualization of a fraction of an immaterial ocean of consciousness, into which it will again merge with its special accumulation of experiences. But modern evolutionary science surely is very skeptical in this respect.

It seems much more reasonable and in line with our present knowledge of the universe, not to introduce any absolutely new and self-existing entity for the explanation of mind. If it is not a product of the vital activity of the living being, chiefly located in the brain and bound to be snuffed out like a light when that activity ceases, then we have as good a reason to believe in the indestructibility of the mind of an intelligent dog or horse.

Science does not seem to know of any sudden leap in mental life, as between the dull mind of an ignorant man and the highest type of an animal. The world may, for all we know, be uncreated and eternal, and all life an integral part of a universe consisting ultimately of psychic stuff, possibly being transmitted by meteorites

from planet to planet, as was suggested by Professor Arrhenius; or perhaps, a product arising on more than one planet at a certain stage of its development. To encumber any individual mind with repeated rebirths and deaths, not to speak of an eternal existence, would seem to be unnecessary and uncalled for in a universe where life is so abundant.

And then we have the tremendous problem of transfer of a disembodied mind from planet to planet, not to speak of transfer to a heaven outside the universe, which, according to the theory of relativity, although finite, fills all the space there is. If mind is a self-existing entity, it would seem that its capacity for speed cannot exceed that of light. But light needs at best four years to reach the nearest star, which may not possess any satellite, and according to the latest astronomical theories several hundred million years to reach the hitherto farthest observed nebula. Now if we assume that a mind or soul can travel with the speed of light, what a task is ahead of it?

When the Bible stories were written, it was so easy and simple to go to heaven. Its shining, crystal vault was seen up there a few miles from the earth, which was regarded as a flat disk with Hell below, or rather in its bowels, being firmly founded and at rest in the universe (*cf. Job, 384-8*). The Copernican system dealt a blow to such notions. There is no up and down in the universe, or on this little spinning globe. What is up at twelve o'clock noon is straight down at midnight. And it seems, as if a real heaven would have to be created outside of the universe, or perhaps on a satellite of a tremendous central star.

But it has been held that the soul is immaterial and its flight perhaps instantaneous. Can we not think of an incident in Europe, or the sun, or the North Star? As if thinking of an object was identical with mind being transferred to its abode in the twinkling of an eye. But this is neither here nor there.

It would seem as if in our new tremendous astro-physical setting there is no room for a special heaven and hell. Whatever fine values there are: truth, harmony, beauty, goodness, love of home and family, kindly social intercourse, work which gives self-expression, art, knowledge, and contentment, are probably located inside the universe, and they would seem sufficient for a new Humanism, both being slowly in the making.

Finally a word on the ethical and sociological bearing of the disbelief in immortality. I would be the last to contend that the old religions, in spite of their vicious intolerance, their cruel *auto-das-fás*, the religious wars, to which they have given rise, and the mental misery caused by the fear of limited or eternal punishment, have not had some share in the civilization of a partly carnivorous being like man.

But as for Christianity it has often been suggested, that one of the reasons for its phenomenal growth and the decisive step taken by Emperor Constantine, was its championship of a glorious life to come. Nothing could be more conducive to the mastering of the downtrodden masses by those who skimmed the cream of an unjust social system, than the idea that the poor would have by far the easiest access to heaven. Roman and Greek mythologies had nothing to compare with it as a sedative for social unrest. And the privileged classes calmly continued to this day to skim the cream, leaving the blue milk to the poor Lazarus and taking their chance at a reversal in life to come.

It is for the sake of social justice more than anything else, that it seems worth while to subject the dream of immortality to a critical examination.

As regards the probable effect on the criminal element of the decadence of the belief in future punishment, it will have to be sufficient to call attention to the apparent fact, that criminals as a rule never were reached by the churches except perhaps for the big, refined specimens, who generally attend service as a cloak for their predatory activities.

We seem to be getting away from the idea of sin as mainly disobedience to a divine arbitrary command. An immoral action is one that has been found to have bad consequences, not merely for society but for the individual agent. And the famous decalogue is, by the way, far from complete, entirely omitting the responsibility of parents for the next generation. It would seem that greater emphasis on the inherent bad results of immorality, in connection with a new religion of humanity, should be capable of doing as much for genuine ethical life as the old fear of Hell and the inducements of Heaven ever did.

Furthermore the human craving for some kind of conscious survival is clearly so ingrained in humanity, that there is no danger of

its going too quickly by the board, whatever reasons are amassed to cast doubt on its possibility.

If this brief essay should have advanced any comparatively new point, it would be the contention, that at least absolute immortality would be as undesirable and truly terrifying, as it is improbable, even with the discard of the barbarous notion of eternal punishment.

Spectral analysis seems to have proved that the universe everywhere consists of the same chemical elements, so that life on other planets would probably be somewhat on the same order as here on earth. In case, then, of several reincarnations, we could hardly escape the boredom of repetition. And as to the possibility of an inactive, perfect, eternal Heaven, the boredom would seem to become entirely unavoidable. It could not be saved by the impossible phantasm of a timeless existence. The idea of timelessness has clearly no status among living beings of any kind.

In the meanwhile our task here on earth should be interesting and worth while enough, when mankind awakens to its true possibilities. There will always be something to work for in the line of social justice and individual approach to general health and an active moral life. We are at least true transforming stations, that in our brief earthly existence can give billions and billions of electrons a new, better, more harmonious course. Our lives, if lived on the right plane will not have been in vain. The effect of their activity will last as long as humanity itself on this little swirling globe.