

MYSTICISM AND IMMORTALITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE question of immortality has been moving mankind, and will not down. Freethinkers, rationalists, heretics, infidels, have again and again pointed out that the whole human organism falls to pieces in death. Men have become more and more acquainted with the scientific facts of life as a process, of consciousness as a function, of the soul as a product of a cooperation of nervous activity; and yet the notion of an immortal soul inheres firmly in the minds of the people. A radical thinker like Schopenhauer, who did not believe either in God or in a personal immortality, devotes a whole chapter to the indestructibility of our inmost being, and he takes it for granted that every living creature is ensouled with the idea of its own permanence, with the indestructibility of itself. It is almost impossible for any man to think of himself as non-existent, and we ask, Is this feeling mere illusion, or is there a truth at the bottom of it?

As instances of these tendencies apparently inherent in the constitution of human beings, we publish in the present number two articles of thinking men both of whom we need not doubt to be honest seekers after the truth, and both hold their views because they have paid close attention to the problem and cling to their belief in immortality in spite of the objections that can reasonably be offered by the natural sciences on the grounds of careful observation and close arguments.

In our opinion there is a deep truth in man's conviction of the indestructibility of his inmost being. The truth is that whatever exists is a fact, and a fact remains. We all know that substance and energy are indestructible, but in addition to this law, there is a law of the preservation of form. Form is not indestructible, but after all it has a tendency to persist; its trace, especially in the living substance of organisms, remains though it may be modified,

and thus it will influence all other formations which will be superimposed in the course of events. This means that whatever is done is embedded in existence, it leaves a trace and though this trace may be modified, and have other traces superimposed on it, it has become (be it in ever so insignificant a manner) a part of the constitution of being and will remain such forever and aye.

Let us grant here at once that the preservation of traces is different according to conditions. Words written in water will be illegible the next moment, and the preservation of the shape of a billow on the ocean will be so utterly negligible that its effect matters very little except so far as the formation of shores is concerned. It makes no difference to the future commotions and storms on the ocean itself. To be sure the effect of everything remains, but for certain considerations it will be absolutely lost, just as much as the light of stars which existed thousands of years ago conveys at a further end of the cosmic system of our starry heavens no meaning of intellectual life, none, for instance, of the aspirations which took place on its planets.

More persistent however in their way are the commotions that take place in a man's brain. They are insignificant so far as matter and energy are called into play. Certainly they are puny in comparison to the enormous force displayed in the descending water-drops of Niagara Falls, and they are very small in the amount of material constituents which their activity stirs in the brain; yet they are highly efficient in ulterior results by stirring up through the medium of communication, through spoken or printed words, other cerebral structures in the brains of other people, and the ultimate result may be the building of extensive railroad highways, or the removal of mountains, the connection of waterways between oceans, or the improvement of the conditions of large multitudes of mankind. It is not the amount of energy which is first to be considered, nor is it the volume and weight and mass of substance which challenges out attention, but it is the possibility of imparting direction, of marshalling the forces of nature and making them subservient to our purpose; and this is not a question of energy, as the philosophy of energeticism would have it, nor of matter, as the materialists think, but as we insist, of form. Life is a forming and re-forming, and the significance of form ought to be the first question of every philosopher to be answered; it is the first problem to be solved and the indispensable condition for an understanding of the constitution of existence.

It is here in the nature of form that our own solution of all the

philosophical problems centers, and so we might call our own philosophy a philosophy of form. This philosophy is intended to be, not the philosophy of a single thinker but the philosophy of science, of an objective statement of knowledge, of a knowledge that ought to be acceptable to every one, whatever attitude he may take toward life and the universe.

The term philosophy is used in a narrower sense and in a broader sense. In the narrower sense it is an objective statement of a systematized knowledge at our command. It is a world-conception digested from the data furnished by science on the basis of our experience, and we call it the philosophy of science. If science exists there must be a philosophy of science. If a philosophy of science is impossible there can be no real science, and in place of definite, positive and unquestionable science we can have mere opinions, more or less probable conjectures.

In a broader sense philosophy is not objective knowledge of the world, but a subjective attitude toward it, and in this sense we may have innumerable philosophies, optimism, pessimism, meliorism, sentimentalism, and mysticisms of different shades, all of them being justified as much as any kind of art may give expression to our sentiments. Every poem, every sonata or every landscape, a painting of any mood or *Stimmungsbild*, has its place as a description of our temperament, our satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life or the universe. Sentiments know of no logic and any kind of sentiment is a world of its own.

The question is whether philosophy in the first sense is possible at all or not; and we believe that it is. All the philosophies in the second sense have a right to exist, and philosophy as a science, as the science of sciences, has no quarrel with any of the others unless one of them usurps the place of the philosophy of science and would regard it as a mere dream just as are the philosophies in the broader sense themselves.

Now to come back to our problem of immortality. Considering the fact that everything that exists is possessed of permanence, we can very easily understand that every form of existence if possessing consciousness feels itself to be a part of the great universe, and has the immediate feeling of persistence, yet this is one side of the truth only; there is the other side to be considered. At the same time with the assurance of our existence we feel the factors of our surroundings which are constantly at work to modify our being. Thus we might as well say that together with the feeling of the indestructibility of our inmost being there is a constant fear

of suffering violence from the outside. Every one perceives the changes that are wrought upon him, some of them welcome and affording the feeling of an expanse, and some of them unpleasant arousing the fear of modifications so radical as to be equivalent to destruction. In insisting on the feeling of the indestructibility of ourselves, Schopenhauer ought also to have borne in mind the consciousness of this constant modification which at certain moments reaches a climax in a terrible fear of death.

We claim that the nature of form will reveal to us the true nature of our being. Many make the mistake of searching for a solution of the riddle of the universe either in the nature of matter or of energy and will finally come to the conclusion that neither can be known. We see no problem in either matter or energy. Matter is simply the reality of existence, energy its actuality in the sense of activity. There is no mystery in either except the blunt fact to be stated in the tautology that existence exists. There is no possibility of getting anything more out of it. As soon as we want an answer to any question why? we can expect an answer only from a tracing of form. If we shall ever be able to understand how and why this natural world developed from some non-material potential substance—say, for instance, from ether—we must expect the answer to be a theory explaining how according to the laws of form the potentialities of a nondescript substance shaped itself into concrete atoms, into whirls, ions, or whatever we may call them. The laws of form are the key that unlocks the doors of all the secrets of nature; they are the revelations of the cosmic order, they are the eternal source through which reason develops, they furnish us with the foundation of science.

We ourselves are forms, and we continue as forms. Goethe proclaims the significance of form in a poem entitled "One and All" where he says:

"In active deeds life proves unfolding,
It must be moulded and keep moulding."

The most obvious feature of the world is the constant flux in which things appear to us and the flux is conditioned by changes of form. As soon as our systematized experience, called science, begins to understand the nature of being it discovers this truth of the significance of form, which, however, is first formulated negatively in the great axiom, or postulate, or doctrine, or principle, or whatsoever you may call it, that the sum total of matter remains unaltered. This is negative, for it means that nothing originates,

nothing disappears. The substance of the world in its ultimate constituents remains the same for ever and aye. But we ought to state it in positive terms, saying that "all that happens in the real world of facts is a change of form," and so the task of science will forever remain a tracing of changes of form. At the same time all the artist can do is to form substances to represent ideas and ideals, in bodily appearances either with paints on the canvas or in corporeal shapes in marble or wood, or in thoughts or words, or in any other way. The task of practical life is to mould things that are useless so as to make them useful, to create formations with purpose and with meaning, to describe the facts of existence in a methodical system so as to afford us a reliable survey over the world in which we live and move and have our being.

There is no province in life where the essential task would not consist in giving a new shape to things. Our very ideas are forms, and the creation of new conditions is nothing but re-forming.

The wonder is that form, this most significant feature of the world, is at bottom a simple and most indubitable, most obvious and most undeniable condition which really is in every detail a matter of course. The sciences of forms and of pure forms can be built up in purely mental constructions on the basis of general abstractions by positing units for arithmetic, by constructing figures through mere abstract motion, and by developing the laws of thought according to the principle of consistency in logic; and these sciences of pure forms exhibit to us the results of consistency in universal terms for universal application in fields of any real or fictitious formation. Since they apply to any kind of possible existence, they are applicable under all circumstances. Kant calls this mental construction by the term *a priori* because we assume them to be valid before our experience begins; they condition experience and they are the tools of our mind. The theorems of our formal sciences are intrinsically necessary, which means, according to the simple principle of consistency, they cannot be otherwise, and being universal they dominate any and therefore all the formations which we meet in experience.

Now there are some people like Omar Khayyam who complain that everything is form and we vanish into nothingness like bursting bubbles, while on the other hand there are men of energetic deeds and poetic strength, men like Goethe who, knowing that the nature of all existences is in their forms and that we ourselves are forms, take up the duties of life and put all their energy into forming the world as they find it into a more suitable abode and

enjoy continuing to live in their work. For such as we are, and such forming as we have done according to the nature of our being, such results will remain after us, and here is the immortality which we feel is ours, which nobody can take from us, and which cannot be denied by any one, be he ever so materialistic, or negative, or infidel, or pessimistic.

The common objection to this view of the persistence of form is based upon the prejudice against the significance of form. Man is so materialistic as to jump at the conclusion that pure form being neither matter nor energy is a nonentity, and that if the essence of our being is form we do not exist. The truth is that the purpose of life, if we can speak of purpose at all, appears to be the realization or actualization of such forms as we wish to be, and the endeavor to shape ourselves according to the ideal in our mind.

As says the poet Rückert:

"The type he ought to be
Each one bears in his mind;
Until that be attained
He never peace will find."

People who feel the truth of the significance of form but are unable to understand the theory and philosophy of it, give expression to their views in visions and allegories, religious doctrines and other mystical theories. They feel that the essence of their mysticism is right, and they do not object to having it clothed in poetical figures.

This in brief is the explanation of the eternal return of mystical theories, although if they are taken literally they may be objectionable as being mere poetical fancies and it is the important duty of a thinker to understand these tendencies.

From this standpoint we can be hospitable to every religion, every poetic interpretation of life, every artistic or sentimental attitude, if but the practical tendencies of these mystical world-conceptions be wholesome and if the symbols and allegories express truths. Mysticism is a mode invented by nature and mostly adopted and followed unconsciously by such souls as have no clear scientific or truly philosophical insight into the nature of existence and yet are capable of adapting themselves to conditions. Every mysticism is dangerous, because the mystic as a rule is uncritical, and the result is that his errors become superstitions which may lead to the most terrible misconduct and religious crimes. Human sacrifices and also animal sacrifices are such evil results, and the awful practices of

heresy trials and witch persecutions belong to the same category, but for all that, mysticism has often proved a very beneficent guide of religious progress. Thus the propheticism of ancient Israel, although it had its drawbacks, was upon the whole a most auspicious movement which tended in the right direction, because there is a deep truth in the idea that God is not a God that takes pleasure in full-moon festivals and in sacrifices, but is a God of justice delighting in mercy. Some mysticism may be childish but harmless, as for instance Luther's belief in a personal devil; but even such harmless notions, humorous though they are, must be regarded with suspicion because they may at any time become dangerous in narrow-minded and strong-headed persons the courage of whose conviction would not shrink from drawing the most abominable consequences.

The religious and philosophical mysticism of to-day is mostly noble and in agreement with modern humanitarian ethics. Indeed it is helpful for those who would be incapable of understanding the truth in its abstract purity. How few people can understand the awful consequences of evil, and how many need the conception of a real brimstone hell to fear doing wrong! Nature kindly provides most people with the religion they need, and nature's method is to clothe truth in the allegory of mysticism.

One of our contributors, Judge Chase, says that ninety-nine out of one hundred believe in immortality, and that may be true, but if it is true I would consider it rather as an argument against the truth of the belief than in its favor. We must remember that Galileo Galilei when positively insisting that the earth turns around the sun, was probably one man against 999,999 out of 1,000,000, and yet in the face of such and similar facts which could be multiplied by the thousands, who would venture to-day to prove truth by the democratic method of counting opinions rather than weighing them?

If we follow up the history of the belief in immortality we must bear in mind that the apologetic writers as a rule reverse the situation. They assume, without any foundation in facts, that primitive mankind knew nothing about the soul or its immortality, and that modern man by investigating the problem more and more, and by penetrating into its mysteries more and more, became more and more convinced of the immortality of the soul, and that we are gathering new evidence with the progress of science. The fact is exactly the reverse. The savage does not believe in an immortal soul; he feels absolutely convinced of it. If you ask him, he

knows that his dead are still alive in the shape of some kind of spiritual beings, for their ghosts appear to the survivors. He does not *believe* in the ghosts of the dead, he *knows* of their existence as surely as he knows of his own and his friends' actuality, for he sees the dead in his dreams, and all the visions—and in that state of development visions are much more frequent than nowadays—are to him unquestionable realities. No American Indian needs evidence, or proofs, or witnesses to prop up his belief in the existence of the soul or its immortality, because such things are matters of fact to him which he would never doubt.

Doubt and positive disbelief develop gradually and indeed very slowly, and when they take possession of man, then, and then only, are demands heard for evidences and for proofs and for arguments in favor of immortality.

By the side of the definite feeling of our positive existence and the indestructibility of our inmost being, which we do not mean to doubt and on which even Schopenhauer insists, we have the feeling which exists in some minds, perhaps in a few only, say in one mind out of a hundred, that the time will come when the world will move on in its old stable ways without us, and as such an instance we will mention William Kingdon Clifford, who wished this simple legend to be written on his tombstone: "I was, I loved, I am not."¹ So we have here the testimony of at least one man against many others who cherishes the positive opinion that after his death he will be no longer; and it seems to us that if Professor Clifford had been acquainted with the interpretation of man's persistence after death as an immortality through the instrumentality of his deeds, including his thoughts and the impression he made upon his contemporaries, he would most assuredly have granted the indestructibility of his inmost being.

The history of the idea of immortality seems to teach us a lesson and it is this: We feel that life does not begin with birth and does not end with death but has a significance beyond the span of our individual existence. This conviction is deeply rooted in our inmost being, and from it springs the belief in immortality. Man has naturally a crude notion of the nature of his own self. He misconstrues the unity of the consciousness of his personality, frequently called the ego, or the self, or the soul. He naturally considers it as the essential part of his mentality, as a metaphysical

¹ I cannot verify this epitaph, and have since found another version of it which reads thus: "I was not and was conceived; I lived and did a little work; I am not and grieve not."

entity, as a thing-in-itself, as a being which could exist without the contents of his thoughts, aspirations, ideals and other personal attributes. This is a common mistake which people make in the same way as they create the notion of things-in-themselves, and in every-day speech man is accustomed to saying, "I have ideas," "I cherish the intention," "I possess the conviction," while the reverse is true. If there is any ownership on either side, it is the ideas, the intentions, the convictions, that come to us or perhaps rise in us and take possession of us, understanding by the pronoun "us" our entire personality. In fact every one of us consists of his convictions. If we speak of a man we mean the sum total of his will, motives, tendencies, aspirations, his thoughts, his emotions and whatever helps to make up the combinations of his personality. We learn in the course of our deeper study of personality that such an entity as the ego or the self does not exist as a special metaphysical being. How can it be immortal? While the true essence of our being, the constituents of our soul, the truths we have recognized, the aspirations we pursue do exist and they continue after we are gone. Many of them have existed before us; they have taken possession of us and in the domain of our soul have been enriched, or strengthened, or enlarged as the case may be, and will continue in the future life of mankind after we are gone.