

THE CONSERVATION OF PERSONALITY¹

IN A series of annual lectures delivered by different persons upon the same theme, it would seem proper that each lecturer should approach the subject in the way which his special training or aptitude marks out for him. I have sought therefore to make my contribution to the purpose of the Drew Lectureship as a philosopher, and to limit myself, in my discussion of immortality, to that aspect upon which philosophy may have a contribution to make. To me this means, in particular, the combination of the widest sympathy with all aspects of human effort that can be achieved, with as strict and unprejudiced a judgment as I am capable of. This seems to entail the recognition that religion is an essential and fundamental activity of human life, in some sense more fundamental and more inclusive than any other, and that Christianity in particular, however much it may be, in its familiar expressions, infected with

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subjectivity and incapable of expressing its true nature, is the only form of religion known to us which contains within it the germs of a possible universality and is, therefore, the only religion which can claim with any significance the capacity to determine the community of all mankind. No other religion, it seems to me, could possibly face the full light of rational criticism based upon our developing science without being destroyed. Christianity, while it cannot emerge from that ordeal unchanged, yet holds within it the capacity of transformation, of a transformation, indeed, which would be the realization of its inherent nature.

On the other hand, it is not clear that a belief in the immortality of the soul is essential to the religious or even to the Christian consciousness. By this I mean merely that if it were possible conclusively to disprove personal immortality, that would not mean, *ipso facto*, the end of Christianity or of religion. Even if it did it would be incumbent upon us to stand by the truth as we discovered it. The philosopher, at least, must demand the liberty to approach this question with an open mind.

The prevalence of the belief in immortality throughout history, and among peoples of the most diverse types, is in itself no argument for the truth of the belief. For many of our beliefs are the product either of the limitations of our knowledge or of our

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hopes and fears. The former kind, if they are false, are gradually dissipated by the progress of knowledge. But beliefs which have their basis in hopes and fears which are universal are not so easily tested. And only the constant watchfulness of self-criticism continually renewed can serve as a protection against self-deception. In some sense, it would seem, the desire for immortality is and has always been very widespread. It is not necessarily, nor even primarily, a selfish desire. More often it is a desire for the immortality of others from whom death has separated us, for the opportunity to recapture and re-establish those supreme values in life which death destroys. But much deeper than the hope of a possible extension of life beyond the grave lies the universal fear of the actuality of death. The gift of reason brings with it, inescapably, the knowledge of death. And this knowledge has to be reckoned with if it is not to paralyse activity and generate an overmastering despair.

One means of escaping from fear and its paralysing effects is to succeed in ignoring or denying its object; and there can be no doubt that to a considerable extent the belief in immortality arises in this way; that it performs the function of a psychological defence-mechanism by denying in idea the fact of death and so enabling men to ignore it in their actual life. I do not contend that this is an explanation of

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the belief in immortality, certainly not that it is a complete or adequate explanation. But that it is a factor that is often present, and may always be present, it would be unreasonable to deny. If we are seeking the truth we shall have to reckon with it and be on our guard against it, since its subjective nature provides us with the wish to prove the truth of immortality and offers not even the slightest evidence for its truth. In any enquiry where our secret desires are inevitably engaged, we are continually in the danger of weighting the evidence in their favour, and it is therefore our duty, as honest searchers after truth, to spare no efforts to eliminate from our thinking the prejudices which spring from our half-conscious wish for a favourable answer.

If we are to undertake any genuine consideration of the question of immortality the first essential is that we should have faced *the fact* of death fully, frankly, and with our whole being. The natural tendency is to ignore it in practice and sentimentalize it in theory. The Biblical story of the Fall, with subtle insight, starts its account of the history of the human struggle by emphasizing this. 'Ye shall not surely die,' said the serpent to Eve, 'ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.' So she and her partner ate of the fruit and achieved the knowledge of value; and the first result was that they knew their nakedness and proceeded to hide it, and so to hide them-

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selves from one another. 'Ye shall not surely die.' That was the writer's diagnosis of the first lie, the basic self-deception from which flowed all the sufferings and evil of human life. And equally, the redemption of man in Christian doctrine is held to be rooted in the death of Christ, in His full and complete acceptance of death for Himself and for mankind through Himself. There is, therefore, a devil's doctrine of immortality to be reckoned with in the voice that speaks within us and says: 'Ye shall not surely die. Death is an illusion. It is not really death.' Until that lie is finally slain in our own hearts, until with all our being we accept death as a reality, we cannot hope to find eternal life, or even to bring an unbiased mind to the consideration of its possibility. For until we have really accepted death as one of the divine ordinances for human life, any doctrine of the immortality of the soul can only be another self-deception, another expression of our desire, in the face of the knowledge of good and evil, to hide our own nakedness from one another and from God. We must start any honest enquiry with the full recognition of the truth that the writer of the third chapter of Genesis puts into the mouth of God: 'Ye shall surely die.'

On the other hand, this assertion itself may be equally an effort to escape from the realities of our human situation. The denial of the immortality of

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the soul, quite as much as its assertion, may itself be subjective and may disguise an effort to ignore the realities of life. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' seems at first sight to involve the acceptance of our mortality. In fact, it does nothing of the sort. In that sense, all of us, whether we believe in immortality or deny it, accept the fact of death. But while one man may seek to escape from the fact by denying it—the attitude this which says 'Ye shall not *surely* die'—another may attempt to forget it by concentrating his attention upon, and engrossing his mind with, the momentary business of living. In both cases there is an intellectual assent to the fact of death, and a practical refusal of it. Both are acting as if the fact of death could be ignored in the business of living, as if it were not an integral part of life itself, and therefore could be discounted. Both attitudes involve pretence and self-deception.

For the *reality* of death is bound up, as the account of the Fall in Genesis insists, with the knowledge of good and evil. The assumption underlying both attitudes can be expressed in the hypothetical proposition: 'If death is real, life is meaningless.' But while one attitude denies the consequent, the other affirms the antecedent. The first says: 'Life is not meaningless, therefore death is not real.' The second says: 'Death is real, therefore life is meaningless.' The practical conclusions are different. The first goes on

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to assert that since death is unreal we can go on living by values which take no account of death. The second, having denied the significance of life, asserts that the only thing to be done is to live in a way that ignores values. The first is seeking to live by unreal values, since values which involve the ignoring of death must be unreal. The other seeks to live by the denial of all values, and, since that is impossible, it also is committed to unreality. The knowledge of good and evil can no more be escaped than the reality of death.

I have insisted on this point, by way of introduction, because it defines the personal approach to the question of immortality through which alone it can be made a real question or have any relevance to the realities of life. We must accept death first and completely; *then* we may go on to consider, with unbiassed minds, the question of immortality.

There has been in recent times a growing disbelief in the immortality of the soul. The main reason for that, so far as I can see, is one which is completely irrelevant. It is simply the shift of interest to the pressing problems of the world around us. Through the advance of scientific knowledge we find ourselves able, for the first time in history, to believe in the possibility of creating, in this world, the conditions of a satisfactory temporal existence. Whether we are right or not is neither here nor there. The point is

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that for the first time it is possible really to think so and to act on the thought. This means that one of the strongest motives for turning our attention to the possibility of a life hereafter which should compensate for the deficiencies of this life is removed. We are more inclined to concentrate on the immediate problems of temporal existence. But though this will explain to a large extent the disappearance of an effective belief in immortality, it has obviously no bearing upon the truth or falsity of that belief.

On the other hand, the development of science, particularly of physical science, has created an attitude of mind which makes it increasingly difficult to conceive a personal immortality. The main consideration which I wish to offer in this lecture is my conclusion that the so-called scientific evidence against the belief in immortality, though it necessarily makes havoc of certain traditional forms of the belief, is yet irrelevant to the main issue. This, of course, does nothing to establish the truth of immortality. It merely shows that most of the grounds on which immortality is denied rest upon a fundamental misconception.

We are so accustomed to think that science is knowledge that we overlook the fact that it *presupposes* knowledge. We have an immediate living experience of the world which is both more primitive and more concrete than any knowledge which is the

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result of deliberate reflection. Upon this all scientific knowledge is based. And this knowledge science can never deny without cutting the ground from under its feet. That life-knowledge not merely furnishes the basis upon which all science depends, but it differs in important respects from all other knowledge. In particular it has a completeness and reality about it which can never be achieved by reflection. For reflection forces us to disrupt the unity of life, to select one or another aspect of it, and put the others aside. The basic knowledge which is the soil in which all the achievements of science are rooted depends for its compulsive force upon the full relation between ourselves and the world. Primitively, we know things as we know persons, by loving or hating them, by living with them, by using them, by co-operating with them in practical life. And this knowledge is, in the last resort, the criterion by which all scientific theories are judged, as it is the reality to which they refer.

It is not merely in a general way that this living knowledge of things is presupposed in all scientific investigation, but also in particular detail. All the presuppositions which underlie science are derived from and verified in it. One of these, in particular, I should like you to notice. Science assumes the right to generalize from the observation of particular instances, to assert that what it finds in the individual

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reveals the nature of the universal. For this assumption there is no abstract logical basis. It arises from, and finds its justification in, that knowledge of the world which we have in the immediate experience of living. The thought of generalizing could never arise were it not for the fact that in our living we are immediately aware of the infinite in the finite. The infinite, which reflection can only represent as lying at the end of an interminable series, as being other than anything we can comprehend or express, is directly experienced everywhere and always in our unreflective activities. The effort of science to reach beyond the particularity of things to the universal laws which they express, is only an effort to reproduce in reflection the infinite which is known, face to face, in immediate experience.

On the other hand, science is only one form, and a limited form, of reflective knowledge. It seeks to understand things, in so far as they are material, that is to say, in so far as they can be measured and submitted to mathematical analysis. You will notice that I do not say that science is interested only in material things. For all things that we know are material, and nothing that we know in our immediate and concrete experience is merely material. Science is interested in everything in its material aspect, in everything so far as it is material, that is to say so far as it is stuff, so far as it can be manipulated and utilized. Be-

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yond that its investigations do not, and cannot, go. Now, if we take these two points together, we shall see that the infinite appears in scientific knowledge only in so far as it is material. That aspect of the infinite, as we are aware of it in life, is infinite Space-Time, and it is represented in reflective thought by the concepts of matter and energy, so that it comes about that the only *scientific* conception of the infinite is the idea of it as the complex of matter and energy, of which all individuals, so far as they are material, are particular expressions. In accordance with this conception of the infinite, the postulate of scientific investigation must be the doctrine of the conservation of matter and energy.

I have tried to indicate that the justification of scientific belief in the conservation of matter is only to be found in our immediate awareness of the infinite in the finite, so far as it is material. But that primary knowledge of the infinite is not confined to the material aspect of the world. In our immediate knowledge both of finite life and of finite personality we are aware of the infinite in other aspects. The taproot of all scientific objection to a doctrine of personal immortality lies in the limitation of the infinite to its material aspect; or, at least, in the belief that the conservation of matter is the essential basis of such conservation as we experience above the material level. I want now to attempt to indicate

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that this limitation rests upon a misunderstanding.

All materialism which has any scientific basis implies the indestructibility of the elementary particles of which matter consists. How these elementary particles are described in current theory is irrelevant. The unit-realities of the material aspect of the world must be, on any scientific theory, imperishable. But what we call a *thing*, so far as it is material, is not imperishable, and its destruction is the disruption of the structure which holds together, in a spatio-temporal order, the unit particles of which it consists. There is, therefore, a sense in which everything material is imperishable. The matter of which it consists, and which is its only reality, so far as it is merely material, is immortal. So much the scientific materialist will admit. But he will go on to point out that the death of a living creature involves its dissolution into the material elements of which its body is composed, and that, though these elements are eternally conserved, the creature itself, as a temporary complex of these indestructible elements, cannot persist when the complex is disintegrated. Now this is undoubtedly true. But beyond and above this there remains something which is unexplained. I refer to the conservation of life in actual experience. Life is maintained from generation to generation through the processes of reproduction. And these are an essential feature of organic life. Certainly there is no

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ground for believing that a plant or animal is conserved as an individual beyond the time of its death. But life itself is conserved in the reproduction of new individuals from the old, and, whatever this conservation of life may be, it is certainly not the conservation of the material particles of which the individual's body is composed. There is, therefore, in the universe a conservation of life which is quite distinct from the conservation of matter.

The only point to which I would invite your attention in this connexion is that, within the limits of the life of an individual organism, the conservation of life does not depend upon the persistent identity of its material elements. On its material side life is a process of metabolism, in which the material elements of the body are being continually changed. It is probable that after a lapse of some years the unit-particles which originally composed the body of an organism have been entirely replaced by others. Yet the life of the organism has been conserved throughout the process. The dissolution of the material complex, so far from being identical with the death of the organism, is an essential element in its life. Thus, though it is true that the individual organism is not conserved beyond the point of death, it is also true that its death does not consist in the dissolution of the material complex which is its body. That dissolution is the *result* of the cessation of life. And the

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cessation of life is the cessation of the processes by which the continual dissolution of the body is continually overcome. The conservation of life, as we know it in experience, consists in the temporal continuity of functional processes which maintain and develop a form, independently of the identity of the matter in which that form is exhibited.

If we now turn to our experience, not of life, but of personality, we find again that it involves an immediate awareness of the infinite in the finite. Just as we experience infinite space in our experience of finite material objects, or the infinity of life in our experience of finite organisms, so we experience infinite personality in and through our experience of finite persons. And as a result of this there arises in reflection the problem of the conservation of personality. The immediate fact which confronts us in experience is the fact that personality is conserved throughout the life of any finite person. The question of personal immortality is directly related to the experience of the actual conservation of personality throughout the organic process of life. The ordinary way of raising the question is to ask: 'Does personality survive bodily death?' This question, largely because of its associations, is apt to be misleading. And I should like to raise the problem in another form. 'Does the conservation of personality, as we experience it in personal life, consist in or depend upon the

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conservation of the life of the organism?' If there is reason to conclude that it does not, then the question of the immortality of the soul will remain an open question. It will not be solved. But it will be released from all entanglement with questions about the conservation of organic life. In other words, the fact of bodily death will have been shown to be irrelevant to the question of personal immortality, just as we have seen how the fact of the conservation of matter is irrelevant to the question of the conservation of life.

The conservation of anything is a matter of its relation to time, and, therefore, the question 'How is personality conserved?' rests upon another question: 'How is personality related to time?' If we revert to the question of the conservation of matter, we can see that matter is conserved because the individual particles of which it consists are independent of time. They do not change. Matter, therefore, is sub-temporal. This is to say that, from the standpoint of the real units of matter, time does not exist. They are the same, identical with themselves and unchanged, at all times. But this is not true of life. Life is essentially a temporal process depending upon a functional continuity in time. Any break in the temporal continuity in the life processes means the death of the organism. On the other hand, the conservation of life in the individual is not the persistence of a changeless self-identity. Life itself is a process of change or

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growth, and the infinity of life is that eternity of growth from generation to generation which we call evolution. The relation of organic life to time is, therefore, the most intimate relation possible. Time is of the essence of life. And life is essentially temporal. It is for this reason that the eternity of life can only be achieved through the continual reproduction of new individuals and new species. To say that life is essentially temporal is to say that organisms are essentially mortal, and that death is an essential element of organic life.

What we have now to ask is whether the relation of personality to time is of the organic type. If it is, there can be no personal immortality. If it is not, there may be. We can put this question in another form. 'Does the conservation of personality as we know it in finite experience depend *essentially* upon the continuity of temporal processes?' To that question I cannot profess to offer any conclusive answer here. But I should like to remind you of certain features of personal experience which suggest that it does not. In doing this I shall resist the temptation to refer to any but strictly normal experience. The field of abnormal experience is full of suggestive material, but I think that so far as research has yet gone such material is rightly suspect. I shall refer first to the familiar experience of sleep and unconsciousness. In sleep the normal processes of organic

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life go on. If they did not, we should die. But personality is in abeyance. Yet as soon as we recover consciousness we are immediately aware that personality has been conserved across the time-gap. To this extent, then, the conservation of personality is independent of temporal continuity. Personality does not fail to be conserved when there are time-gaps in personal consciousness.

In the second place, personality is bound up with the nature of rational consciousness. And this involves the capacity, as Plato put it, 'to look before and after'. This ability to transcend in consciousness the experience of the immediate present is a capacity, in some sense, to hold past or future existence within the limits of the temporal present, and involves a relation of the self to time which is completely different from the relation to time of either matter or organic life. For matter there is no past nor future. For life there is only a continuous advance from the present into the future. But for personality there is a freedom, in time, from time, which enables it, at least within limits, to be 'spectator of all time and all existence'. The limits of our personal consciousness extend far beyond the temporal limits of our organic life.

This obvious fact is not, as it is often represented, merely a feature of reflective thought. It is experienced in practical activity. When I determine an

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action through a memory of something that happened in my earlier experience, or through a knowledge of something that happened before I was born, there is an immediate relation between a past event and a present event. This relation is not mediated through a temporal continuity such as either mechanical or organic causality demands. It is as if in personality there lay the capacity to annihilate the time-gap separating the past from the present and to make the past, in its real pastness, an immediate determinant of the present. Here again, there is evidence that personality does not essentially depend, even in the practical sphere, upon the continuity of temporal processes.

We are familiar with experiences which we describe as living in the past or living in the future. If we consider what we mean when we use such phrases we shall find that they imply that the centre of personal life is not necessarily the temporal present. Action, so far as it is organic, must, of course, be action in the present. But a person's actions in the present, when considered not as events but as expressions of personality, may be focused and unified in an experience which is past. We know very well that the whole life of many a person is only explicable by the fact that his personality has its centre in early experience, and there are also many persons whose personal lives centre in the future and are explicable only in terms of expectation.

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All these facts and many others like them indicate that the relation of personality to time is of a peculiar type, and in particular that the personal is not essentially temporal in the way that organic life certainly is. The conservation of personality, they suggest, is independent of, and not determined by, the continuity of temporal process which is the essence of the conservation of life. They suggest that personality is super-temporal, and that, in some sense, it includes time and yet is free of the limitations which belong to what is organic, so far as it is organic. I should go further and say that they show clearly that any argument against personal immortality which involves treating personality on the analogy of organic life must involve a misconception. Since the conservation of personality is of a different order from the conservation of life, it follows that the fact of death, indeed, the fact of the necessary mortality of the organic, does not in itself imply the mortality of the person.

That is as far as I can carry the argument at present. It does not at all prove any doctrine of personal immortality, but it does clear the ground and leave the field open. It also directs attention to the proper quarter. It is upon our experience of the conservation of personality, and upon the peculiar characteristics of the relation of personal experience to time and to temporal processes, that any discussion of the

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problem of immortality must be based. It is there that the data for drawing a conclusion are to be found, and that field has up to the present remained largely unexplored. But there is one theory of immortality which is definitely ruled out, the theory which I called to start with the Devil's doctrine of immortality. It is the conception of immortality as the persistence of the *organic* life beyond the point of death. Whatever is organic is mortal. And the death of the organism is the end of the organic life. But it is not necessarily the end of individual personality, nor even of personal consciousness. For personality is not inherently in time.

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