

# CONCERNING IMMORTALITY

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We have heard very much of the problems concerning prayer during these years—how long they seem!—since the war broke in upon our old arrangements, and another problem has become perhaps still more pressing—that of immortality.

The awed spirit holds its breath  
Blown over by a wind of death.

We have been living face to face with staggering conditions, and we have been closer neighbors to death than has ever been the case before since there were men. We have been forced to ask over again the immemorial questions of the human race and more urgently than ever before the question which sooner or later every man asks of himself, "Do my loved and lost still live in another sphere; shall we find each other again, and will there be a real fulfilment and consummation of this incomplete and fragmentary earthly career?" No absolute answer can yet be given to that palpitating human question, though some genuine illumination relieves the otherwise appalling darkness. For many—in fact, for multitudes—the Easter message of the gospel is all that is needed. It is a pillar of hope and a ground of faith. It closes the issue and settles all doubt.

But in a world which has proved to be in the main rationally ordered and marvelously susceptible to scientific treatment, we should expect to find in the natural order of things some sort of rational evidence that the highest moral

and spiritual values of life are conserved. Those of us who have been accustomed to knock at the doors of the universe for answers to our earnest questions can hardly help expecting nature to respond in some adequate way to this most urgent quest of ours. It is the rational quest of which I propose saying a few words.

There have been in the past, and there still are, two quite different ways of approaching the question of survival on rational grounds. We can pursue the method which is usually called empirical, or we can follow out the implications of the ethical life. The first method deals with the observable facts on which belief in survival rests. In the primitive and rudimentary stage of the race dream experiences had important influence on the formation of man's ideas about the unseen world. In his sleep he saw again those who had vanished from his sight. His dead father appeared to him, talked with him, and even joined him in the chase. It was, however, a world quite different from the world of his waking senses. It was not a world which he could show to his neighbor, nor did it have the same rigid, solid, verifiable characteristics as did his outer world. It was a ghostly world with shadelike inhabitants. It was not a radiant and sunlit realm; it was dull and unlovely. But in any case most races reacting on dreams, and probably on even more impressive psychic experiences, arrived at a settled conviction

that life of some sort went on in some kind of other world. The mythologies of the poetic races are full of pictures and stories expanded out of racial experiences. These psychic experiences have continued through all human history, and a large body of facts has slowly accumulated. In recent years the automatic writing and the automatic speaking of psychically endowed persons have furnished a mass of interesting material which can be dealt with systematically and scientifically.

It is too soon, however, to build any definite hopes on this empirical evidence. There can be no question that some of the reports which come from these "sensitives"—these psychically endowed persons—*appear*, to an unskeptically minded reader of them, to be real communications from real persons in another world or, at least, in another part of our world. This is nevertheless a hasty conclusion. It may be true, but it is not the only *possible* conclusion that can be drawn from the facts. It is a mistake at this stage of our knowledge to talk of "scientific" evidence of survival. All we are warranted in saying is that there are many cumulative facts which may eventually furnish solid empirical evidence that what we call death does not end personal life. But at its best the empirical approach seems to me an unsatisfactory way to deal with this problem. I should feel the same way about empirical tests of prayer. They do not meet the case. The real issue reaches deeper. We shall, of course, welcome everything which adds to our assurance, but I, for one, prefer to rest my faith on other grounds than these empirical ones.

Far back in the history of the race prophets appeared who inaugurated a new way of solving human problems. They discovered that man's life is vastly greater and richer than he usually knows. There is something in him which he cannot explain nor account for, something which overflows and transcends his practical, utilitarian needs and requirements. He feels himself allied with a greater than himself, and his thoughts range beyond all finite margins. Eternity seems to belong to his nature. He cannot adjust himself to limits either of time or of space. These prophets of the soul's deeper nature, especially those in Greece, Socrates and Plato for instance, insisted that there must be a world of transcending reality which fits this depth of life in us. The moral and spiritual nature of man is itself prophetic of a larger realm of life which *corresponds* with this inexhaustible creative inner life. With this moral insight, immortality took on new meaning and new value. The life after death was no longer thought of as a dim, shadowy, ghostlike thing, to be dreaded rather than desired. It was now thought of as *the real life* for which this life was only a preparatory stage. Steadily this view of the great ethical prophets has gained its place in the thought of men, and the mythology based on dreams and psychical experiences has in measure lost its hold on those who think deeply.

It seems impossible to consider life—life in its highest ranges in the form of ethical and spiritual personality—as a rational and significant affair unless it is an endlessly unfolding thing which conserves its gains and carries them cumulatively forward to ever-increasing issues.

A universe which squanders *persons*, who have hopes and faiths and aspirations like ours, as it squanders its midges and its sea-spawn cannot be an *ethical* universe, whatever else it may be. It must have some larger sphere for us, it must guard this most precious thing for which the rest of the universe seems to be made. The answer to the question rests in the last resort on a still deeper question. Is there a Person or a Superperson at the heart of things, who really cares, who is pledged to make the universe come out right, who wills forevermore the triumph of goodness—in short, who guards and guarantees the rationality and moral significance of the universe? If there is such a Person, immortality seems to me assured. If there is not—well, then the whole stupendous pile of atoms is “an insane sandheap.” That way madness lies. It simply is not thinkable.

But from the nature of the case these supreme truths of our spiritual life and of our deeper universe cannot be proved

as we prove the facts of sense or the mathematical relations of space. The moral and spiritual person must always go out to his life-issues as Abraham went out from Ur of the Chaldees, without “knowing” whither he is going. The moral discipline, the spiritual training of the soul, seems to demand venture, risk, the will to obey the lead of vision, faith in the prophetic nature of the inner self, confidence in “the soul’s invincible surmise.” I, for one, prefer the venture to empirical certainty. I should rather risk my soul on my inner faith than to have the kind of proof of survival that is available. What we have is so great, so precious, so loaded with prophecy of fulfilment, that I am ready to join the father of those who live by faith and to swing out on that last momentous voyage, not knowing altogether whither I am going, but sure of God and convinced that—

What is excellent, as God lives,  
Is permanent.

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## RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

### IV. RATIONALISM (*Concluded*)

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#### **2. The Principles and Dogmas of Rationalism**

The vast range of the rationalistic movement and the great number of the works of its noted representatives have

given rationalism an exceedingly respectable place in the constitution of the modern Protestant religious mind. We shall now attempt to present an analysis and brief exposition of its fundamental