

ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CONSCIOUS SURVIVAL.

To the Editor of The Open Court :

I should like to reply to that part of Mr. Wakeman's article on "Human Immortalities," that directly concerns my own position as stated in the November number of *The Open Court*.

I take exception to no portion of Mr. Wakeman's paper, save that under the heading of "Science and Sentiment"; and even here I can quite see and appreciate Mr. Wakeman's attitude of mind, which, as I before stated, is thoroughly understandable. I would point out, however, that Mr. Wakeman, in his reply, has in no wise answered my objection to his position, as stated in my own criticism, which was, namely: "That the majority of *Open Court* readers do not look at Psychical Research phenomena in the proper spirit—or study them from the particular point of view of the Psychical Researcher." (P. 697.)

Mr. Wakeman confines his criticism of my previous article to my *other* article on "The Origin and Nature of Consciousness," to which I referred in my discussion, and has limited his criticism to my viewpoint, as expressed in that article, and to the theory I there maintained; and has not at all answered the primary objection I raised in *The Open Court*, as to the attitude of mind assumed by himself and others towards the possibility of immortality. Before discussing this at greater length, I should like to reply briefly to the criticism as raised by Mr. Wakeman of my theory of consciousness, and its relation to brain-function. In stating that "it must be admitted that thought is in one sense or another a function of the brain," I did not intend to imply, and in fact my whole article was against the assumption, that the thought was the *production* of the brain functioning, and I then pointed out that the functioning might be connected with states of consciousness in altogether another way than in the relation of producer and produced, and that it was at least conceivable that this functioning, accompanying all thought, is but coincidental with the thought;—not necessarily its producer, but conceivably the produced, the thought being the real causal agency; or that both are but aspects of something else—differing from both in its underlying reality,—just as the tremors of a violin string are perceived by us as *sound*, and as more or less *visible vibrations* of cat gut,—according to whether the ear or the eye interprets these vibrations; and, though they appear to us as dissimilar as possible they are, it will be seen, but the differing aspects, or subjective methods of interpretation, by ourselves, of the same physical cause. Thus it may be that consciousness and brain functioning, though apparently so dissimilar, are ultimately one and the same thing at basis,—the two being but the differing modes in which the same cause is interpreted. I admit that the brain is simply 'active nervous tissue'; but this simply states the *condition* of the physical brain at the time of thinking,—upon which I would insist as much as Mr. Wakeman,—for it is always in connection with this activity that thought is associated in this life;—but it does not prove that the activity *produced* the thought, as I have before pointed out, but merely that it is coincidental with it. There is absolutely no proof that the nerve activity *produces* the consciousness; all we can ever say on this question is that they are coincidental in point of time.

I do not agree with Mr. Wakeman in his statement that "Sight is seeing, is action, and not a thing, and has no eyes as instruments; it is simply the activity of the nervous tissues of the eyes and brain when light vibrations reach them" (p. 109). I must insist that the activity of the eyes has absolutely nothing to do with the sensation of consciousness; *that* is associated only with the activity of the sight-center in the brain, and the eyes merely transmit to that center certain vibrations, arousing in it a nervous activity with which the sense of sight is associated, but the eyes have nothing to do with the state of consciousness. They are merely transmitters or instruments, as I before insisted upon; and that the consciousness, the idea of seeing, is associated only with activity of the sight-center in the brain is proved by the fact that in hallucinations, when this sight-center is morbidly excited, the sensation of sight is experienced *without* vibrations reaching the sight-center through the eye, or without the rest of the brain being involved in the slightest degree. No matter *how* the sight-center is aroused into activity, it is the activity with which thought is associated, and with the activity of that center only. I must insist, therefore, that eyes *are* 'instruments,' and not in any way associated with, or producers of, the conscious state known to us as the sensation of sight. I do not see, finally, how Mr. Wakeman can pronounce upon the "impossibility" of consciousness persisting apart from brain functions, unless he is omnipotent,—since all his arguments can ever lead to is the scientific *improbability* of such persistence, and this improbability will, in turn, rest—not on philosophic speculation, but on the presence or absence of *facts* tending to show that such persistence of consciousness, apart from brain function, is a fact in nature.

Mr. Wakeman says there is no such evidence, we psychical researchers say there is,—not that the evidence is absolutely conclusive, but that it is suggestive, and at least renders such persistence of personality a probability; and this brings me to my last point, to which I have been working throughout this paper. I do not think the question of survival or non-survival can ever be settled by philosophic or metaphysical speculation. Mr. Wakeman might produce arguments against its probability, and I for it, indefinitely, and we would probably both, in the end, be all the more solidly grounded in our own belief.

I think that the only way this matter can ever be settled is by resolutely putting aside all philosophic and other preconceptions, and by turning to direct investigation of evidence and of facts that may be forthcoming—tending to say that such persistence of consciousness is an actual fact. If these facts are ever established, then all speculation is mere child's play and conclusively disproved by the evidence in the case.

As a member of the Psychical Research Society I must insist upon this being the only attitude in which to approach this problem, and only by such direct evidence can this fact ever be definitely settled one way or the other.

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THE LAY CHURCH.

We have received a number of communications, suggestions and endorsements on the proposition of founding a Lay Church, published some time ago in *The Open Court*, and mentioned again in our March issue. It almost seems