

LAW, LIFE AND PURPOSE

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

COMBATING the views of certain leading astronomers and physicists, Dr. Inge, the so-called Gloomy Dean of St. Paul, London, declared recently that "nature needed God much more than God needed nature." It hardly needs saying that the philosophical dean defined neither nature nor God. He felt certain, however, he said, that if the Universe is running down like a clock, obeying thus purely physical law, God would intervene at the eleventh hour, as it were, and wind the Universe up again. Just why he should do this is far from clear. Why not create a new Universe out of nothing? Or why not carry on without any universe?

The answers to these queries, from the viewpoint of tolerably progressive theology, can be easily guessed. God, they hold, is interested in the Universe because of its evolved moral values, which are associated with life, especially with human life. To permit the Universe to run down is to acquiesce in the destruction of the crown of creation—Man. And man is worthy of preservation because of his ideals and standards; his religion, morality and philosophy, his science and his art.

Without belittling the positive and fine achievements of man, one may challenge the dean's assumption that the sum total of these achievements, weighed in the balance, with man's superstitions, follies, cruelties, crimes, and outrages in one of the scales, is sufficient to justify perpetuation of the Universe solely *for his sake*. If the rest of nature is morally valueless, Dean Inge's God would hardly rewind the Universe in order to extend indefinitely man's stay on this little globe of ours. What naive anthropomorphism it is to imagine that God is profoundly interested in man's struggles, successes, failures, and defeats!

Yet this sort of anthropomorphism is by no means confined to Christian Platonists of the type of Dean Inge. We find it, with some surprise, in the lectures recently delivered at Yale by Prof. Arthur H. Compton, distinguished American physicist and a winner of the Nobel prize in his branch of the exact sciences. We shall consider here, briefly, Prof. Compton's views on two subjects—individual immortality and free will.

Science, says Prof. Compton, can give no answer to the question, What will happen to the individual human being after death?

For science concerns itself with the body, the hull, not with the mind or soul within the hull. Of course, there is the theory that the mind is merely another name for a certain function of the brain, and not an independent entity, and that, therefore, the destruction of the brain carries with it, inevitably, the destruction of consciousness. But Prof. Compton says he cannot accept this hypothesis. Why not?

Because, to summarize his argument faithfully, it does not satisfactorily account for human actions. Some of these actions, or the purposes which inspire and determine them, imply a type of thinking that is free from the constraints imposed by the physical and chemical laws governing the brain.

Plainly, Prof. Compton makes an assumption here which many biologists and psychologists will consider to be gratuitous and illegitimate. The connection between the physical and chemical laws governing the brain and the purposes and motives formed by the same brain is not always clear, of course, but *that does not mean that no connection exists*. Human motives are mixed, but it is not difficult for the scientific psychologist to account even for what we call noble and heroic actions. A man, let us say, works unselfishly for a cause; he makes what we call sacrifices in behalf of that cause. Why does he do this? Certainly the laws of physics and chemistry cannot answer the question. But psychology, ethics, and sociology, with the aid of history and common sense, *can and do*. A cause is an idea, a concept, or an emotion which is very dear to one, and it becomes a part of his or her personality. To serve a cause is to express one's own nature, and the demand for self-expression is imperative, brooking no denial. What ideas and sentiments a given person is to entertain and cherish, it is impossible to say in advance. Education, environment, mental and emotional make-up combine to determine that. But we know that it is possible to shape and influence thought and conduct. We build schools, erect churches, establish all sorts of organizations for the purpose of shaping and directing conduct. We know that character can be molded and modified, and that habits can be deliberately formed.

The conclusion from these and like facts is clear—namely, that, while the dance of atoms cannot explain moral and spiritual phenomena, such phenomena are nevertheless subject to perfectly natural laws. There is nothing miraculous or supernatural about them.

Just how forces we call physical and chemical at one end of a process become mental, is still a great mystery, but, be it noted,

a mystery by no means limited to the grander, finer, and more truly human manifestations. Take the simple case of sudden panic—dread inspired by some unexpected, abnormal phenomenon—say the appearance of a wild and savage animal on a city street. There is nothing noble in fear. We are ashamed of cowardice, even when it is instinctive. We feel we *ought* to be brave and self-possessed under all circumstances. Now, what is the emotion of fear, and how does it pass from the physical sensation to the mental state we consider unworthy? We do not know. But the process is precisely the same whether the emotion excited be creditable or discreditable, admirable or morally indifferent.

Man, as has often been said, is half demon, half angel. If we do not require the God hypothesis to account for the ugly and bad side of man's nature, it is impossible to see why we need that hypothesis to explain his better and finer side. Pity is as spontaneous as fear, sympathy as antipathy. And even the animals we affect to despise practice mutual aid and exhibit acts of an altruistic nature. Between animal behavior and human behavior there is no such yawning chasm as some schools of thought have supposed and perhaps still suppose to exist. Mind is not a monopoly of the human race, though it possesses a higher degree of intelligence than any other type of living organism. Does a matter of degree warrant the extraordinary and at bottom meaningless "God" hypothesis?

Prof. Compton says that "when both physical and psychological laws are taken into account, the actions of a living organism such as man may be approximately determined." "*Such as man,*" please note. But the modern biologists and psychologists will not accept this gratuitous limitation. Can physical laws alone account for *animal* behavior—for example, the dog's devotion to man? Does the dance of atoms explain *affection* in the dog? Certainly not. But this dance is translated and transformed by the brain and nervous system into feelings and emotions. Man, as a social animal, needs more than intelligence to live in peace and safety—or, rather, in such relative peace and safety as he has managed to achieve—and his emotional nature is largely a social product. The God hypothesis is superfluous and does violence to the scientific law of parsimony.

But, contends Prof. Compton, if man obeys physical and psychological laws, and is not master of his own destiny, his purposes are ineffective and life becomes meaningless. This does not follow. As Prof. Judson Herrick of the same University of Chicago has argued at length and most persuasively in his book, *Man as Machine*,

man increasingly controls his destiny not by ignoring physical and psychological laws, but by obeying and using them for his benefit. Purposes are formed and made effective by those men who know how to conform to nature and harness its forces. Life is not meaningless, because enlightened and progressive men can *give* it a meaning—a serious and significant meaning.

Ideals that could never be realized would indeed be meaningless. Ideals gradually realized by enlisting for them the support of average bodies of men, by and through education and inspiring leadership, spell positive and genuine progress of the race, and such progress gives our life meaning.

How irrational it is to suppose that men's finest purposes can be achieved in defiance and contempt of natural law! Such a view assumes a complete and impossible chasm between man and the rest of nature. The evidence is all against the existence of such a chasm or gulf. Man is part of nature and dependent on nature's forces and laws.

We turn now more specifically to the question of immortality. Does death end all? Certainly not. Matter is not destroyed by death; it only changes form. Does death involve the destruction of something non-material? The existence of something non-material in man is the very thing to be proved. Is it at all probable that at some stage in the development of a human being a spirit enters the body, while at another stage, called death, the same spirit takes flight and translated, operates somehow, somewhere, without the instrumentality of a body? Such a supposition can be framed *in words*, but does it convey any *idea* to the mind? Are we to imagine disembodied souls in myriads afloat in space-time?

Science, says Prof. Compton, cannot tell us whether something in us does or does not survive death. No: science has no *data* whereon to erect an answer to such a naive question. But the methods, processes and habits of science unite to repudiate the hypothesis of a world or heavenly host of disembodied spirits. What part would such a host play in the drama of existence? What conceivable purpose would it serve? Freed from the ties and limitations of the body or hull, the disembodied spirit would have no passions, no conflicts, no functions and, therefore, no values.

Moreover, science deals with facts, not with fictions of the untrained imagination, and it solves only actual problems. True, science may make strides and leaps as the result of mere accidents in

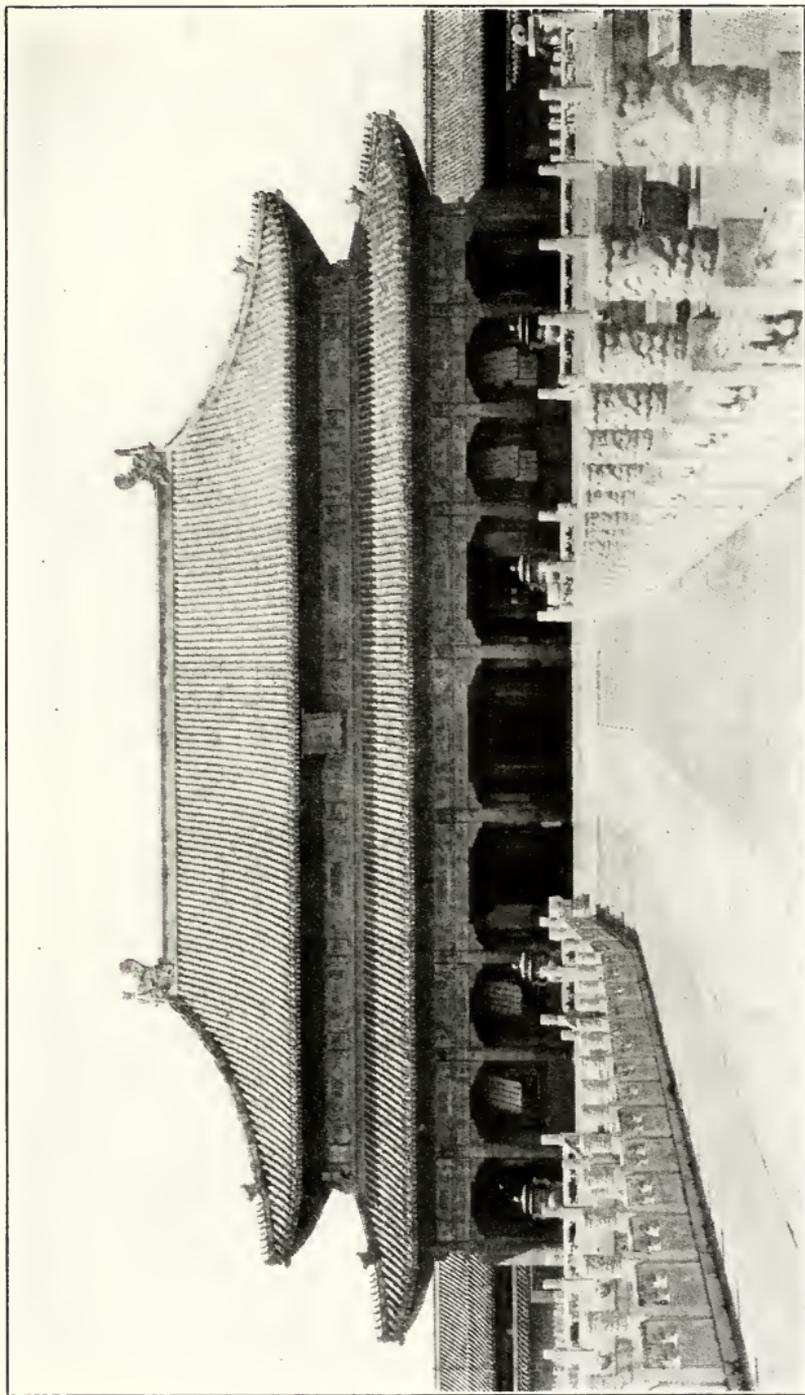
laboratories, but such accidents immediately raise certain problems and call for interpretations.

To talk of disembodied spirits is to raise not actual or significant problems, but such questions as have just been put, questions that point to the childishness of the whole notion.

Finally, there is another important, if depressing fact, which the men of science who toy with the idea of immortality always overlook. That *fact* is the decline in old age of the intellectual and moral faculties of even the most powerful of our thinkers. Second childhood is not by any means limited to the mediocre, the dull, the ignorant. It may come to the philosopher, the savant, the seer and leader. Now, what becomes of the soul or spirit—if it is an independent entity—at or during the stage of second childhood? Does it separate itself from the brain; does it quit the hull or body in disgust or contempt? If so, it is a very poor sport indeed. But the decay and breakdown of the mind may be gradual or slow, and in cases of that sort the thin and improbable theory of a divorce between the soul and the brain completely fails as a last refuge.

No; immortality is not even a decent hypothesis. If science does not stop, or stoop, to reject it, it is because, as I have said, science cannot afford to take notice of, or waste time on idle and ghostly ideas. The burden of proof is upon the proponents of the idea of individual immortality. Thus far they have advanced absolutely nothing worthy of the name of evidence. Why should science or philosophy bother about it?

As for the contention that if man does not live again after death, life is not worth living, and the moral code is deprived of its *raison d'être*, the answer, again, is that the *facts* of human life and human evolution refute that pessimistic view. The individual may not hope for survival, but the race may and does. Humanity has millions of years before it, and each generation can do something toward improving the social organism and the conditions under which it lives. The will to make this contribution, to carry on, to work for social and moral amelioration, is an observed and observable fact. It has no supernatural or mystical elements. It is, like man himself, a social product. And it is a product which can be cultivated deliberately. This or that system or civilization may fail and die, but humanity will continue to live and to advance. It is slowly and painfully *learning* to be the master of its destiny and to create an environment favorable to the growth of the best qualities in its own collective nature.



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