

SPIRITUALISM AND IMMORTALITY

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IN a recent widely-read book entitled *The Road to Endor* an intensely interesting account is given of how two British officers won their way to freedom from a Turkish prisoner-of-war camp by the use of methods usually described as "spiritualistic." The attitude of the author towards the phenomena so described may already be guessed from the title of his work, borrowed as it is from Mr. Rudyard Kipling's satiric lines:

Oh, the road to En-dor is the oldest road
And the craziest road of all!
Straight it runs to the Witch's abode,
As it did in the days of Saul,
And nothing is changed of the sorrow in store
For such as go down on the road to En-dor!—

It is thus explicitly set forth in the Preface (p. ix): "If this book saves one widow from lightly trusting the exponents of a creed that is crass and vulgar and in truth nothing better than a confused materialism, or one bereaved mother from preferring the unwholesome excitement of the *seance* and the trivial babble of a hired trickster to the healing power of moral and religious reflection on the truths that give to human life its stability and worth, then the miseries and sufferings through which we passed in our struggle for freedom will indeed have had a most ample reward."

I

On the other hand, in an even more widely-read publication of a year or two earlier the distinguished author excuses himself in his Preface for his seeming obtrusion of private family affairs and revelations upon the attention of the general public, on the ground of the comfort the facts narrated are calculated to afford to those who like himself have suffered bereavement through the Great War. "I should not have done so were it not that the amount of premature and unnatural bereavement at the present time is so

appalling, that the pain caused by exposing one's own sorrow and its alleviation to possible scoffers becomes almost negligible in view of the service which it is legitimate to hope may thus be rendered to mourners, if they can derive comfort by learning that communication across the gulf is possible." (*Raymond, or Life and Death*, by Sir Oliver Lodge—pp. vii & viii). And to like effect the same writer in a subsequent article in one of the great English reviews: "Had it not been for the widespread misery of war-bereavement I should probably have continued a more stringent policy of reticence. But the solace which the facts themselves have brought to many homes amply justifies a reasonable amount of publicity. Families have been reunited, sorrow has been alleviated, despair has been checked and a sane and religious outlook has been restored, and this not in a few cases but in a multitude." (*Hibbert Journal* Jan. 1920, p. 266).

Which of these opposing attitudes to the phenomena of Spiritualism is the truer? Or is there truth on both sides? And how far can spiritualistic methods carry us towards a helpful, comforting belief in immortality? The following reflections, stated largely in outline without development in detail, by one who can lay no claim to a personal or first-hand experimental knowledge of the facts, but only to being an interested and, as he trusts, unprejudiced observer of the facts recorded, may assist in indicating the proper line of answer to these questions.

The spiritualistic claim to obtain communications from the departed by means of mediums and thus to establish scientifically the fact of personal survival of bodily death, is one not to be rashly set aside as a sheer "recrudescence of superstition," in the way that is too often done, especially by representatives of the Church. That is an unscientific, dogmatic attitude, which is unworthy and unjustifiable. It is never in the interests of truth that any facts claiming to be true should be refused a frank, unbiased examination or investigation. The matter is one of evidence and of evidence alone. And the testimony of such men as Sir William Crookes, Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir William Barrett in favour of the claim, is not a testimony to be lightly discounted.

On this matter of the available evidence however, two observations have to be made. The first is this: It has always to be remembered—a truth which David Hume set forth long ago in his famous argument concerning miracles—that the evidence necessary to establish an event which is outside and above ordinary experience must be specially strong and convincing—evidence not explicable

by any other known hypothesis. The strength of the testimony must always be in proportion to the supra- or extra- ordinary character of the facts alleged. And, second: the phenomena of spiritualism are amongst the most intricate with which the human mind can grapple, so that few have the gifts or the training necessary to make competent or qualified judges of the evidence. When one remembers the different factors to be taken into consideration—the sitter or sitters present, the medium, the “control” acting on the medium, and the “communicator”¹ or presumed discarnate spirit on the other side who uses the “control” as his instrument for communicating with the medium—it is seen that the possibilities of confusion, and of conscious or unconscious deception, are very great. Hence the need of the evidence being carefully tested and weighed by scientifically trained experts, and the scientific expert in this case is the experimental psychologist and the mental specialist. Especially is this latter caution needful today in this post-war time when so many desolate and bleeding hearts are turning wistfully in this direction for possible comfort in their bereavement and sorrow.

II

The phenomena investigated by psychical research, the facts of hypnotic suggestion, telepathy, clairvoyance, and such like, have revealed new and previously unthought of possibilities in the world of spirit. In particular, investigations in these realms have established the power of mind to act independently of the body, and to communicate with other minds irrespective of material contact or sense connection. Experimental disproof has thus been provided of the necessary dependence of mind on the bodily mechanism of nerve and brain.

Now such a new discovery of the possibilities of mind and spirit, it is evident, may aid not a little in removing prejudice from the scientific side to the belief in personal survival of bodily death. For those who approach the subject of the future life, and of personal survival after death, from the scientific standpoint and under the influence of materialistic or semi-materialistic assumptions these spiritualistic investigations have in not a few cases as a matter of fact exercised a profound influence in modifying their previously negative or agnostic attitude to the subject. So it has been, for example, in the case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, one of the most recent distinguished converts to this faith, as witnessed by his own striking confession in *The New Revelation*, pp. 17ff.

“When I had finished my medical education, in 1882, I found

1. The “Communicator,” can sometimes, it would seem, act directly on the medium without the interposition of a “control”.

myself like many young medical men, a convinced materialist as regards our personal destiny.....When it came to a question of our little personalities surviving death, it seemed to me that the whole analogy of nature was against it. When the candle burns out, the light disappears. When the electric cell is shattered, the current stops. When the body dissolves there is an end of the matter..... This was my frame of mind when spiritual phenomena first came before my notice.....I was amazed to find that a number of great men, men whose names were to the fore in science, thoroughly believed that spirit was independent of matter, and could survive it. When I regarded Spiritualism as a vulgar delusion of the uneducated, I could afford to look down upon it; but when it was endorsed by men like Crookes, whom I knew to be the most rising British chemist, by Wallace, who was the rival of Darwin, and by Flammarion the best known of astronomers, I could not afford to dismiss it. If mind could act upon mind at a distance, then there were some human powers which were quite different to matter as we had always understood it. The ground was cut from under the feet of the materialist and his old position had been destroyed. I had said that the flame could not exist when the candle was gone. But here was a flame a long way off from the candle, acting upon its own. The analogy was clearly a false analogy. If the mind, the spirit, the intelligence of man could operate at a distance from the body, then it was a thing to that extent separate from the body. Why then should it not exist on its own when the body was destroyed?..... There are many—*quorum pars parva sum*—who without any reserve can declare that they were turned from materialism to a belief in future life, with all that that implies, by the study of this subject."

A preparatory or prolegomenary function, accordingly, in the way of removing objections from a naturalistic, scientific standpoint, and thus clearing the ground for a more positive attitude to the idea of a future life—that at least we may recognize as fulfilled by the phenomena in question.

III

The very fact, just referred to, of the new evidence provided by psychical research investigations as to the complexity of the incarnate human mind and its possession of previously unsuspected powers and capacities makes it difficult to establish beyond doubt the reality of the alleged communications from the other side in such a way as to say that this is the only possible or even the most probable explanation of the facts in question. Not to dwell on the generally recognized fact that fraud, conscious or unconscious, has been found to play a not inconsiderable part in these enquiries, it is acknowledged by unbiased investigators of the Society for Psychical Research that many phenomena which *prima*

facie appear to be due to the continued activity of deceased persons is really due to super-normal and little understood powers of the living human personality—to “thought transference from those who are sitting with the medium or telepathy from other living persons who may know some of the facts that are automatically written” (Sir William Barrett, *On The Threshold of the Unseen*, pp. 162, 163). So Sir Oliver Lodge in the work already referred to frankly admits that “the gradually recognized possibility of what may be called normal telepathy or unconscious mind-reading from survivors raises hesitation about accepting such messages as irrefragable evidence of persistent personal existence” (*Raymond*, p. 346); cf. his earlier work *The Survival of Man*, p. 330). The most decisive or convincing evidence for spirit communication is usually found in the phenomena of “cross-correspondences” or “cross-references.” In these an often very complicated series of disjointed messages or allusions is given piece-meal at different times and through different mediums—each message or allusion fragmentary and unintelligible by itself and apart, but all capable, when the case is complete, of being pieced together so as to form a more or less coherent and intelligible message. Such a case points unmistakably, it is urged, to the influence of a single disembodied, discarnate mind acting on the different mediums or automatists. But even in such cases the judgment of the cautious investigator and inquirer may well be one of “not-proven.” It is always open to say that this is not the only possible key to the facts, and that the phenomena in question may be the result not of the influence of discarnate intelligence, but of super-normal powers of incarnate mind, our knowledge of which is as yet not sufficient to set limits to telepathic power. Until we can assign more definite limits to the possibilities of the incarnate mind, we are forbidden by the Law of Parsimony to say that any fact can be due only to discarnate influence.¹ That is to say, the phenomena in question may after all be natural, though to take them in we have to widen and enlarge our ideas of the possibilities of the incarnate mind. This point, what they call “the true case against the spiritistic view” has been admirably put by the editors of the new *Psychical Research Quarterly*, thus:

“Our knowledge of what the incarnate human mind can achieve on occasion is not yet sufficient to warrant our assigning definite limits to its powers—powers which modern psychology has already shown to be much more extensive than we once suspected. Until we can fix these limits with reasonable precision it is rash to claim

1. This same law forbids us to ascribe the facts to demonic influence, to the action of evil spirits.

that a given phenomenon transcends them and must therefore be due to discarnate influences." (Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 2, July 1920).

In every instance, accordingly, the difficulty of establishing beyond doubt the reality of the alleged communications from the unseen has to be admitted. Of course supporters of the spiritualistic view urge that the different incidents should be considered not separately but together and as a whole, and that the cumulative evidence supplied by a number of incidents may raise what is only a possible to a probable conclusion. But this argument would be valid only if the cumulative evidence served to diminish the fundamental uncertainty which attaches to each particular case; and this is what it does not do. We cannot overlook the significance of the fact that scientific experts in general remain unconvinced by the evidence. Few, it would seem, of the world's leading experimental psychologists or mental specialists are prepared to accept the theory of spirit communication. One of the latter has thus expressed himself recently: "The tricks the brain can play without calling in spiritualistic aid are simply astounding, and only those who have made a study of morbid as well as normal psychology realize the full truth of this" (1920 Report of Dr. G. M. Robertson, Medical Superintendent of the Royal Mental Hospital, Edinburgh).

IV

Even if the alleged facts were better substantiated than they generally are, and even if they admitted of only one interpretation, the further question remains whether they provide an adequate basis for a belief in personal immortality in any sense in which that belief can satisfy the longings or demands of the human spirit. On the most favorable view, they are evidence only of a continuance of conscious existence, of the departed surviving for a time at least the dissolution of the body. But in such a mere survival man has little interest or concern. The future life if it is to be of any worth or value must be a better and fuller stage of being, the development of the present life and not simply its continuance or recurrence. As Professor A. E. Taylor has put it in a fine essay on "The Belief in Immortality" in *Faith and the War* (page 130): "What has made the hope of immortality precious to mankind in its hours of peril and bereavement is precisely that immortality has always been taken to mean that it is the best features in our personality which endure in spite of the mortality of all earthly things, that in the world to come the soul will always retain its interests in Truth, Beauty and Goodness, and will be able

there to pursue the ideals as it cannot while it is hindered at every moment by the limitations imposed on its endeavors by its connection with its present body, and exposed to all the chances and changes of this mutable world."

Now the alleged communications from the other side are for the most part, as the eminent psychologist Professor William James remarked, so "trivial" and petty as to give little satisfaction to this demand. This very "triviality" of the messages supposed to be received has indeed been pointed to by spiritualists themselves as of peculiar evidential value. "Trivial personal details" says a writer of great fairness and sanity "are probably the best evidence of personal identity, far more convincing than any amount of 'solemn' religious talk." (J. Arthur Hill in *Spiritualism, its History, Phenomena and Doctrine*, p. 204). Further, it is insisted by supporters of this theory, we have to remember that it is extremely difficult for those in the spirit world to communicate at all with those still in the body, much more to represent non-earthly things in terms intelligible to those on earth. Moreover, it is said by those of this way of thinking, there are different "spheres" or planes of life on the other side, and communication seems possible only for those spirits who remain in or come back to visit the sphere or plane which lies nearest to the life on earth. These different considerations are urged by the more thoughtful supporters of spiritualism to relieve the objection commonly brought against the supposed spirit-messages on the ground of their "triviality" and pettiness. They point out too—and, it must be confessed with some justice—that it is contrary to reason to expect that death should make any sudden change in the character and interests of the individual or confer vastly greater powers of wisdom and goodness than were possessed in this life, in the way traditional Church doctrine has been apt to assume with its representation of the transference to the other side of the veil as involving either a sudden jump to everlasting bliss or a sudden plunge to everlasting woe. Rather should we expect, they say, continuity and gradation on the other side as on this, the other life being but a continuation and development under ampler conditions of the interests and activities of the present. Yet with all this one instinctively feels that messages from the unseen, if genuine, should move on a higher level and be more intellectually and spiritually edifying than they are; instead of reflecting as they almost invariably do "the commonplace thoughts of commonplace minds." They materialize the unseen, picturing the world beyond as a pale reflection of the material conditions of the present, and give no information about the conditions of life

hereafter that is beyond the powers of an ordinary human imagination to invent. Most thoughtful critics will, we think, find themselves at one with Mr. Augustine Birrell when in one of his Bristol speeches some years ago he expressed himself on this point thus:—"The records of Spiritualism leave us unconvinced. They lack the things of morality, of grandeur, of emotion; in a word, of religion. They deal with petty things, mere prolonged egoism, as if the one thing we want to be assured of is continued existence and an endless capacity to exchange platitudes. A revelation of a life beyond the grave ought surely, if it is to do any good beyond this world, to be more stupendous than that, something of really first-class importance, otherwise we are just as well without it."

V

Lastly, it may be asked is not the attempt to establish belief in immortality by such empirical experimental evidence act after all sub-spiritual, not to say sub-Christian, in its essence? Is it not to seek to attain a knowledge of spiritual facts by natural means? Spite of the name, is not spiritualism a thing essentially naturalistic or materialistic, a kind of naturalism or materialism in religion?

The only kind of immortality really demanded by the human spirit for our departed and for ourselves being, as has already been indicated, not mere continued existence but an immortality in which moral and spiritual values are conserved and developed, the roots of belief in such an immortality must be sought in the specific character of the moral and spiritual life itself and the infinite significance of the values therein expressed. Such a belief cannot be compassed by "scientific" evidence open to all obtainable through psychic methods which have little or no relation to morality. It is morally and spiritually conditioned, and rests for its assurance ultimately on faith in the power and love of God as revealed supremely in Jesus Christ. Spiritualism however—it is significant to notice—makes little of Jesus. Even God himself tends to those of this way of thinking to be pushed into the background in the excitement of supposed communications with human spirits haunting the margin of the life beyond. Communication with the dead, indeed, tends to be the enemy of communion with God. Thus it is that the term "Spiritualism" to describe the facts in question is somewhat of a misnomer; "Spiritism" is a more correct designation.

The answer we would return accordingly to the questions before us is this. For those who approach the subject of the future life from a scientific point of view, with objections derived from a mater-

ialistic or semi-materialistic standpoint, the phenomena of Spiritualism may serve a very real preliminary and preparatory function in the way of removing these objections and thus clearing the ground for a more positive attitude to the belief in personal survival of bodily death. And for others they may supply scientific confirmation or corroboration of a belief already based on deeper and more stable foundations. To this extent this line of research may be said to have added to the evidence for a future life. But in and by itself, it is insufficient to establish a satisfying belief in immortality. Hence protest must be made against the tendency manifesting itself in some quarters today to set forth Spiritualism as a substitute for religion, as a new revelation which may dispense with the higher convictions attained by more moral and spiritual means.

One thing more. From the spiritualistic claim to communication with discarnate spirits must be distinguished the Christian doctrine of communion with the blessed dead. It is indeed the undue neglect by the Church of this article of the faith—the “lost article of the Church’s creed” as the doctrine of “the Communion of Saints” has been called—that is responsible in great measure for the hold which Spiritualism has at present on many religious minds. Of the neglect or misrepresentation of this doctrine by the Church of today Sir Oliver Lodge with justice complains. “Terribly depressing doctrines about repose in graves and fleshly resurrection at some long distant day have obtruded themselves into the Burial Service and popular tradition, and have obscured the sense of Communion” (*Hibbert Journal*, Jan. 1920, p. 271). But the inter-communion between the departed and the living which we have in Christ is very different from the outward and sensible mediumistic communication of the spiritualists. It is an inward and spiritual sense of presence and fellowship acting on us, comforting us, and inspiring us often in ways beyond our discerning. And the most effective way in which the Church can combat an inadequate doctrine of communication is by recovering this truth from the neglect into which it has fallen, and thinking and speaking in a more Christian way about those who have passed on.

Have we not too?—Yes, we have
Answers and we know not whence;
Echoes from beyond the grave,
Recognized intelligence.

Such rebounds our inward ear
Catches sometimes from afar;
Listen, ponder, hold them dear
For of God, of God they are.