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DOES MORALITY
DEPEND ON LONGEVITY?

BY

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DOES MORALITY DEPEND ON LONGEVITY?

IF any one were to maintain that it is impossible to give children any sense of the excellence of truthfulness and the evil of falsehood; that they cannot be induced to exercise any control over their tempers, or to keep from pilfering sweet things; that they cannot be brought to obey the commands given them by their parents, though no eye may witness the disobedience, because it is *right* to obey and *wrong* to disobey them; that, in short, they cannot be formed into virtuous and noble characters unless you can assure them that they will certainly live to be very old men and women, and during this long period—endless to the imagination of a child—will reap the fruits of all their childish virtues in a prosperous, happy life, or gather up the bitter consequences of a contrary conduct in a miserable existence;—we should laugh at such a disputant as one who defied the teachings of experience, and lived in a world of self-deluding dreams. And no one, I think, could expose this folly more forcibly than “Presbyter Anglicanus,” if he thought it worth while to pull such notions to pieces. Yet, what is the doubt which the Presbyter so seriously expresses in his tract, part of this series, ‘On the Doctrine of Immortality in its bearing on Education’? “Whether, if

we cut existence short at the moment which we call death, there can be any morality at all" (p. 7), but an exaggerated form of the proposition that children cannot be induced to exercise childish virtues and eschew childish vices, unless you can assure them of a long extension of life, in which they will experience the good or bad consequences of their childish actions.

But if it be true of children, in whom the genuine tendencies of our nature manifest themselves in their most native purity, that in order to produce goodness it is not necessary to appeal to remote future consequences, but that it is necessary only to awaken into activity the instinctive feelings of truthfulness, gentleness, self-denial for the sake of others—the harmonies of love, hidden beneath the conflicting impulses of passion, but as a directing power which, once aroused to action, claims the right to rule,—why should we question the sufficiency of the same force if it is appealed to in our subsequent life, to carry on the work commenced in childhood, without introducing as a motive the calculation of future consequences either on the earth or after death? I cannot find in the reasoning of "Presbyter Anglicanus" any ground for such a questioning, except the statement, which I do not dispute, that the present education of English youth "is based upon the idea of their existence hereafter as well as here; that the teaching of all our great schools, and, probably, of all the schools of every denomination, is not only founded upon, but steeped in, this idea."

Now, no doubt if the alternative of not insisting on this belief as the foundation of moral principle were what the Presbyter seems to contemplate, namely, that it must be based solely on an appeal to the calculation of its advantages to the individual in the conduct of life, combined with a positive assertion on the part of the teacher "that after this life is over

there is and can be no future life," the consequence might be expected to be a general break-down of morality. But it appears to me that both our present experience of human nature in children, and the history of mankind, prove this alternative to be by no means the only one left us. And at the present time, when, as "Presbyter Anglicanus" will, I am certain, admit, the customary proofs of the doctrine of immortality, drawn from the assumed infallibility of the Scriptures, are giving way, on all sides, before the progress of critical research into those Scriptures; which must, sooner or later, force upon all honest and well-informed inquirers the conviction that, whatever is their value—and to me it is very great—they are simply human productions, no more able to reveal the state of things in unseen worlds than is the 'Phædo' of Plato; it does appear to me, also, of no small importance in the education of the young, that we should rest the principles of conduct upon the knowable and present, instead of upon a future about which we can only dogmatize without knowing anything certain. With this view I propose to adduce some considerations, such as seem to me to show that there is no necessity for making this uncertain forecast in order to gain a solid foundation either for religion or morality.

I. Antiquity offers us the spectacle of two adjoining nations, which have filled an important part in the religious history of mankind—the Egyptians and the Jews. We know now that the whole religious system of Egypt was founded upon the firm conviction that the conscious spirit survived death, and entered into a state determined by the deeds done in the body. Among the Jews, on the contrary, notwithstanding their long intercourse with Egypt, the idea of immortality appears scarcely to have found entrance at all till after the Babylonian captivity, when

they seem to have borrowed it from the Persians. Even in the work which especially deals with the matters now most commonly relied upon as postulating, so to speak, our own future being if we would not deny the Being of God, namely, the unmerited sufferings of the good,—even in the Book of Job, this idea is wanting. For the Goel of chapter xix. is, very clearly, no God to be seen after death; but a deliverer in whom Job confides that He will appear at last on earth to justify him, as, *in fact, he does* appear in the concluding chapters of the Book. Can anything be more startling? Here are writings which have furnished the storehouse of the profoundest religious feeling for successive ages; writings which have been the well-spring of the living water of trust in God. Yet it is clear that the writers by whom they were produced had no firm hold on the idea of their individual conscious existence after death, if, indeed, they had any faith in it at all. Now suppose that, instead of the Psalms and Prophets, mankind had been fed upon extracts from the 'Book of the Dead,' or any similar Egyptian work, will any one maintain that the religious or moral effect could have been as great, and rich, and varied as the effect of the knowledge of the Old Testament has been?

But this is not all the lesson which the story of the Jews teaches. After the captivity they learnt from their Persian deliverers the idea of immortality. Under its influence they produced, as we learn from the recent critical researches into the Canon of the Old Testament, the Books of the Ceremonial Law, the Books of Chronicles, the Visions of Daniel and accompanying Apocryphal writings, and that system of the authoritative interpretation of the ancient Scriptures, which first stifled their spiritual life beneath the formality of Pharisaism, and ultimately replaced the Bible by the Talmud. In exact contrast with what modern theories would induce us to expect,

we find the Jewish spirit full of religious life when it did *not* believe in the prolongation of individual existence, and sinking into a mummified torpor when it took a firm hold on this expectation.

II. At the opposite extremity of Asia Minor to the home of the Jewish race, we find that of the most highly-gifted member of the great Aryan family—the Greeks. To them, as to the Egyptians, a future state of reward and punishment for their conduct in this life was a matter of religious faith. The popular morality, the traditionally orthodox education of their youth, was founded on it. Was the morality thus based able to resist the influences of increasing wealth, growing power, and the manifold temptations which the life of cities brings with it? The story of Thucydides and Xenophon, the comedies of Aristophanes, and the complaints of Plato, offer abundant evidence that it was not.

But within this corrupt civilisation there grew up a body of men whose morality, however much we may find to criticise in it, undoubtedly did rise to a level far higher than that of their countrymen in general—a body of men who, during a long succession of generations, under the political annihilation which came over Greece with the rise of the Macedonian and Roman empires, continued to be the living witnesses for the efficacy of principles of conduct not based upon any calculation of external advantages, to produce virtuous action—I mean, of course, the Greek philosophers; of whom we must remember that they were not merely a few eminent men, but a numerous body of persons, professing to follow certain fixed rules of life, and who appear to have, for the most part, fulfilled this profession.

Now, among these Greek philosophers, it seems clear that the doctrine of individual immortality met with very doubtful acceptance, and, even where it was accepted, did not occupy a prominent place as the

foundation of moral conduct. Socrates, for instance, according to the account of the speech made by him at his trial given by Plato, presents two alternatives: *Either*, he says, death is a dreamless sleep, in which case it cannot but be a gain, if we compare this perfect quiet with any other night or day of our whole life; *or*, it is a migration to some state where the dead might live in delightful intercourse with the great men who had died before them.* And this is all that he says about it. Again, in the intimate conversation narrated in the 'Phædo of Plato,' to have taken place on the day of his death, where he heaps up a variety of arguments to establish the position that the soul is eternal by its nature, he does not present this conception at all as the foundation of morality, but only as a consideration which should make the philosopher welcome death rather than fly from it. "For how," he asks, "in truth, should those who philosophise rightly not wish to be dead, how should not death be to them, of all men, the least terrible? Would it not be the height of unreason if those who have always quarrelled with the body, and longed to possess the spirit in itself, should be fearful and angry when this happens, instead of eagerly going there, where, when they arrive, they may hope to attain what they have elected throughout their life; for they have chosen wisdom, and to be delivered from that with which they quarrelled so long as they possessed it."† Of the argument so much in favour with the moderns, which identifies the prolongation of our individual existence beyond the tomb, with trust in the goodness and justice of God, there is scarcely a trace in the 'Phædo'; the only approach to it being the "*caution*," that, if the soul is incapable of destruction, and death, therefore, cannot deliver us from the consequences of our past acts, the wicked cannot be freed by it "at once from their sins and their souls; but the only

* Apology towards the end.

† Phædo, § 34.

deliverance from evil must lie in a good life.”* But this conception is so far from having formed the basis of the moral teaching of Socrates, that, to judge by the tone of this conversation, his notions on the immortality of the soul would appear to have been kept by him as a subject for his private meditations, and to have been communicated to his friends, only upon the close approach of his own death. And they rest, for their chief support, upon the persuasion, entirely strange to our modern conceptions of immortality, that our souls come to us out of a *previous* state of conscious existence, and bring with them the knowledge of ideas, or general principles, which the experiences of sensation gradually re-awaken in our memories.

Passing from this beginning of philosophical speculation to a point far advanced in its course, to the age of Cicero, we find a yet more striking absence of any connection between the idea of immortality and the principles of morality in the eloquent treatise where this great Roman thinker sums up, in his old age, the reasonings of Greek philosophy on this subject in the first book of his Tusculan disputations. Although he expresses his own belief in the Platonic doctrine of immortality, which he rests principally upon an argument ascribed to Socrates in the Phædrus of Plato, that that must be eternal which possesses the power of self-motion, and, as this power is possessed by the soul, the soul must be eternal; an argument which he applies to *all* living creatures,† yet all the concluding portion of the treatise is occupied in demonstrating that death is not to be dreaded, *even* although it should involve the total loss of consciousness. How little morality depended in his judgment

* Phædo, § 130.

† Inanimum est enim omne quod pulsu agitur externo, quod autem est animal id motu cietur interiore et suo. Nam hæc est propria natura animi, atque vis; quæ, si ipsa semper moveat, neque nata certa est, et eterna est.—Ch. 23.

on the continuance of individual existence, we gather from the declaration made by him towards the close of this argument, that "no one has lived too short a time who has perfectly discharged the duties of perfect virtue."* It is still more conclusively shown by the fact that his celebrated "Offices," his great work on moral duty, is avowedly founded upon the treatise by Panætius, who on this point, as he tells us, "dissented from Plato; whom everywhere else he calls divine, the wisest, the holiest, the Homer of philosophers, but whose doctrine of the immortality of the soul he rejected on the ground that whatever is born must die, and whatever is subject to disease must be subject to death.† This, it should also be observed, was the general doctrine of the Stoics, of whom Cicero says that they "likened men to crows, asserting that the soul lasted a long time, but not always."‡ Yet the Stoics are notorious for having taught a morality which, if open to the charge of being wanting in tenderness, undoubtedly exercised a most powerful influence over the minds of those who embraced it, moulding their whole course of life, and leading them, in very numerous instances, to an almost ascetic renunciation of the pleasures of sense.

We see, then, that the history of four of the most remarkable nations of the ancient world by no means supports the notion that man is not furnished by his Maker with sufficient motives for noble action derivable from the world in which he finds himself placed, and the faculties of which he finds himself possessed, but must draw the stimulus to present goodness from a future to which he has no access. On the other hand, if we consider what have been the consequences of acting upon the latter assumption, we shall, I think, find still more reason for questioning its truth.

Six centuries after Semitic and Aryan thought had effected a union in Christianity, took place that fierce

* Ch. 45.

† Tusc. Quest., I., ch. 32.

‡ *Ib.*, ch. 51.

outburst of Semitic faith in the absolute will and unconditional sovereignty of God, called by us Mahometanism. The great instrument by which the triumphs of this creed were effected was its uncompromising declaration of a future state, where the faithful would obtain from Allah a recompense for his toils and sufferings in endless joys, and the unbeliever would be precipitated by his relentless command into endless tortures. "Hell is much hotter," was the reply of the Prophet to the remonstrances of the Arabs who, on his proclamation of war against the Romans, "objected the want of money, or horses, or provisions, the season of harvest, and the intolerable heat of the summer."* "Paradise is before you, the devil and hell-fire in your rear," was the pithy exhortation of the Arab generals to their troops, before the battle of Yermuk, which gave to the Moslems the possession of Syria.† The imagination enlisted on the side of Islam proved as powerful to sustain the active courage of the fanatic warrior, as it had been, in earlier times, to sustain the patient fortitude of the Christian martyr.

IV. If the East has thus testified to the danger which may await morality when it is built upon a faith emancipated from the control of present experience, the West has borne a not less powerful witness to the same truth in the history of the attempts made within the Christian Church to extinguish heresy. Gibbon, basing his calculations upon the number of martyrs whom Eusebius states to have suffered in Palestine during the great persecution in consequence of the Edict of Diocletian, and upon the probable proportion borne by the population of Palestine to that of the rest of the empire, estimates the number of Christians on whom capital punishment was inflicted by judicial sentence throughout the Roman Empire

* Gibbon, ch. 50; Ed. 1855.

† *Ib.*, ch. 51; 76, 318.

during the ten years that this persecution lasted, as somewhat less than 2,000;* while Grotius declares that, in the Netherlands alone, 100,000 of the subjects of Charles V. suffered death as heretics under the hands of the public executioner. Even if we assume, as M. Guizot appears to do, that the estimate of Gibbon is below the mark, and allow, with Ruinart, in his 'Acts of the Martyrs,' greater credence to the vague statements of "innumerable witnesses,"† while we reduce the victims of the persecution in the Netherlands with Fra Paolo to 50,000,‡ there remains a terrible witness, in this case, to the excess of cruelty of which Christians have been guilty, on religious grounds, towards other Christians above that of which the ancient heathen world was guilty in its attempts to repress the spread of Christianity. It is notorious that this evidence is far from being a solitary testimony to the fact. To what are we to attribute a result so astoundingly unlike what might have been reasonably expected from the spirit of profound love which animates the Gospels? Can it be doubted that the cause has been the belief in the endless duration of the soul, combined with the belief that its welfare during this endless period might be irremediably destroyed by the opinions which it entertained while on earth? Accept these beliefs as true, and it becomes a *duty*, far more sacred than the duty of preserving man's mortal body from violent assault, to preserve his undying soul from the contamination of any opinions as to which we may be convinced that they have this appalling issue. Even the *probability* of such a result is sufficient to raise this duty. For, if we are *mistaken*, the injury we do to the individual who suffers is insignificant, since his immortal soul will not suffer; while, if we are *right*, the good that

* Gibbon, ch. xvi., Ed. 1855, II. 284.

† Note in Milman's Gibbon, Second Ed., I., p. 598.

‡ *Ib.* ch. xvi.; I., p. 600.

we may do to others, if not to the individual sufferer, is incalculable.

No doubt, if we adopt the view of "Presbyter Anglicanus," there would be no danger of our falling into such excesses. If the whole of our unceasing existence is assumed to be a continuous course of education, by which *all* shall ultimately be "brought into a state where they will think rightly and act rightly, because they will be filled through and through with the love of God,—that is, with the love of that which is true, and pure, and just," we may contentedly leave the Divine educator to work out His own method of instruction, without stepping in to His aid by abruptly dismissing any of His pupils from one class to another in the never-ending school. But when "Presbyter Anglicanus" maintains that the religious instruction of the great schools throughout England is "not only founded on, but steeped in, the belief" in immortality, I would remind him that it is certainly *not* such a belief as this. That instruction, where it *really* dwells on our imaginations of the future as the base on which our conduct in the present should be founded, is, I conceive, far more closely represented by the unbelieving belief of that self-important self-nullifier, Dr Pusey, that, if men make any important slip in what the teacher calls orthodoxy, no matter what their conduct may have been in other respects, "their shrieks will echo for ever along the lurid vaults of hell," than by the loving trust of the Presbyter. The doctrine of immortality, *theoretically* taught in the great majority of English schools, where *any stress* is laid upon it, is the doctrine of which the fires of Smithfield were the legitimate fruit; and, if it does not produce this fruit now, the reason is that, *practically, it is not believed*,—that the only part of the doctrine which has any general influence on men's minds at the present time is one scarcely connected with morality at all, namely, the sentimental hope

of reunion in "another and better world" with those we have loved and lost in this.

How much hold the idea of continuous existence has upon men's minds under this form, we see by the rapid growth of belief in the so-called Spiritual manifestations. And when we consider how very unspiritual the character of these alleged manifestations appears to be; how entirely destitute it is of any conceptions of a nature likely to ennoble the lives of those whose minds are occupied with them, we cannot form a high estimate of the influence of the mere notion of continuous existence upon the conduct of mankind. Of the conception as "Presbyter Anglicanus" would present it to us, I must form a very different estimate; if, as he no doubt supposes, the continued life of the individual is conceived to be a career of active usefulness, in spheres of action of continually increasing extent and importance, according to the perfection of the will by which the active power is regulated, certainly this conception would operate as a powerful stimulus to the noblest use of all the faculties which we possess here. Yet when we remember how peculiarly liable such a stimulus is to be misdirected, if we allow ourselves to dwell upon the dreams of a future of which we know nothing rather than upon the ideas which can be tested by present experience, we shall, I think, be disposed to look upon the use of this stimulus with great suspicion.

That morality alone, even in its purest and most ideal form, is sufficient to be the permanent source of spiritual blessing to mankind, I do not believe; and that not because our lives are short and uncertain, but because *morality belongs* properly to the *intellectual, analytical* side of our nature, and therefore, though it is very efficient in telling us *what* we ought to do, is very feeble in furnishing the motive power to do it. "Conduct," to use the words of Mr Matthew Arnold, in his remarkable 'Essays on Literature and Dogma'

“is the simplest thing in the world so far as *knowledge* is concerned, but the hardest thing in the world so far as *doing* is concerned.”* To gain this power of doing, we require to turn to the other great factor of our being, the *constructive* principle of will, and the impelling force of love by which this principle can be at once strengthened and guided. Now, the spirit of *loving Will* is the spirit of *Religion*.

Awake in man the trust that the power which can glow in his own bosom governs the universe—that God is no mere name for “the true, the pure, the just,” but is the Eternal Spirit of purity, justice, and truth, with whom the spirit of man can have communion, on whom it may rely in death as in life, in sorrow as in joy, and you will not require the doubtful dogma of continuous existence to furnish motives to action, which the present reality will abundantly supply, but to use the beautiful words in which Cicero winds up his argument against the fear of death, will hold “nothing to be evil that is determined either by the immortal Gods, or Nature the parent of us all; for not hastily, or by chance, are we born and created, but assuredly there is a power which takes counsel for the human race, and has not produced and nourished it, that when it has gone through all its toils, it should fall into eternal evil at death; rather should we think that it has prepared for it a haven and place of refuge.”†

In regard to the place which the conception of continuous individual existence should occupy in the education of the young, I think Presbyter Anglicanus will agree with me, that it cannot continue to be what it has been. Whatever arguments Plato or Cicero could use in support of this faith, it is open to us to use now. We may, perhaps, add to them others, from the knowledge of Nature which scientific research is opening to us. But with the faith in infallible

* ‘Cornhill,’ Oct., 1871, p. 485.

† Tusc. Quest. I., 49.

teaching,—and to the Presbyter, if I am not much mistaken, no less than to myself, this faith is gone, irreparably gone, beyond remedy by decrees of councils be they ever so imposingly vouched, or plasterings of learned ingenuity be they ever so skilfully applied,—there is gone also all certainty in any assertions about that world of which we can know nothing unless, indeed, we are ready to be “rapped” into conviction, and delight ourselves with the fantastic Hades of our new spiritual “Home.” It must become us, then, to substitute, on this subject, modest hope for dogmatic arrogance. But it does not follow that our faith in the *eternal* should be less vivid, because it ceases to be identified with a belief in the *Longeval*.

For myself I am persuaded that the conception of infallible teaching, and the certainty of so-called immortal life associated with it, has constantly interposed itself between man and God, and that the faith in an ever-present Deity will never be generally realised till the faith in these counterfeits of His presence has died away. To God, the source of all good, we must direct man’s thoughts alike for the education of the young, and the solace and guidance of maturer age. Once quicken mankind to trust in His presence as a living reality, and we may conclude with Schleiermacher, whom “Presbyter Anglicanus” finds so hard to understand, that only those who “care to live well rather than to live long” can partake in that immortality which belongs to truth and love, whether or not the conditions of existence allow a continuous prolongation of individual being to those who live in the aspiration after love and truth.

What, indeed, can be more absurd than for a man to say to his Maker, “O God, the love of Thee, and the study of Thy acts, and the following of Thy Spirit, would be sufficient to satisfy my soul for countless ages, but it will not suffice for fifty years. For so short a time it is not worth my while to be en-

lightened by Thy truth, and cheered and warmed by Thy love. Every attraction of sensuous delight, every dream of self-seeking gratification, every impulse of passion, is preferable. Give me endless existence, and I yield myself up to Thy service, which is perfect freedom. Deny it me, and I serve myself, though to serve myself is to become slave to a devil." Yet what is the assertion that the belief in immortality is essential as a support to morality but this sentiment in disguise? The notion I take to be the legitimate product of that false religious teaching which, by substituting authority for conviction, converts morality into legality. Divines of the stamp of Dr Pusey instinctively feel that the edifice of apparent goodness which they may raise rests in the great majority of cases upon a foundation of sand, to which they can give solidity only by the pressure of fear. It is perfectly consistent in them, therefore, to insist on the faith in an endless duration of individual existence, which furnishes the heavy rammer that they require. But divines who, like "Presbyter Anglicanus," would build goodness upon love, should feel, what Dr Pusey, I am persuaded, feels to be his *own* case, that they need no such extraneous support—that "the rain may descend" and "the floods rise," and "the winds blow upon that house," but it "cannot fall," for it is "built upon the rock."



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