MODERNISM AND IMMORTALITY.

CAVENDISH MOXON.

THE Roman Catholic controversialists are to some extent justified in their charge that in Protestant countries the belief in immortality has ceased to count. Some persons who are religious believe that there is no future life for the soul after death. Others who accept the traditional belief fail either to make it a personal conviction or to connect it with their manner of life. The causes of this prevalent disbelief and uncertainty are chiefly two:

(1) The spread of scientific knowledge and of naturalistic metaphysics has roused in many minds a vague feeling that the new theories have shaken the foundations of the old belief. And

(2) the Church as a whole has persisted in the use of antiquated defences against the new attacks and has refused to abandon untenable positions.

This confusion of Christian thought is specially noticeable in regard to the idea of bodily resurrection. The ancient theory was at least consistent in teaching that just as Jesus' body rose from the tomb, so in like manner will our bodies rise at the last day. But modern knowledge has compelled the reformed churches to allow their members to deny a bodily resuscitation in our case. Yet the Anglican bishops are trying to prevent the clergy from denying the literal disappearance or resurrection of Jesus' corpse. If the bishops can conceive our resurrection in a new and modern sense apart from a reintegration of scattered particles of matter, it is hard to see why the life of Christianity depends on our believing this new sense of resurrection to have been impossible in Jesus' case. The bishops ought to extend their persecution to those who disbelieve their own physical resurrection or to allow the clergy to deny the tradition of the empty tomb in its miraculous implication.

The Church will never stem the tide of unbelief by appeals

to authority or by refutation of the illogical dogmatism of unbelievers. The only way out of the present chaos of half beliefs is a way that calls for faith, patience, and courage. If the Church lacks these qualities she is better dead; if she fosters them in her members the result to-day will be that she will urge all truth-seekers resolutely to test the traditional arguments for immortality, boldly to burn the rubbish and then consider what is the essence of the old belief in the light of our knowledge and our religious needs. At the outset of our enquiry we may state what appear to be the results of the criticism of the traditional Christian belief in resurrection:

(1) The criticism of the records in the New Testament makes it probable that the Church has been mistaken in supposing that Jesus' body suddenly disappeared from the earth by a miracle of resurrection on the third day after His death.¹

(2) The criticism of natural science makes it probable that no literal resurrection will take place either of the whole or of any portion of the human race.

(3) The argument from the infallible authority of Jesus has completely broken down. It is precisely in his eschatological beliefs that Jesus has been shown to be mistaken. From this it follows that we can no longer assume a priori the absolute truth of his belief in the Fatherhood of God or the resurrection of man. It is important to notice what is the effect of these three results of criticism upon the Christian hope. Denial of the resurrection does not imply disbelief in immortality. Some Modernists like to say that they still hold the fact of resurrection whilst doubting or denying the old belief about its mode of accomplishment. But this juggling of a new meaning into an old and well defined term is calculated merely to irritate the layman. Therefore it is truer and wiser to say that you deny resurrection, if you do, and at the same time to show that, so far as this criticism goes, the way is still open

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¹ The evidence of this conclusion is admirably set forth by Prof. Kirsopp Lake in *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

for a consideration of the further and separate question of personal immortality.

It is a fact that many moral and religious people who deny a physical resurrection yet continue to hold fast to a belief in personal life after death. It is also clear that their motive for this belief is not a mere desire for their own persistence and pleasure or a mere physical fear. It is rather a moral demand that the universe should prove friendly to human values. By this belief in immortality they express their faith in the worth of goodness and the value of human endeavor. And most Christians not only believe in the conservation of all values already achieved, but also in new opportunities after death for the completion of lives cut short by evil. On the other hand there is a common belief in the punishment of the wicked, for their own good, in purgatory or for the satisfaction of a Christian sense of justice, in hell.

The defenders of the belief in personal immortality make much of these supposed demands of our moral nature as the strongest proof of their belief in survival in the absence of clear and direct evidence from "the other side."

It is important, therefore, to examine these moral claims, and if they survive our scrutiny, to enquire whether it seems likely that the nature of the world will guarantee their satisfaction. We are told that the world or God *must* satisfy our moral need for new opportunities beyond the grave. But we shall reply that before taking this risky leap from a judgment of value to a conclusion about existence we must examine our moral judgment to see whether our wish is obviously in accordance with the nature of the world.

The belief in personal immortality has value for religion because it implies (1) that human values are really good, (2) that these values are preserved after death and (3) that personal growth and decay are not confined to this present life. Of these three implications (1) and (2) do not demand this particular belief for their assertion. Indeed many believers in the eternity of human values have been, like

pre-Christian Hebrews, unbelievers in personal immortality and development after death. And until the evidence for post-mortem psychical activity becomes stronger, it is the duty of the churches to allow their members and their ministers who hold the first or the second implication of the traditional belief in life after death to deny that the moral or scientific evidence is enough to warrant our making a belief in personal immortality an essential part of every Christian's faith.

The distinction that we have just made between the fact and the manner of the preservation of human values is declared by orthodoxy to be unreal. Professor A. E. Taylor is one of the most recent defenders of the traditional belief in personal immortality as the only reasonably possible manner in which values can be preserved eternally intact.² He admits that the essence of the religious belief in immortality is the quality and not the mere quantity of existence after death. He believes that only a "moral" certainty is possible and desirable. Hence he rejects all *a priori* arguments from the indestructibility of the soul, and he regards the arguments from spiritualism for mere survival as being incapable of guaranteeing the safety and increase of the human values in which religion is interested. He thinks that the best argument for immortality is drawn from the moral demands of those who believe in God. He is sure that values will either be preserved in persons or not at all. For him only two alternatives are reasonable: either belief in personal immortality or pessimistic atheism. He refuses to allow Christians to affirm the eternal value of the good life whilst professing ignorance or disbelief with regard to another life after death. He dares to assert that there must be a moral advance in this new life in order that our moral demands may be satisfied. Now we shall not be surprised if modern Christians refuse Professor Taylor's dogmatic demand that they shall choose between a literal acceptance of a belief springing from the moral

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² See his essay in *The Faith and the War*.

demands of a section of the modern world and blank disbelief in all values and in their preservation.

Is it quite so morally certain as Professor Taylor supposes that the nature of reality must exactly correspond with his ideal destiny for the human soul? Even on the orthodox theistic hypothesis, is it wise to be so sure what must happen after death if God is just? All previous attempts have failed to enclose the possibilities in the form of a simple alternative or dilemma. The path of beliefs about man's history here and hereafter is thickly strewn with illusions. Christians have been firmly convinced that resurrection must mean resuscitation of our mortal flesh and bones; that justice demands the eternal torment of the damned. Professor Taylor's dogmatism about another and far better life after death not only conflicts with the warnings of experience, it also depends on a dualistic view of the two worlds. Here the devil causes sin and death to prevail; but there God has made a better world free from the domination of evil.

If, however, God is supreme it seems to follow that evil is here because the human values He desires cannot be won in a world apart from evil. What right then has Professor Taylor to assume that a further moral advance towards God can take place after death in a far better world? If human values persisted unchanged after death we could then imagine a mode of eternal life infinitely better than this evil world. But if an advance in moral worth is to be assumed then the belief of spiritualists in another life closely resembling this life in its general conditions is the most reasonable hypothesis. The history of the belief in personal immortality is another reason against the attempt to bind belief in values to the dogma of moral progress after death. For this belief arose at a time when men lived in a small world of which the Earth was the centre. In those days the only other beings in the world were angels and devils: there was no thought of the evolution of life on other stars. To-day we cannot assume that either our Earth or our human race has a supreme or final or exclusive

value. The theory of evolution has taught us to regard each species not only as an end in itself but also as a means to a further development. A natural pride of race makes it hard for us to apply this truth to our own species. As Professor Bergson reminds us (*L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 276) "chaque espèce se comporte comme si le mouvement général de la vie s'arrêtait à elle au lieu de la traverser. Elle ne pense qu' à elle, elle ne vit que pour elle." Now it is inevitable that this deep-rooted generic egoism should have been specially strong in the religion of geocentric times. We must be prepared to question the centrality of man now that we have learned the pettiness of our planet. It may well be that the human race is a means to some higher form of being. In that case human life has intrinsic value, even though its end be to produce fuller life here and not to prolong its own life hereafter.

From this vast extension of our view of the world it follows that we can hardly presume to declare that, unless our personal values are augmented after death in an environment more favorable to virtue, there is no meaning and value in life and no reasonable motive for continuing to struggle against sin.

The question of personal immortality ought not to be discussed apart from the meaning and value of the whole human race in the world process. Man has neither being nor worth in isolation. He has no absolute claim to any rewards or benefits, temporal or eternal. Therefore it is impossible to decide the question of his immortality on a priori grounds such as the abstract requirements of justice. If it could be shown that the world's progress would best be promoted by human activity limited to this life, the individual could then have no claim to an extension of life that would hinder the whole cosmic process.

Our view of the world has forever removed our certainty that man is the end and crown of creation. We can no longer ask, as our forefathers did, what is the good of every other creature in relation to man? But if the other living beings were not specially created for our use or pleasure,

how can we any longer assume that the world itself must be so ordered as to satisfy our lust for a perpetual extension of pleasure and our petty desires for adequate rewards?³

Professor Taylor is again the mouthpiece of orthodoxy when he declares that we must believe in personal immortality if we are to think nobly of the soul (p. 134). Without this belief it would not matter to him whether he had acted "well" or "badly." And on page 135 he even goes so far as to suggest that a rational judge without this belief would find no warrant for pronouncing the moral goods that are painfully won to be still the highest. But if these goods are valuable they are valuable because we judge their worth in this life—unless Professor Taylor can only see their justification in an unearthly society. How then is an atheist proved to be irrational because he still pursues these goods simply because he sees their value as enhancements of our earthly life? The atheist can still desire to enrich individual and social life: unless he is morbid and degenerate he must desire this increase of life. He will doubtless deny the "good" of life-denying "virtues," such as the longing for martyrdom, asceticism and celibate isolation, but he will affirm the values of all the qualities which uplift the race through the individual.

Professor Taylor confidently holds out to the unbeliever the cheerless prospect of the certain death of the world. But this final dissolution of the universe is by no means certain. We may well ask Professor Taylor the question put by Professor Bergson (*L'Évolution créatrice*, p. 268), "Mais, même du côté de la matière inorganisée avons nous le droit d'étendre à l'univers entier des considerations tirées de l'état présent de notre système solaire? A côté des mondes qui meurent, il y a sans doute des mondes qui naissent."

Nietzsche's belief in the eternal recurrence of the finite forms of life gives him a strong motive for acting in such a way that he would not dread its eternal repetition. For

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³ Even though our pleasure be a highly refined religious altruism.

such an atheist as Nietzsche with a vigorous faith in life there is no such slackening of the sense of obligation as Professor Taylor supposes to follow disbelief in life after death. It is the weak and degenerate who will only live well if they have the reward of immortality dangling ever before their eyes.

The earthly life of man may well be like a work of art. A piece of sculpture has a value in itself though it is not preserved forever. Unless Professor Taylor agrees with B. Croce that beauty is fully expressed in the soul apart from the material form, he must admit that the artist leaves some part of the value of his life behind him when he dies. If it is not a waste of time to produce perishable forms of art, why should the art of living well be neglected even though the artist dream of no perpetuation of the beauty of holiness?

We conclude, then, that belief in the continued personal activity of the self after death is not a necessary postulate for the moral life. But the question still remains; is there any certain ground of belief in immortality?

(1) The argument from moral and religious needs to belief in personal progress in life after death.

Professor Taylor maintains (p. 137) that it is unreasonable not to believe that the Universe will answer our moral needs just as it answers our rational needs. But the questions at once arise: What are our true moral needs? and how does the universe satisfy our rational needs? The ancient Hebrews believed firmly in Yahweh and yet felt no moral need for this personal progress after death; and many religious Orientals in our time make no such demand upon the universe as Professor Taylor thinks reasonable. Is it not possible that our true moral needs are not yet perfectly revealed to the human race? Is the man of faith compelled to be certain that his present needs *must* be met by the Universe or God? It may be that the demands of moralists like Professor Taylor can be no more exactly answered than the moral demands of the savage for heavenly fighting and feasting. For as Dr. McTaggart pointed out in the

Hibbert Journal (Vol. 4, p. 116 f.) tastes differ and change. "A Maori warrior might well find that the idea of an immortality without fighting made the world intolerable."

And how does nature satisfy our rational needs? Not by shaping itself in accordance with men's beliefs about magic, miracles or animism. If, then, we cannot impose a priori beliefs of our reason upon nature, how can we reasonably assume that nature must satisfy certain far from universal moral demands?

The horror that Professor Taylor feels at the thought of personal extinction *may*, after all, be the very natural and deeply rooted physical will to live which leads every creature to avoid death when unmoved by a stronger desire. Belief in personal activity after death *may* be a myth desired to strengthen the natural instinct that we should love the good life and seek to prolong it so far as the good of the race and the individual demands our persistence. In that case the men of the future would gain strength to face the facts and to live a full and valuable life without the aid of personal immortality. These men would no more share Professor Taylor's horror than he shares the horror of the Maori warrior. Men who by experience have learned the values of earth would have no need of a reward in heaven to spur them on to live worthily in this life.

It is most unlikely that the faith of Jesus demanded "a continual and unlimited augmentation" of personal values after death, since for Him the final judgment appeared to be close at hand. And in view of the faith of a Modernist like George Tyrrell it seems simply untrue that every believer must either accept Professor Taylor's traditional belief or become a pessimistic atheist. To Tyrrell the perpetuation hereafter of man's moral struggle seemed "geomorphic"—a conception of heaven in terms of earth (*Essays on Faith and Immortality*, p. 225). Dean Inge also completely escapes Professor Taylor's dilemma. On the basis of a form of absolute idealism, quite apart from any historical or scientific evidence, he is convinced that the values of human personality are fully preserved, though

he sees no reason for postulating a progress of souls in time or space after death, and indeed roundly asserts that "the question whether it is 'my' soul that will live in the eternal world seems to have no meaning at all" (*Hibbert Journal*, Vol. 15, p. 592).

(2) The argument that justice demands progress after death affords as little support to Professor Taylor's dogmatism as the foregoing argument from moral needs.

This argument is only made plausible if justice is held to demand a retributive punishment as an end in itself. Professor Taylor imagines that Bismarck, by dying, escaped the penalty which later generations are paying for his sin, and that unless he survives to pay his penalty, the whole world will be as unjust as this earthly section of it is.

Here we come back to moral needs. It is a fact that many Christians simply cannot desire that any outward penalty shall be inflicted either here or hereafter merely as a penalty. They feel that if Bismarck acted unworthily he suffered as a consequence the only just penalty, namely a shrinkage of spiritual stature: they do not demand that he should live in order to receive an additional outward adversity. Since we cannot decide what is just for us to receive till we know what our destiny is, we can hardly use our ideas of what is just to prove a truth about our own destiny. Man has no rights in abstraction from his world.

(3) The argument from an infallible person, book, or society. The baselessness of this argument has been so often and so clearly shown that it is needless to do more than refer to the full argument in A. Sabatier's *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*. The objections have indeed gained strength since this book was written in so far as the critics have shown that it is precisely in eschatological matters that the evidence for the fallibility of Jesus is strongest.

(4) The argument from the Christ of experience. There is a growing tendency amongst modern students to admit that the evidence for the miraculous disappearance of Jesus' body is quite insufficient as a basis for belief. It is

obvious that if Jesus' survival depended on a bodily disappearance which is unique in history, his resurrection becomes a hindrance rather than a help to faith in the survival of other men. Many Liberal Christians, therefore, suggest that it is enough to believe in objective visions of the "risen" and telepathically present Jesus. Some apologists who find no sure ground for belief in survival in the confused records of the New Testament rely instead upon the Church's witness to the Christ of experience. The mystical sense of Christ's dwelling in believers and the results of his activity in the Church are together supposed to offer a sure and certain ground for belief in his and therefore in our life after death. Bishop Henson, for instance (in the *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. 2, p. 483) seems to argue from the influence of Jesus to the fact of his resurrection. But in order to use this argument it is necessary to establish two impossible premises, (1) that we can distinguish between communion with the risen Jesus Himself and communion with the Spirit of his life, and (2) that the results in the Church could not have followed from the grace of God and the influence of a mortal Jesus on the minds of men.

(5) The argument from psychical research. If ever the evidence for survival prove sufficient to convince a majority of the trained investigators and psychologists, no doubt the question will have received a definite answer of great interest and importance, but not an answer that will satisfy Professor Taylor's moral demands. For Professor Taylor's religious purpose the evidence from psychical research is worthless because it fails to disclose a better life unhindered by evil, and because the alleged messages do not guarantee the eternal value of the spiritual life and the victory of good over evil, which form the chief interest in the belief in life after death from the religious and moral point of view adopted by Professor Taylor.

(6) The argument from the Fatherhood of God. In so far as this is a metaphysical belief it has a right to be held as a theory, but not to be imposed upon all religious people as a dogma. It was only reasonable to set up the Father-

hood of God as a certain premise for the proof of immortality so long as it was possible to assume the infallibility of the theological metaphysics of Jesus. To-day it is just as impossible to accept without question or criticism Jesus' belief in the Father as his belief in the Devil.

We conclude that the moral and religious needs of the present day forbid our setting up any one theory about human immortality as a necessary dogma for all believers in the values of personality. History shows us that when men have thought too much about the future life they have often lacked enthusiasm for the enrichment of our present life. Dean Inge admits "that the absence of any clear revelation about a future state is an indication that we are not meant to make it a principal subject of our thoughts." It is probable that equally dangerous to a full earthly life is the preoccupation with absolute values of a supposed real and eternal world, of which other world the history of human consciousness on earth is but a shadow.

If Professor Taylor cannot preserve his zest for the fullness of life without his belief in immortality, it is good for him to believe in it. Only let him not proceed to infer that it is either true or necessary for all. Many men and women have been devitalised by this very belief and have led a solitary and antisocial existence in one long ecstasy of heaven. There is only one absolutely binding dogma for all, *viz.*, the will to well-being in this present life. All other beliefs have religious and moral importance just in so far as they promote and enrich this life.

CAVENDISH MOXON.

LOS ALTOS, CALIFORNIA.