A REPLY

TO THE QUESTION,

"APART FROM SUPERNATURAL REVELATION, WHAT IS MAN'S PROSPECT OF LIVING AFTER DEATH?"

BY

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"It must be so——
Else whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,
This longing after immortality?"—Addison's 'Cato.'

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TWO views may be taken of man's immortality—the one, that of his passing from the present to a future life without retaining any more consciousness of having lived before than the new-born infant on emerging into the present life—the other, that of his recollecting his former existence, and, however changed, being conscious of personal identity with his former self. It is the latter only to which our hopes and aspirations are directed. To believe that we shall revive from death in total oblivion of any previous existence, would be as little consolatory as to believe that the extinction of life is final, or that the vital principle is perpetuated indeed, but absorbed in and blended with other elements of life, and destined to animate new forms of being, distinct from our personal selves.

The question, therefore, which I am requested to consider, must be, whether, excluding from the inquiry all supernatural revelation on the subject, there is any reason for believing that death is a passage to a new phase of life on which we enter with the consciousness of personal identity with our former selves.

Our reasonable course is to see, in the first instance, what light is thrown on the subject by the analogy of creation. And it must be admitted that the result is
disappointing to our hopes and wishes. There is no annihilation of any part of the material universe, so far as we can observe. To suppose, indeed, that there may be, involves the further supposition that what is annihilated is simultaneously replaced by a new creation of matter \textit{ex nihilo}, equivalent to that annihilated; otherwise there would be a perpetual derangement of the system of the universe—a supposition which no one, I presume, can entertain. The process which is going on, and has gone on, as it would appear, through successive ages, is the continual disintegration of the several substances of which the world is composed, and the working them up into new combinations. Shakespeare's idea that the dust of Alexander the Great might have served for the bung of a beer-barrel is not a mere fiction of fancy, but is conformable to fact. We do not perceive, as in the case of material substances, what becomes of the principle of life; but this principle is, no less than the component parts of the human body, or of a rock or tree, a portion of the elements on which creative power is exercised. Arguing, then, from what takes place in the case of those elements which are seen and felt, to that which is not an object of the senses, we should infer that the same law of creation must be applicable to that also; unless it can be shown that there are different laws for the two. That the one is visible and tangible, the other not, is a difference which does not imply that the law of creation is not uniform.

Is there, then, in the second place, anything in man's nature which may induce us to believe that this is not so in his case, whatever may be the fate of inferior living creatures. Let us see.

Does the possession of a reasoning faculty by man give us, as some think, an assurance of this? Assuming that man alone of earthly creatures has this endowment, can we infer from it that, therefore, he is destined for immortality? I think not. The exist-
ence of a reasoning faculty in man can only characterise him as the highest in the scale of that manifold creation, the general law of which is that of a continual dissolution of its elements, and a re-combination of them. As the crumbling rocks and decaying vegetables disappear to reappear in other organisations, why not man’s vital principle, and with it all that is unseen in his nature, including his reasoning faculty, under the disintegrating process of death? Why should it not be re-combined in successive generations of all animate beings? Such undoubtedly is the law of creation; such the inference from analogy. That some portions of creation should be palpable to the senses, others not, is not, I repeat, a difference from which we can conclude that it is not so.

It is, moreover, asserting what may be questioned, to say that man only has a reasoning faculty. He has it in a much larger degree than the dog, the elephant, and some other brutes; but these others do give unmistakable proofs of being endowed with something very like it. Man is so formed as to be capable of improving the faculty to an extent that makes it appear different in kind; but it would seem to be rather a difference of degree. Supposing it to be otherwise, of itself it furnishes no sure foundation for belief in man’s immortality.

There is a surer resting-place for our hope in the desire for personal and conscious immortality which the Creator has made part of man’s nature. This does, indeed, distinguish us from all the rest of earthly creation; for no other earthly being has it, or the faintest resemblance to it; but it is not on that account that it assures us of living after death. What we have a right to argue from its existence is, that the Creator would never have made it part of our nature, if the object to which alone the desire is directed were unattainable. That desire is as distinct from the instinctive desire to preserve our present life, which we share with all our fellow-beings,
as is the object to which it is directed from the present life. As in the case of other constituent parts of man's spiritual nature, the strength and purity of this desire are different in different individuals. There is a great disparity between the desire for immortality which ennobles the civilised man, and that which is mixed in its development with gross and absurd ideas; still it is man's prerogative, and, in his higher stages of progressive improvement, becomes an assurance to him that he will survive death, and retain, in some future phase of life, the consciousness of personal identity with his former self.

The strength of the argument lies, as I have observed, in our conception of the Divine nature as revealed to us in creation. To suppose that the Creator has made man with a strong desire as part of his nature, and that the object, on which alone that desire can be exercised, does not exist, is as inconsistent with what we know of Him and His ways, as to suppose that He might have given His creatures eyes when there was no visible object, or ears when there was no such thing as sound.

The craving after life beyond death, with a consciousness of personal identity, does not, however, stand alone as an indication provided by the Creator, apart from any supernatural revelation, for assuring us of it. Another, the strength of which again is derived from the same impression which He has given us of His nature and His ways, is the universal craving for spiritual communion with Him. However diverse may be the shapes which the effort to satisfy this craving has taken, and still takes, they all testify to the fact, that the Creator has made the craving a part of man's nature. It is evidenced, not only by those who worship Him in spirit and in truth, but by those, too, who substitute, in various guises, the creature for the Creator; for, in all the moving impulse is a craving in man's nature after a communion beyond that with his fellow-men, a feeling after God—to
borrow the expressive language of the Apostle Paul—if haply they may find Him.

Is the object to which this desire is directed ever attained? Is it ever fully attained even by the most enlightened? No doubt it prompts them to pray; no doubt in the act of praying are comprised some of the essentials of a real intercourse with Him who thus draws us unto Him, such as the petitioning for good things, and against evil things; for pardon of offences; for comfort under affliction; praise and thanksgiving; and, intermingled with all this, a yearning after God Himself, a striving to penetrate the barrier that separates Him from our sight, our hearing, our outward senses. But this is not communion. It is defective in that which is essential to communion, essential to the fulfilment of that natural desire which prompts man thus to do his part towards it. There is no reciprocity. The worshipper is not conscious of any corresponding address to him from Heaven; he is not made conscious even of being heard. If his heart burns, at times, with a holy glow, and this appears to him to be a divine response, can it be adduced as a proof that God is listening and responding, even thus indistinctly and inarticulately, and not the result of the soul’s ardent desire to reach that which is its object, albeit an object not to be fully realised in our present state of being?

Nor does it affect this statement, that Christians, having learnt to believe that God does listen to prayer, and does, in some way, answer it, substitute faith for conscious fruition of a Divine intercourse with them when they address Him. That faith may entitle them to apply the term communion to their devotions; but it is obviously not the interchange of communication which we call by that name when we speak of intercourse between man and man; not that to which the yearning of our hearts, made part of our nature by God, is directed; and which cannot be satisfied until a mighty change takes place in our
condition, of which our present life exhibits no sign. The Apostle Paul, whose faith was fervid, if ever man's was, described it, after all, as seeing through a glass darkly, and longed for that true and full communion which he contrasts with it as the seeing God face to face. (1 Cor., xiii. 12.) Until that blessed consummation of our desire, we are fain to cry out with the Psalmist, "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God." (Ps. xlii. 2.)

The acts of devotion to which we are prompted by our natural constitution, would seem to be rather a training of that particular part of it, the desire of communion with God, in order to prepare us for a future intercourse with Him, in some future stage of our being, a nourishing of a desire, which not being fulfilled in this life, must have its fulfilment in a future life; if, as we presume, the Creator creates nothing in vain.

This desire is, moreover, closely connected with that for personal and conscious immortality. When our thoughts extend beyond the grave, our future life is ever associated with a revelation of God's presence. The lower the condition of man in the scale of humanity the less he has of this ingredient in his hope of immortality. It becomes more and more prominent as he ascends to a higher and yet higher condition of being; indicating that it is designed for further and further development, as the rest of our nature progresses from stage to stage towards its perfection. Contemplating man with the effect produced on him by the working of both—the craving after immortality, and after God—we recognise a spiritual element in his composition, of which no other earthly being partakes, and which connects man alone with a future life and with his Creator in that future life.

There is this peculiarity, too, about Man which, if there is no future state for him, makes him an anomaly in creation. In all other living creatures
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completeness characterises the Creator's work, in man incompleteness. Beasts, birds, fishes, reptiles, all would seem to be now what they were from the first of their being; and even the domestic animals, with all the modification of their nature which is the result of their domesticity, cannot be said to be an exception. The case is the same with respect to man's material organization; but the reverse with respect to his spiritual element. The individual is almost a different being according as his spiritual part has been cultivated by education and other social influences; progress of the inner man marks the history of the human race; and still there must ever be an incompleteness in the work of his Creator, until he reaches that further stage of existence in which the desires that distinguish him from all other animate beings on earth shall be provided with their appropriate objects, and shall be fully developed in the realization of those objects.

There is no reason, when this view is taken of Man's spiritual part, why we should not include in it the acquirements both of his intellectual and of his moral nature. Can the stores which are accumulated through the exercise of our understanding, our heart, our moral sense, be destined ultimately for waste? It may be said that they will have served certain good and great purposes both for the individual and for the human race in its progressive improvement. Still, is it not more probable that, beyond this their first application, they will be carried on so as to form an elementary stage in Man's progress, when he enters on that new and future life, than that they will be cast away with the material substances in which his spirit is now clothed? If, as the preceding considerations dispose us to hope and believe, Man is to pass through death to another condition of being, when he revives, which is the more likely—that he will revive divested of these acquirements, intellectual and moral, or that they will
still be his, will constitute his personal identity, and will only be changed, or pass away, as he advances from that, his second infancy, to another maturity? Of itself this consideration is no proof of a future state; but, once assured that a future life must be our destiny, these acquirements, these intellectual and moral habits and attainments, would certainly seem a fit preparation for entering on it. The present cultivation of our intellect may be the foundation of its exercise on the divine nature more clearly revealed to us, and on the now hidden marvels of creation; whilst habits of justice, mercy, truth, charity, may be incipient qualifications for higher and higher destination in the boundless sphere of being. And if so, the opposite habits may lead to a lower and lower allotment; neither perhaps final; but one stage onward in a progressive life which, once begun, is never to end.

Incompleteness must be imputed to the Creator, in respect of his creature Man, in another and a very important point of view, if there is no future state for him. There are inequalities in the divine government of the world, which would seem to be inconsistent with the divine nature and attributes as otherwise made known to us, unless there is another life to complete the present, in which those inequalities are to be redressed. To suppose that it may be otherwise, is to suppose that God, who has impressed on our moral nature an estimate of justice as that which is right and good, and of its contrary as that which is wrong and evil, should either ordain or permit in-justice in any of his providential dealings. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis xviii. 25.) “Man’s life is incomplete on earth” is the only escape we have from the doubt. “In another life, what would be unequal and unjust if life ended with death, will be re-adjusted, and made conformable to perfect justice.” It is the less necessary to dwell on this argument, because it is one with
which all who have reasoned on the natural probabilities of Man having a future life, are familiar. It is not the less valid on that account, whether we consider it alone, or as strengthening, by combination, those other arguments which I have been pointing out, and which, although they come more directly home to us, being drawn from our constitution as men, do not appear to be so generally recognised. It is not, however, by dwelling on this or that indication alone, that the prospect of living after death assumes clearness and something like certainty. That prospect brightens, and its outlines become more strongly defined, when we regard each indication as part of a natural, but not the less divine, revelation of a truth which is to encourage us in our path through this life, to console us under its trials, and to infuse hope into the prospect of death itself. When we say within ourselves, is it conceivable that the Creator has made a craving after future life, and after Him, a part of Man, and that the appropriate and only objects of these cravings are unattainable by Man? another voice within us seems to take up the words, and say, "And is it conceivable that the all just God should not have provided an after-stage of Man's existence, to redress the apparent inequalities of his government of Man during his present existence? When completeness characterises his other works and ways, is it probable that his dealings with Man, and with the nature which he has given him, should be left incomplete, by death being made the boundary of his existence?"

There are other arguments which I forbear from dwelling on, because, although to some they may appear to have weight, they will be found, I think, on due reflection, to be inapplicable. Such is the argument that the spiritual part of Man must survive the body, because, whilst the body decays, the spiritual part retains its vigour. The assertion itself is not borne out by fact. It often happens, on the contrary, that
the decay of the mind outstrips that of the body; and it is seldom, indeed, that, in extreme old age, the mind retains all its former vigour. Moreover, the analogy of nature would forbid us to make much of the phenomenon, were it otherwise. In the disintegration of those compound substances which are the objects of our senses, we observe no uniformity in the dispersion of the compound elements; some preceding others in their decay and disappearance as often as not.

There is one additional argument, however, on which I will venture to touch, although it is one on which, apart from the foregoing, no stress could be laid. It is the belief in the occasional apparition of dead men. This belief may be a mere delusion; and, unquestionably, ghost stories are less and less frequent as the age and country become more and more enlightened. Nevertheless, that there should be such a belief, and that it should be found in every age and country, and that even now, and amongst ourselves, there are not a few who entertain it, can only be explained by the existence of that strong yearning after another state of being, which, as in other instances, substitutes an unreal object, the creature of imagination, for a reality which is inaccessible. It is, in short, one more evidence of the strong craving after that future world of continued life which God has made part of our nature, and which is so powerfully active as to anticipate its object.

Do these considerations suffice to satisfy us? The reply of the enlightened reasoner may be, "They satisfy me, because my education and habits of thought qualify me to estimate them; but what of the great mass of mankind? If the Creator designed that his very creation should convey an assurance to his creature, Man, of a life for him beyond death, is that purpose fulfilled, seeing that a great proportion of mankind are incapable of appreciating the indications? That they are incapable is undoubtedly true;
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that their prospect of a future life, if they have it, is not based on a process of reasoning, is most true. Yet, as a general rule, they do have it; whence is it? The ready reply will be, "From the supernatural revelation conveyed to them through God's Word in Scripture." This, to a certain extent, is so; but that revelation would be inoperative on their hopes and fears if it found nothing already in their natural constitution which responds to it, which assimilates it to their instinctive impressions, and converts what would otherwise be a lifeless creed into a living belief. The fact is, that the strong craving after life beyond the grave, together with that other strong desire which acts in unison with it, create the belief in man, even when he has not reasoned on it. It is so because the Creator designed that it should be so. As man becomes more enlightened, he mistrusts impressions so formed, and is not satisfied unless he can bring them to the test of reasoning; and to him, accordingly, considerations such as we have been dwelling on, are then necessary. And thus it happens that the transition from the impressions made without reasoning to reasoning on them, is commonly a state of doubt, which is cleared up, or otherwise, according as these impressions are confirmed or not, by the test to which the inquirer subjects them, and to his mode of applying it.

I ought not to conclude without adding a word or two respecting the place which supernatural revelation occupies in the argument. Excluded though it is from the present inquiry, if regarded in the light of a separate and distinct assurance of the truth at which we have otherwise arrived, we may ask, Is the reception of such a revelation by generations of men, in different ages and countries, and with different habits of thought, possible, if God had not created Man with a craving after the truth, which is revealed? In short, he who rejects all supernatural revelation is not the less bound, he is perhaps even more bound,
to recognise, in its almost universal reception, an evidence that man has within him an assurance which leads him to embrace eagerly the supernatural assurance from without.

Nor ought those who rest their hope of living after death on supernatural revelation, to suppose that it can supersede and render valueless the primary revelation of our Creator in the creation of Man. This last would seem to have been interwoven with our nature, in order that it may be a Scripture, indelible, and universal, subject to none of the misapprehension which may affect an external revelation, exempt, too, from the doubts which may assail the mind, as questions are raised, from time to time, affecting the channels through which that external revelation comes to us.

Happy is he who, relying on a supernatural revelation, finds himself free from misgivings, as he draws nearer and nearer to

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns—

to certify to him that there is light and life beyond it. Happy is he, too, who can silence misgivings by the consciousness that our fatherly Creator has so fashioned his creature Man, as to make him a revelation to himself of this momentous truth, that his present life is a preparatory stage to another, and that his condition in that future stage cannot but be essentially affected by the preparation that is made for it now.