



Human Pre-Existence

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HUMAN PRE-EXISTENCE.

I wish to state some reasons for thinking that the belief in human pre-existence is a more probable doctrine than any other form of the belief in immortality, and then to consider what would be the practical value of such immortality as it can promise us.

The most effective way of proving that the doctrine of pre-existence was more probable than other doctrines of immortality would be to prove directly that the doctrine of pre-existence was true. But it is, unfortunately, quite impracticable even to attempt this in a short paper. Few things, I think, would be more useful to the world than a comparatively simple demonstration of some doctrine of immortality. But such a demonstration, so far as I can see, is quite impossible. I do not see how it can be founded on anything short of a detailed and demonstrated theory of the relation of man to the Absolute. And such a theory can only come at the end of a complete system of metaphysics.

I must content myself with stating in a more general manner my grounds for believing that there is a much better chance of proving immortality with the addition of pre-existence than without it. There are two ways in which a proof of immortality may be attempted. The first is the directly metaphysical way. We may attempt to show that the nature of man is such that he cannot cease to exist while the universe continues to exist; or that his nature is eternal, and that an eternal nature cannot have an end in time; or pursue some similar line of thought.

In this case, as it seems to me, immortality would almost necessarily stand or fall with pre-existence. I do not see how existence in future time could be shown to be necessary in the case of any being whose existence in past time is admitted not to be necessary. If the universe got on without me a hundred years ago, what reason could be given for denying that it might get on without me a hundred years hence? Or if my eternal nature is compatible with its temporal manifestation having begun at some point of time,

could we find any reason for supposing it to be inconsistent with that nature that its temporal manifestation should cease at some point in time?

I do not see of what nature such a reason could be. It is true that the significance of order in time as a manifestation of the eternal has been but little considered. Attention to it might show us that the future stood in a different position from the past in this respect, and that, in consequence, ending stood in a different position from beginning. But no one, I believe, has yet attempted to show this.

There is another way in which attempts have been made to prove immortality. This consists in first demonstrating that the universe is the work of a benevolent creator, or has a purpose harmonious with our ideals of morality, and then saying that the absence of immortality would be inconsistent with the benevolence of such a creator, or with such a moral purpose. With such an argument as this, unending future life is in a stronger position than pre-existence. No wrong can be done to the non-existent, and it could scarcely be held as a reproach to the goodness of the universe that it had waited a long time before it produced a particular person. But, once produced, any person has certain moral claims, and if it could be shown that his annihilation was inconsistent with those claims, we could argue from the goodness of the universe to the impossibility of his annihilation.

But arguments for the goodness of the universe to the impossibility of a particular evil are always very doubtful. For it cannot be denied that some evil does exist. The ultimate nature of reality, then, is not incompatible with the existence of some evil. And when this is once admitted, it seems impossible to give an *à priori* proof that any particular evil is too bad to be consistent with the nature of the universe. We may be able to prove that a particular evil is not real, but we cannot, as far as I can see, ever prove it from the fact that it is evil.

So we are forced back on the purely metaphysical argument, and here we seem able to make no distinction between past and future. My conclusion is, then, that any demon-

stration of immortality is likely to show that each of us exists through all time—past as well as future—whether time be held to be finite or infinite.

There are some considerations which, to a certain extent, support such a view. They do not, indeed, give any reason for supposing that we have existed through all past time, but they do very strongly suggest that we existed before the formation of our present bodies.

In the first place, even the best men are not, when they die, in such a condition of intellectual and moral perfection as would fit them to enter heaven immediately—if heaven is to be taken as a state of perfection which renders all further improvement unnecessary and impossible. This fact is generally recognised, and one of two alternatives is commonly adopted to meet it. The first is that some tremendous improvement—an improvement out of all proportion to that which can ever be observed in life—is effected at the moment of death, at any rate in the case of those who die under certain conditions. For this there are, so far as I know, no arguments. The other more probable alternative is that the process of gradual improvement can go on in each of us after the death of our present bodies.

If we adopt this view, it seems to be only reasonable to take one more step, and to hold that this life will be followed by other lives like it, each separated from its predecessor and its successor by death and re-birth. For otherwise we should be limited to the hypothesis that a process begun in a single short earthly life—I use this expression for brevity to denote any life bounded by birth and death—should then be continued in one indefinitely long life, not divided by death and birth at all. And to suppose, without any reason, such a sudden change from the order of our present experience, seems unjustifiable.

Our lives, too, are not only incomplete in their results, but also very fragmentary in their nature. We continually find that a process is cut short by death—that a life holds a fault without a retribution, a preparation without an achievement, while in other cases, where the life has lasted longer,

the process is complete between birth and death. Surely the more probable conclusion is that the process which is worked out in an earthly life in the one case, will be worked out in an earthly life in the other case, even though death has intervened. Such problems as these have never been put with more force than by Browning. Both in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and in "Evelyn Hope" he adopts, at any rate for dramatic purposes, the hypothesis of a plurality of earthly lives.

Such arguments, indeed, only lead directly to a belief in our subsequent earthly lives, and not to a belief in pre-existence. But the two beliefs are very closely connected. For if a plurality of earthly lives is once granted, it would be gratuitous to suppose that this was the first of the long chain. And since even the lowest man is high above many living beings, there would be a strong reason for believing that it was in previous lives that we had gained this relative superiority.

But there are other considerations which are more important in themselves, and which bear more directly on the reality of previous earthly lives. As a man grows up certain tendencies and qualities make themselves manifest in him. They cannot be entirely due to his environment, for they are often very different in people whose environment has been very similar. We call these the man's natural character, and assume that he came into existence with it.

Now when we look at these differentiations, which we call the natural characters of men, we find that they have a very great resemblance to those differentiations which we learn by direct experience can be produced in the course of a single life. One man seems to start with an impotence to resist some particular temptation which exactly resembles the impotence which has been produced in another man by continual yielding to the same temptation. One man, again, has through life a calm and serene virtue which another gains only by years of strenuous effort. Others again have instinctive powers of judging nice and difficult questions of quality, in pictures, for example, or in wine, which place them, soon

after they have turned their attention to the subject, in a position to which less fortunate men can attain, if at all, only by the experience of years.

A still more striking instance is to be found in personal relations. Two people who have seen but little of each other are often drawn together by a force equal to that which could be generated by years of mutual trust and mutual assistance. The significance of this fact has been, I think, very much underrated. As a rule, the only case of it which is considered is the case—by no means the only one—when the attraction is between people of different sexes, and the inexplicability is then rather hastily explained as due to the irrationality of sexual desire.

Here, then, we have characteristics which are born with us, which are not acquired in our present lives, and which are strikingly like characteristics which, in other cases, we know to be due to the condensed results of experience. Is it not probable that the innate characteristics are also due to the condensed results of experience—in this case, of experience in an earlier life?

I have now done all that the limits of my paper permit me to do in the way of proof. We must pass to a question which, though it ought not to be allowed to influence our beliefs, even to the smallest extent, is nevertheless of great importance. If pre-existence is true, is it desirable? How much, from the point of view of the interests of mankind, would such an immortality as this be worth?

The most serious objection relates to memory. We do not now remember anything of any previous life. If, nevertheless, we have lived previously, there seems no reason to expect that we shall be able to remember our present life during subsequent lives. Now an existence that is cut up into separate lives, in none of which can memory extend to a previous life, may be thought to have no practical value. We might as well be mortal, it may be maintained, as be immortal without a memory beyond the present life.

This objection is sometimes carried as far as the assertion that such a state of things would not be immortality at all.

Without memory of my present life, it is said, my future life would not be mine. If memory ceases at the death of the body, I cease with it, and I am not immortal.

If each life had no continuity with its successors, and no effect on them, then indeed there would be little meaning, if any, in calling them lives of the same person. But we cannot suppose that this could be the case. If the same self passes through different lives, then any change which happens to it at any time must affect its state in the time immediately subsequent, and, through this, in all future time. Death and re-birth, no doubt, are of sufficient importance to modify a character considerably, but they could only work on what was already present, and the nature with which each individual starts in any life would be moulded by his experiences and actions in the past.

Moreover, any theory which found a place for individual immortality at all, would have, I think, to regard the universe as embodying an end, and would have to regard each immortal individual as forming part of that end. In that case, all the successive lives of each individual would have to be regarded as united by final causality. They would all be stages or factors in the realisation of one determining end. Such a process would form a unity which was more than nominal.

The further objection has been made that the re-birth of a self without a memory of its previous life would be exactly equivalent to the annihilation of itself and the creation of a new self of similar character. Now, it is argued, I should not regard myself as immortal, if I knew that I were to be annihilated at death, even if I knew that an exactly similar individual would then be created. And therefore, it is urged, re-birth without memory cannot be considered as real immortality of the self.

But the objection supposes an impossibility. There could not be another self of exactly similar character to me. For the self is not a Thing-in-Itself, whose existence is independent of its qualities. The self is a substance with attributes, and the self has no nature except to express itself in its

attributes. If, therefore, the attributes were exactly the same, the substance also would be the same, and I should not be annihilated at all. But if there were a new self, the difference of self must be expressed by some difference in the attributes. Then the new self would not be exactly similar to me, and the parallel to re-birth would fail, since with re-birth there is no interruption whatever in the continuity of the attributes. Thus the continuity of the attributes is always sufficient to preserve personal identity, not because it would be sufficient if the substance changed, but because it proves that the substance remains unchanged.

But, granted that immortality would have some meaning without memory, the question would still arise whether it would have any value. Whatever be gained in one life must necessarily, it might be said, be left completely behind us in death, for death would not only remove us from the fields of our activity, but would deprive us of all memory of what we had done. We should have to start fresh in each life, and there could be no reason to hope that our future existence would on the whole be better and happier than our present existence.

Even if this were true, immortality might still be of some value. If we hold—and I think it would be the general view—that life on the whole, as we see it around us now, was worth living, then immortality would, I suppose, be judged good, since it would give us more of life. Nor need we, then, be so much influenced in our judgment of life by the unevenness with which good and evil are distributed in it, since there would be a possibility, at least, that the inequality would disappear when all the lives of each man are taken into account. But the chief reason, no doubt, of our desire for immortality is not that it will give us more life like this, but that it will give us a better life as time goes on. We can scarcely hope that it will do this unless we can carry something of value from the present to the future.

We are not discussing the value of immortality in itself, but only the relative value of that immortality which excludes persistence of memory. We must ask, therefore, what ele-

ments of value are carried on by memory from the present to the future. And then we must consider whether they can be carried on without memory.

All questions of value are in the last resort questions of ultimate judgment as to which argument is impossible. But I think I shall be in agreement with most people when I say that memory is chiefly of value in our lives in three ways. In the first place, it may make us wiser. The events which we have seen, and the conclusions at which we have arrived, are preserved in memory, and add to our present knowledge. In the second place, it may make us morally better. The memory of a temptation, whether it has been resisted or successful, may under various circumstances help us in resisting present temptation. In the third place, it may tell us that people with whom we are now related are the people whom we loved in the past, and this may enter as an element into our present love of them.

The value of memory, then, is that by its means the past may serve the wisdom, the virtue, and the love of the present. If the past could help the present in a like manner without the aid of memory, the absence of memory need not remove the value from a succession of lives.

Let us consider wisdom first. Can we be wiser by reason of something which we have forgotten? Unquestionably we can. Wisdom is not merely, or chiefly, amassed facts, or even recorded judgments. It depends primarily on a mind competent to deal with facts, and to form judgments. Now the acquisition of knowledge and experience, if wisely conducted, may strengthen the mind. Of that we have sufficient evidence in this life. And so a man who dies after acquiring knowledge—and all men acquire some—might enter his new life, deprived, indeed, of his knowledge, but not deprived of the increased strength and delicacy of mind which he had gained in acquiring the knowledge. And, if so, he will be wiser in the second life, because of what has happened in the first. Progress, therefore, has not perished with memory.

Of course, in losing the actual knowledge he loses something. But it is sufficient if he does not lose all. Most

progress is like the advance of a tide, whose waves advance and retreat, but do not retreat as far as they advanced. And is not even this loss a gain in disguise? For the mere accumulation of knowledge, if memory never ceased, would soon become overwhelming and worse than useless. What better fate could we wish for than to leave such accumulations behind us, preserving their greatest value in the mental faculties which have been strengthened by their acquisition?

So, again, with virtue. And here the point is perhaps clearer. For it is obvious that the memory of moral vicissitudes is of no moral value except in so far as it helps to form the moral character, and that, if this is done, the memory could be discarded without loss. Now we cannot doubt that a character may remain determined by an event which has been forgotten. I have forgotten the greater number of the good and evil acts which I have done in this life. And yet each must have left a trace on my character. And so, if a man carries over into his next life the dispositions and tendencies which he has gained by the moral contests of this life, the value of those contests has not been destroyed by the death which has destroyed the memory of them.

There remains love. And here the problem is, I admit, more difficult. Firstly, because it is more important, for it is here, and not in wisdom or virtue, that I think we find, not only the supreme value of life, but also the sole reality of life, and, indeed, of the universe. And then particular loves do not submit to be taken as means, in the same way as particular cases of cognition or volition do. To forget an act of past virtue does not diminish virtue, and here, as we have seen, the loss of memory may cause no evil at all. To forget a truth does diminish wisdom, and here the loss of memory does mean an evil, but an evil which may be more than compensated by future gains—gains to which that loss may be, as we have seen, a necessary means. With love it is different. Love lost for one person can never be replaced by love felt for some one else. Every man is individual and unique, and so is the love which one man feels for another. And it is in this uniqueness—and not in any common quality

—that the value lies. I may well be consoled for forgetting in death all the truths I have known, if I believe that in my next life I shall learn others, and be better fitted to learn them. But if I am to lose the friend I have now, I shall not be consoled by the belief that I shall find fresh friends. It would be better to look forward to annihilation for both of us, than to be forced into a view which would add squalor to misery.

But if we look further we shall find, I think, that what is uniquely valuable is the relation to each particular person, and not the particular acts and feelings in which that relation is expressed. The latter, indeed, are not durable under any circumstances. Like all other events, they are continually passing away. Nor do we, I think, attach any unique value to the remembrance of them after they have passed away. Much has been forgotten in any friendship which has lasted for several years within the limits of a single life—many confidences, many services, many hours of happiness. But we do not feel that they have been lost, and that we are no better off than if they had never happened; for we know that, though they have passed out of consciousness, they have contributed to form and strengthen the living relation of the present, which is in consciousness.

We shall, if my theory is right, have many lives, perhaps many millions of lives. In each of these lives we shall meet many people, in most of them—to judge from experience—we shall love several people. Now, if the fact that I loved a person in this life gave me no reason to suppose that I should love him in any other, then the whole significance of love would be as much confined to a single life as if there were no immortality. And in that case it might, perhaps, be said that the significance of life was equally confined, and that immortality, though real, was worthless.

The chance of two people loving one another in any future life, who have loved one another in the past, must depend primarily on the conditions which determine where and how they are born in the future life. For people cannot love one another in any life unless they have met in that life. If the

conditions which determine the circumstances of birth, and through them the juxtapositions throughout life, were themselves determined by chance, or by some merely mechanical law of necessity, the probability of meeting our friends in another life must be too small to be regarded.

But such a view of the conditions would be quite unjustifiable. If we were to hold that the world was determined by mere chance, or by mechanical necessity, we should have no reason for believing in immortality at all. For neither Scepticism nor Materialism leaves any room for immortality. It can only be defended on the basis of Idealism.

If we are immortal, then, it must involve that Spirit is the dominant reality of the universe. And, if so, all that is significant and important for Spirit is significant and important for the universe. I will not here inquire whether anything has ultimate significance for Spirit except love. But it will scarcely be denied—least of all by those who feel the difficulties which I am now considering—that the significance of love for Spirit is very great. And, if this is so, then the emotional relations which exist between people must be highly significant of their real positions towards one another in the scheme of the universe.

In other words, people who love one another cannot be dependent for their proximity to each other—and consequently for the possibility of their love—on some chance or mechanical arrangement whose recurrence we could have no reason to expect. Their love is not the effect of proximity, but its cause. For their love is the expression of the ultimate fact that each of them is more closely connected with the other than he is with people in general. And proximity in a particular life, like everything else, is the effect—or, rather, the manifestation under particular circumstances—of those relations which make up the eternal nature of the universe.

If, therefore, two people love one another in this life, we have, on the assumption that they are immortal, good reason for believing that their lives are bound up with one another, not for one life only, but for ever. This would not involve their meeting in every life, any more than it would involve

that they should meet every day of each life. Love can survive occasional absences, and is often even stronger for them. And the universe is on a large scale, and might admit or require long absences. What we are entitled to believe is that, while time remains, their eternal nearness must continually find its temporal expression in proximity.

And, if friends are not to be separated, then certainly the love of one life is not wasted because there is no memory of it in the next. If by means of it we make our relations—speaking *sub specie temporis*—stronger and finer, then they will be stronger and finer at the next meeting. What more do we want? The past is not preserved separately in memory, but it exists, concentrated and united, in the present. Death is thus the most perfect example of the “collapse into immediacy”—that mysterious phrase of Hegel’s—where all that was before a mass of hard-won acquisitions has been merged in the unity of a developed character. If we still think that the past is lost, let us ask ourselves, as I suggested before, whether we regard as lost all those incidents in a friendship which, even before death, are forgotten.

I do not deny that in each particular life the prospect of the loss of memory at the end of it will *appear* to some extent a loss and a breach of continuity. In losing memory we lose that in which we have found great value. Arguments may convince us—as I have said, I think that they ought to convince us—that we do not lose all the value, or any of the highest value, but only the comparatively worthless form, a form which the lapse of years would change to a positive evil. But no doubt we shall always have a tendency to shrink from the loss of memory. Yet I believe that, as we come to understand life better, we shall shrink from it less and less.

If what I have said be true, we may, perhaps, fairly conclude that the value of immortality would not be lessened by the truth of pre-existence. For the loss of memory that it renders probable is, I think, the only ground on which the value of such immortality has been seriously questioned.

It is true that the prospect of a great number of lives—perhaps an infinite number, though this is not a necessary

part of the theory—gives us the prospect of many dangers, many conflicts, many griefs, in an indefinite future. Death is not a haven of rest. It is a starting point for fresh labours. But if the evils are extended, so also is the recompense. All the good that our folly has missed in this life, all the good from which we have been debarred by circumstances, or which we had to sacrifice when a choice between incompatible goods became necessary—for all of it we shall have another chance. And for our failures and sins there will be another chance—a chance not only of pardon, but of trying again. The conflict between good and evil in the self is never on equal ground, for the good satisfies more and more, the evil less and less, as they become better known. And so either success or failure in this life may start us in the next better fitted to succeed.

The way is long, but it can be no more wearisome than a single life can be. For with death we leave behind us memory, and old age, and fatigue. And surely death acquires a new and deeper significance when we regard it no longer as a single and unexplained break in an unending life, but as part of the continually recurring rhythm of progress—as inevitable, as natural, and as benevolent as sleep. We have only left youth behind us as we have left, this evening, the sunrise. They will both come back, and they do not grow old.

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