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AGNOSTICISM AND IMMORTALITY.

BY

SAMUEL LAING,

Author of "Modern Science and Modern Thought," "A Modern Zoroastrian," "Problems of the Future," etc.

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AGNOSTICISM AND IMMORTALITY.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question"—a question which has been asked before and after Hamlet, in all ages and countries where mankind has risen from blank savagery to thought and intelligence. The love of life, the horror of annihilation, are instincts common to men and to the whole animal creation. In civilised man this instinct rises beyond the vague terror of death and fear of the unknown. He "looks before and after;" his sense of justice longs for a future life to redress the wrongs and sufferings of the present one; his affections crave for a sight of faces which he has loved and lost; all the feelings of his complex nature cry out for some assurance of a continued existence. On the other hand, all positive knowledge and experience fail to give him this assurance, and rather tell him that, as his individual existence began with birth, so it will terminate with death.

How stands this most momentous of all problems in the light of modern science, and of that development of it which is fast invading modern thought under the compendious term of "Agnosticism"?

To attack a problem we must begin by clearly defining its conditions. What do we mean when we talk of a "future life" and of "immortality"? Clearly, for all practical purposes, we mean a life in which we retain our personal identity and individual consciousness. To be absorbed in some metaphysical essence, or soul of the universe, as some tiny rivulet is in the pathless ocean, is tantamount to annihilation. Extremes meet, and the Nirvana, which is the ultimate goal of the most

purely metaphysical religion, that of Buddhism, lands us practically in the same conclusion as that of the Materialist, to whom life and consciousness are but functions of particular modes of cell-motions.

It is important to keep this distinction well in mind, for it bears upon the next stage of the inquiry—viz., what are the historical facts of the problem? What are the views of it which have been entertained by different nations and in different ages? Do they show such a general consensus of opinion as may establish at any rate a *prima facie* case for any definite conclusion, and show it to be a necessary product of the evolution of the human mind? Or are they so conflicting as to neutralise one another, and show that no common conclusion holds the field, which remains open for inquiries conducted with all the latest resources of modern knowledge? The answer must be that the latter is undoubtedly the true state of the case.

If we take immortality to mean the preservation of conscious personal identity after death, the majority of mankind have had no such belief. The countless millions of Brahmins and Buddhists do not get nearer to it than to assume some vague absorption into the soul of the universe, after more or less transmigration through other forms of life. Plato and his followers had much the same idea, in a more refined and philosophical form, of an unconscious pre-existence in the universal spirit before birth, and return to it after death—a speculation which we find in the creeds of almost all our modern poets, and which is stated with much force and precision by Wordsworth in his ode on "Immortality." Other nations, such as the Chinese and Japanese, have no distinct ideas on the subject beyond a vague veneration for departed ancestors, and their educated classes accept either the Agnosticism, pure and simple, of Confucius, or some vague conception of Buddhistic philosophy. The lower classes, and savage and semi-civilised races generally, have a sort of rude faith in ghosts, which are scarcely distinguishable from the evil spirits in which unknown or injurious forces of Nature are personified.

The first dawn of a belief in a continued personal

existence after death is found in the interments of the neolithic period, in which weapons and food were deposited for the use of a departed chief in the happier hunting-ground of another world, and slaves were sacrificed so as to give him an appropriate retinue.

From this germ arose the Egyptian creed, which was for so many centuries by far the most powerful and practical exemplification of a belief in a future existence by a great civilised nation. They looked, as Herodotus tells us, on their tombs as their permanent abodes, and the homes in which they lived as mere temporary occupations. Their idea was that every existence, animate or inanimate, consisted of two parts, the material body and the *seol*, or incorporeal spirit, which could wander about in dreams, and, after death, continue a shadowy existence, living on shadowy food, and taking pleasure in shadowy geese and kine and other belongings. But this *seol* must have a corporeal body, or semblance of its old material self, as a basis for its existence, and hence the care and expense which were lavished on mummies and on paintings on the walls of tombs.

It is remarkable that, wherever the faith in a personal immortality of the soul has been at all strong, it has been associated with an equally strong faith in the resurrection of the body. The old Egyptians and the early Christians equally shared this belief; and even in the more shadowy mythology of the Greek and Roman world due funeral rites to the body were considered necessary to save the departed soul from wandering, as a shivering, bodiless ghost, on the banks of the melancholy Styx.

Another remarkable nation, the Jews, entirely ignored the idea of a future existence—a most singular circumstance, considering that they were so long in contact with the Egyptians, with whom it was the pervading fact of their daily life, and that the Jews were supposed to be a chosen people, specially instructed by Jehovah. And yet nothing can be clearer than that, from the time of Moses down to that of Ecclesiastes—and even later, as held by the Sadducees, the conservative aristocracy, who clung most tenaciously by the old law—the pure Jewish faith was that death was annihilation, and rewards

and punishments were dispensed either to the individual in this life or to his posterity.

Nothing can be more explicit than the words of Ecclesiastes which are put in the mouth of the great preacher, King Solomon, as the result of his long experience and deep wisdom : " A living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward." And again : " There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest."

It is not a little surprising that a religion like Christianity, in which eternal life and future rewards and punishments are such essential elements, should have originated from the matter-of-fact and almost Materialistic creed of Mosaic Judaism. Orthodox theologians will, of course, say that it was because it pleased God to conceal these things from former generations, and to teach them for the first time by a new revelation. The retort is obvious : if Jehovah were a just and benevolent Deity, why should he mislead his own chosen people by allowing Moses, Abraham, and other pious patriarchs after his own heart, to believe and teach the direct opposite of these essential truths ? But the retort, however obvious, is effective only against the idolaters of the Bible ; for its sincere students it is more to the purpose to observe that the assumption that these Christian dogmas are taught by Divine inspiration is met at the very outset by this staggering objection. What Jesus, St. Paul, and the Apostles taught respecting the immortality of the soul was this : that our personal identity after death would be preserved by a resurrection of the body, which was to take place in the lifetime of some of the existing generation. This is stated over and over again in the most distinct and positive terms, and, if the prophecy failed, there is absolutely nothing in the New Testament to teach us anything certain as to any future life. The last judgment is, in like manner, inextricably mixed up with the advent of Jesus in a cloud, with a trumpet and angels, within the prescribed time.

Now, it is historically certain that the prophecy was a mistake ; 1800 years have elapsed, and the end of the

world, the bodily resurrection, and the Day of Judgment, as described by Jesus and St. Paul, have not come. It is equally certain that, scientifically, no resurrection of the material body is possible. Death resolves the atoms and energies of which it was composed into new and simpler forms, which enter into totally different combinations. What becomes, then, of the superstructure of a personal identity after death, when it is based on two pillars which have crumbled into dust? It is as though it had never been made, and the fact remains that in no religion of ancient or modern times can we find any reliable information, or general consensus of opinion, as to that greatest of all mysteries—what may be “behind the veil.” If from Theology we fall back on Science, we have real and accurate information up to a certain point; but the final step escapes us. We know in the most precise and accurate manner that all we call soul, spirit, thought, memory, will, perception, and consciousness are indissolubly connected with definite motions of minute cells in the cortex or grey enveloping matter of the brain. Given the motions of given cells, and the corresponding effects will follow with the same certainty as if we were nothing but an electric battery, with nerves for conducting wires. And, conversely, without the proper inducing motions of nerve-cells the effects will not follow. This has been proved by such innumerable experiments that I shall confine myself to noticing a few which have the most direct bearing on the question of soul or personal identity.

Memory is clearly at the bottom of this feeling of personality. It links together past perceptions, and makes us feel that they are not isolated phenomena, but have an unity and connection, as having happened to one and the same person—viz., ourselves. Now, it is quite possible to obliterate portions of the memory by destroying portions of the grey matter of the brain appropriated for remembering that particular class of impressions. For instance, there is in the back part of the brain a tract of grey matter, connected by a collection of fine conducting wires, called the optic nerve, with the retina, which enables us to see. Surrounding this is another tract of grey matter, connected with the former,

which serves as a sort of register office for messages sent from the eye to the central telegraph office—or, in other words, which is appropriated to the memory of visual perceptions. Destroy the first or central office, and we can no longer see. Leave it untouched, but destroy the second or register office, and we can see, but no longer remember what is seen.

In like manner with the sense of hearing: there is a central office by which we hear, and a connected register office by which we remember what we have heard. Destroy the latter, and all memory of all we have ever heard passes away from us. Memory, therefore, is clearly proved to be not merely a general function of the brain *en masse*, but a special function of special portions of the brain, told off for the purpose of converting mechanical impressions received from the outer world, through the senses, into registered messages, which form the raw material of what we call memory, which is itself the substratum of consciousness.

The will is another faculty which is commonly attributed to personal identity, and yet it also is indissolubly associated with brain motion. Nothing can well be more mechanical than straining the eye to look at a black wafer stuck on a white wall. And yet, by this purely mechanical process, a state called hypnotism can be frequently induced, in which the will is apparently lost, and the will of another personality—that of the operator—is substituted for it. Thus, in the well-known experiment of Dr. Braid, a puritanical old lady, to whom dancing was an invention of Satan, was sent capering about the room to a reel tune, when told to do so by the Doctor. Nay, further, it is shown, by the careful experiments scientifically conducted at the Salpetriere by eminent French physicians, that a suggestion to an hypnotised patient may affect his or her brain movements in such a way as to give rise to the corresponding actions of nerves and muscles weeks after the suggestion was made and the hypnotic state had passed away. Thus a moral person may be irresistibly impelled to commit an atrocious crime on a specified person at a specified date, which would have been utterly repugnant to the patient's normal nature.

In like manner, visible things may be rendered invisible, and invisible things visible, by this hypnotic suggestion. And, what is even more extraordinary and more directly materialistic, these suggested emotions and perceptions may be transferred into one another by the action of a magnet. A case is recorded in Binet and Fere's volume on the Salpetriere experiments in which a patient told to hate one of the doctors endeavoured to strike him ; but, on a magnet being held near the back of her head, hate was changed into love, and she tried to embrace him. Another case is interesting as bearing on the question of personal identity. A female patient, on being told that she was one of the doctors, immediately assumed his gait and manner, and stroked an imaginary moustache ; and, being asked if she knew her real self, replied : " Oh, yes, there is an hysterical patient of that name who is not over-wise."

The same phenomenon of a dual personality is frequently found in persons who have received some injury to the brain, and are subject to trances. They have two personalities—one of a real, the other of a trance life, which are quite distinct and each unconscious of the other ; so that Smith may be alternately Jones or Smith, as he falls into or awakes from a succession of trances. In other words, the brain is like a barrel organ, which plays one tune in its normal state and a different one when the stops have been altered by some abnormal influence. In short, the last word of physiological science is that all which we call soul, mind, consciousness, or personality, are functions of matter and motion. Observe, however, that, when we ticket the *facts* with the word *function*, we explain nothing, but simply sum up the results by affirming that, as far as human experience goes, the two phenomena go necessarily and inevitably together.

There is another class of experiments recorded by the eminent French physician, M. Binet, in the columns of the *Open Court*, which bears very directly on this question of a conscious personality. It is not uncommon with hysterical patients to find portions of the body or particular limbs which are subject to what is called anæsthesia. That is, they are insensible to pain, as in

the case of chloroform, and cut off from all connection with the conscious self, as completely as if they were external pieces of matter. But, if certain motions are suggested to the paralysed limb, the same results will follow as if they had been dictated by will and accompanied by consciousness. Thus, if a pen be put in the anæsthetic hand between the thumb and the index finger, without the subject seeing or being in any way conscious of it, he will seize it, and his other fingers and arm assume the attitude necessary for writing. Suppose, next, we make the pen write a familiar word, such as the subject's name; after a short interval, the unconscious and paralysed hand will write the word over again, sometimes five or six times. And, what is still more extraordinary, if we purposely write the word with a wrong or superfluous letter, when the subject repeats the word the anæsthetic hand will hesitate when it comes to the mistake, and, after several attempts, frequently end by correcting it.

Now, in this experiment we have clearly proved, as Binet says, an unconscious perception, an unconscious reasoning and memory, and an unconscious volition. It is clear, therefore, that, in such a case, the essential elements, not merely of unconscious reflex movements of nerve and muscle, but of all that we are accustomed to consider as mind or spirit, have been reduced to unconscious or mechanical conditions. As Huxley puts it, you may suppress consciousness, and yet all physiological phenomena will continue to be performed automatically just as before; objects will continue to be perceived, unconscious reasonings will develop, followed by acts of adaptation. This is not "Agnosticism," but science and hard fact, with which the orthodox believers in soul or spirit have to reckon, just as much as those who fail to discover in the problem anything that can be solved by human faculty. In fact, no one can state this more explicitly than one of the ablest of modern theologians, Principal Caird, in his sermon preached before the British Medical Association in 1888, in which he says: "Of the thoughts, emotions, volitions, which in endless multiplicity and variety constitute our conscious life, there is not one which is not correlated to some

physical change or motion in the brain-matter of the thinker ; and, as far as we know, the growth, development, decline, the healthy or morbid action of the human mind, is invariably connected with corresponding changes of nervous or brain tissue." But Dr. Caird, who is not a mere commonplace theologian, but candid, sincere, and thoroughly acquainted with the latest discoveries of science, falls back on two arguments to refute the conclusions of Materialism—the first scientific, the second metaphysical. The first invokes the principle of the "Conservation of Energy." Dr. Caird argues that the soul, as distinct from the body, is an energy, and, therefore, indestructible. In the first place, if it were true, it would point rather to the Brahminical and Buddhist doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and ultimate merger in the one universal and eternal energy. But the premise involves the fallacy so common in all theological arguments, that known to theologians as the *petitio principii*. It assumes a soul which is at one and the same time immaterial and material. That is, immaterial as being subject to none of the ordinary laws of matter, such as gravity, form, and extension ; material as being subject to the law of indestructibility, which is known to us only as another attribute of ordinary matter and energy. If there be a soul or spirit, how do we know that this law applies to it ; or, if it did, that it is not transformed into some sort of dead or potential energy after the active energy comes to an end with the dissolution of the material frame, in association with which we alone have any knowledge of it ? For there is no fact more certain than that we have absolutely no knowledge of any soul apart from this association. No man of sane mind will assert that he has any recollection of anything that occurred before he was born, or that he has received any authentic message from any world of spirits inhabited by the dead. The last word of science is—"Behind the veil."

The second or metaphysical argument is that the very existence of matter implies thought. We know nothing of matter and motion in themselves, but only as they appear to us, which is after they have been transfigured by something antecedent to and independent of them,

which we call thought or consciousness. It is argued, therefore, that all phenomena require us to assume the existence of an universal mind in which they are conceived, and that, to constitute the reality of the outward world, the presence and the comparing, discriminating, and unifying activity of thought is pre-supposed. Therefore, there is an universal, eternal thought or soul of the universe, which, expressed in anthropomorphic language, is called God, of whom we may say, with St. Paul: "Of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things."

This seems a stupendous superstructure of assertion to raise on the slender foundation that, as a matter of fact, according to the experience of the inhabitants of our tiny planet, thought or consciousness, and brain or nerve motion, do commonly, though, as we have seen, not invariably, go together. It is not by any means clear, even in man's limited sphere of knowledge, which of the two is the *post hoc* and which the *propter hoc*; and no real assurance can result from the double guess—first, that our own mind is the *propter hoc*, or originating fact of our own existence; and, secondly, that, if so, the same is true of all existence in the universe. The fact is that these metaphysical solutions of the mysteries of the universe never give any certain assurance even to the acutest philosopher, and to the great mass of mankind they are not even intelligible. Moreover, it is to be remarked that, even if philosophers could establish the truth of their proposition as to mind and thought, it would not take us one step further towards proving what is the real object of our hopes and fears—the continuance of our personal identity after death. On the contrary, Dr. Caird's whole argument tends to the conclusion of Brahmins, Buddhists, and Platonists—that individual existences come from, and return to, the great universal soul or energy of the universe, like the waves which rise and fall, rippling for an instant the surface of the pathless ocean. To carry this one step further and arrive at a personal God, with intelligence and feelings like those of a magnified man, even such an acute reasoner as Dr. Caird has to fall back on *wishes* rather than *reasons*. He finds that "a God outside of knowledge, the dark, impenetrable background of the

phenomenal world," is not "the boon he wants," and he accordingly postulates something nearer to him and more in accordance with his personal aspirations and feelings. But wishes are not proofs, and there are many things which, although we desire them ever so ardently, do not come to pass. What can be more intense or more legitimate than the longing of a mother to receive some message from a lost child?—and yet it has never been gratified. How many lovers have been parted, how many minds extinguished, in the full maturity of powers which might have benefitted mankind, and where are their hopes and fears, their ardent affections, their far-reaching plans? Buried in the grave, where there is "no work, nor device, nor knowledge" beyond that "undiscovered bourne from which no traveller returns."

And it is to be noticed that, even if we were to admit as proved the arguments for a personal God and an inspired revelation, we should not be one step advanced towards any certain assurance of a personal immortality. For what this personal God is assumed to teach us by His inspired record in the Bible is this: Firstly, by the Old Testament, that there is no future life; secondly, by the New Testament, that there is a future life, but coupled with the condition of a resurrection of the body within the lifetime of a generation who have all been dead for 1800 years. Clearly there is nothing in this which approaches within a hundred miles of anything like certain and definite knowledge.

What, then, is the attitude of Agnosticism towards this great question of personal immortality? All gnostic forms of religions and philosophies—that is, all systems which teach that the question is knowable, and within the range of human faculties, either with or without the aid of revelation—break down under critical and candid investigation. If I were placed in the position of a conscientious juryman, who was told that the court is competent and the case closed, and that I was bound to deliver a verdict "Aye" or "No" upon the evidence as it stands, I should feel constrained, however reluctantly, to say "No." But this would not be my true deliverance. I should much prefer to return a verdict of "Not proven," or rather I should say the court has no jurisdic-

tion, and should walk out without giving any verdict at all. This an Agnostic may do with perfect good faith. He believes that our little knowable world is encircled by a great Unknowable, in which all things are possible. He stands, like the Ulysses of the poet, on the margin of that great ocean beyond the setting sun, on which so many millions of millions have embarked, and not one has returned. He, too, like the rest, must soon follow, and turn his prow westwards. What fate is in store for him? Shall the gulfs wash him down and merge forever his frail bark of hopes in the fathomless depths of a sleep where there are no dreams; or shall he perchance arrive at some fortunate islands of the West where he may survive in some newer and better life,

“ See the great Achilles whom we knew,”

and, dearer than the great Achilles, once more behold the faces of those whom he has loved and lost? He knows not: no voice on earth, no message from the dead, ever reaches him, and one thing only remains—to possess his soul with patience, and to oppose “one equal temper of heroic hearts” to the decrees of destiny and of the irrevocable future. But in the meantime he may dream his dreams and indulge in his visions without fear of contradiction, and without vitiating his manhood by pretending to believe as certain where there is no certainty. Surely this is better than to pin his faith on assurances of certainty which break down under the first touch of the Ithuriel spear of candid and critical investigation, and leave him either shivering in the cold creed of “dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return,” or wrapped in an unhealthy mantle of prejudices and prepossessions, impervious to the invigorating breezes of truth, of candour, and of sincerity.

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