

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Bachelors' Theses

Dissertations, Theses, and Professional
Projects

6-1928

Is Death the End?

Edward T. O'Neill

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/bachelor_essays



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

IS DEATH THE END?

By

Edward T. O'Neill

A Thesis submitted partially to fulfill the requirements

for The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

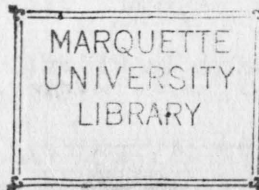
0378.23

On2

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

JUNE 1928



IS DEATH THE END?

In asking the great question, Is death the end, I understand that I am entering upon the very specific inquiry as to whether death is the end of ourselves as separate and distinct individualities. In discussing immortality, I assume that I am discussing the survival of the human soul, after the dissolution of the body, in the full retention of its conscious identity. In this I follow the same interpretation of the essential problem involved that Professor Josiah Royce lays down in his "The Conception of Immortality":

"When we ask (he says) about the immortality of man, it is the permanence of the individual man concerning which we mean to inquire, and not primarily the permanence of the human type as such, nor the permanence of any other system of laws or relationships."

It is necessary to make this preliminary interpretation clear, for in recent years, the agreement or assumption of conscious individuality in immortality has been broken. There is a theory in existence now which would make out of immortality an absorption into some sort of a "cosmic consciousness."

An analysis of the question, Is death the end, reveals four possible solutions of the problem. In the first place, death may be followed by total annihilation. Secondly, one may survive, but without any consciousness whatsoever. Thirdly one may survive with just the same consciousness of personal identity that we have today. Lastly, one may survive by being merged with, or absorbed into, the universal con-

' See The Conception of Immortality, page 2.

sciousness, whatever that may be supposed to be.

Of these four conceivable solutions, only the third involves what is rightly meant by immortality. This solution, however, gives rise to innumerable difficulties. How can personal identity be preserved apart from the body; what is there in our "consciousness" that is stable enough to survive; is not the sense of personal identity dependent upon memory, and is not memory one of the most uncertain faculties of the mind; how can we expect our consciousness or self to survive the terrific cataclysm of death, when it can be destroyed by a slight accident to the brain or a mere disorganization of the nerves; if we expect to be conscious of this life in the life to come, why are we not now conscious of the life that must have preceded this, if we are really eternal beings?

Immortality has been attacked on the grounds of its inconceivability. Naturally that which is, by the very nature of its reality, beyond the bounds of experience, must be inconceivable, but cannot, therefore, be denied because of its inconceivability. James Martineau has said; "We do not believe in immortality because we have proved it, but we forever try to prove it because we believe in it." To be persuaded, or rather dissuaded, by the difficulties that stand in the way of belief, without also surveying the difficulties that stand in the way of disbelief, is dangerous business. Certainly the difficulties on this side are just as numerous, to say no more, as they are on the other side. It is true that it is hard to believe that we are immortal. But it is also true that it is hard to believe that we are not

immortal. Evidently, then, the question of immortality is now open for consideration. We can believe in immortality if we can find any good reasons for doing so.

In the first place deep knowledge and wide thought must be regarded as authoritative in this field of speculation as in every other. The greatest thinkers, wisest sages, and most inspired prophets of all ages have believed in the immortality of the soul as one of the cardinal doctrines of human life. This agreement, of course, is by no means unanimous, as long lines of doubters from *Epicurus* to Hugo Munsterberg clearly indicate. But it is nevertheless only sober truth to affirm that the consensus of the best thought and the profoundest emotion is indubitably favorable to the idea that death is not the end.

But the question of immortality manifestly cannot be decided on the grounds just stated. It is not enough to accept fully what the great thinkers of the past have given to us, but we must also look to the considerations that induced in them the belief in the souls' immortality, and to compare, in the light of modern thought, the validity or non validity of the arguments.

Men in all ages have believed in, hoped for, and considered the immortality of the soul. This in itself does not, of course, offer a very conclusive proof for the reality of future life. But we come to a different consideration when we look upon the immortal hope not as a belief to be accepted, but as an idea to be explained. For the idea of immortality,

whatever may be said about the acceptance of the idea, is a phenomenon which is universal. The significance of this universal presence of the idea of immortality within the human mind, as an intimation of a reality corresponding to the idea, has ever been apparent to the prophetic mind. Theodore Parker defined this significance in his Sermon on Immortal Life, when he said,

"What is thus in man is writ there of God, who writes no lies. To suppose that this universal desire has no corresponding gratification, is to represent God not as the Father of all, but only as a deceiver. I feel the longing after immortality a desire essential to my nature, deep as the foundation of my being. ----- I cannot believe that this desire and consciousness are felt only to mislead, to bequile, to deceive me. ----- For my own part, I can conceive of nothing which shall make me more certain of immortality." '

If, therefore, anything is clear, it is that man's consciousness of God, the soul, immortal life, his persistent endeavour to verify this consciousness and answer the problems which it has raised, and his development and utilization of spiritual faculties as means of adjustment to the invisible realm revealed by his consciousness, are themselves the only verification we need of "the everlasting reality of religion." As the eye proves the existence of light and the ear the existence of sound, so may we not say that "the human soul vaguely reaching forth toward-----an external world not visible to the senses," ' gives us something very akin to a proof of the existence of this world.

' See A Sermon on Immortal Life, Centenary Ed. Pages 321 - 22.
' See Through Nature to God, John Fiske, Page 188.

Thus does the thought of immortality, when regarded not as a belief to be accepted, but as an idea to be explained, present to us the argument for its own verification. The fact that man, from the very earliest period of his existence, has had this extraordinary idea of an eternal life, of which the life that now is gives no least suggestion, — the fact that all men have had this idea, have never been able to get away from it, have never succeeded in killing it by their disbelief or weakening it by their doubt, have always tried to solve its problems and overcome its difficulties, and especially have found in it the answer to their noblest hopes, highest aspirations, and deepest affections — all this would seem to be the sure adaption of the struggling spirit to the reality of the Unseen. Is it not wonderful also, that we have in man a creature who is capable of containing this idea of immortality? Man has all the faculties he needs for his earthly existence and infinitely more, which seems to have no relation to the necessities of his present career. If this life be all, what need has man of these stupendous mental powers, intense moral convictions, lofty spiritual aspirations, which characterize him as a being apart from the rest of the material universe? If death be the end, how shall we reconcile this vast endowment of spiritual force with an environment for which the physical endowment of the animal is found to be a sufficient provision? If this world be all, then are not the physical powers of an animal more useful than the brain of a Plato or the heart of a Christ? In the face of these facts,

the conclusion that this life is all is manifestly impossible. In the divine economy of this great universe, no such maladjustment of condition is thinkable. When we find man dowered with these marvelous faculties of mind and spirit, it means but one thing — that his life, unlike that of the brute, is adapted to the conditions of a sphere for transcending that in which he is now living —, that he is the heir of an eternal life, wherein the powers of his soul may find their true purpose and fulfilment. James Martineau in his Study of Religion illustrates this point with a very apt parable:

"I go down to one of the great docks which line the waterfront of New York, and there I find a little vessel, which is of weak construction, manned by a scant crew of three or four, laden with provisions adequate for a week only, equipped with means for meeting the hazards of only the lightest seas. I know at once, from the whole character and outfit of this ship, that she is a coaster, bound for no more distant port than Baltimore or Portland. Close by, I see another vessel of quite a different character. She is superb in every rope and timber, built with a strength calculated to withstand the mightiest gales that blow, manned by a large and disciplined crew, and stocked with provisions that might last a year or more. And here again I know at once, from the mere appearance and equipment of the ship, that she is a merchantman bound for the most distant ports of Africa and Asia.

So also with man! Is it not true of him, as of the merchantman, that the equipment points with perfect accuracy to the character and direction of the voyage?"

We come now to what we call proofs of immortality. By proofs, we admit we do not mean the kind of inductive demonstration that is common to modern science. Immortal life is by the very nature of its being beyond the conscious experience of this present life. It cannot be seen, heard, explored, and therefore its real existence cannot be demonstrated.

' See James Martineau's Study of Religion, Vol. 11, pages 347-59.

All hope, therefore, of proving immortality, as the scientist proves his laws of physical phenomena, by actual experiment, must be abandoned. But this method of observation, experimentation, and induction are not the only kind of proofs at our disposal. Scholastic philosophy offers the best of proofs. Here the soul is considered as the ultimate substantial principle of every activity. By ultimate principle is meant the last ground, the top root from which everything else flows. By substantial is **meant** not bulk, or length or breadth etc., but it does mean, as its latin root sub et stare would indicate, "to stand beneath". Substance therefore is the permanent subject of successive modifications, it is that which is capable of subsistence, of standing by itself, it is that which does not need a further subject of inhesion.

Now the question is, is this vital principle simple and spiritual, and hence immortal? In the first place as to the simplicity of the soul.

Simplicity is defined as some absence of composition, that is, not made up of parts. To prove this we argue from the nature of the effect back to the cause. If the acts themselves of the soul have no space nor projection, the cause must be equal in this perfectability. For example, acts of the mind, the rational activity of the soul, such as ideas of loyalty, beauty, justice etc., acts of judgment, an act of psychological reflection, and acts of the will, are effects simple, as far as absence of parts is

concerned, and therefore demanding this same simplicity in their cause, the soul.

Spirituality presupposes simplicity, and at the same time adds something to it. A spiritual substance is one not made up of parts, and intrinsically independent of matter. Spirituality and simplicity, therefore, are not convertible terms, for while every spiritual substance is simple, every simple substance is not spiritual. For example, the soul of an animal is so bound up and immersed in matter that it can function only con-jointly with that matter. The soul of man, however, in its existence and it at least some of its activities is intrinsically independent of matter. It is the subject and source of many spiritual activities, and must, therefore, be spiritual also. For example we are capable of forming ideas of the abstract, the universal, and the particular. Can ideas of this nature be formed by any material faculty? The answer is no. They are themselves spiritual, and demand a spiritual cause. Also take for example the will. If the soul is entirely immersed in matter, how can the will ever desire objects above the material, such as Justice for Justice's sake, God, happiness? Also the very freedom of the choice of the will shows a spiritual faculty, for all matter is necessitated.

Now as we have defined immortality before it means that the soul will not die, will not be destroyed, but will continue in an endless, conscious existence. Death, or the cessation of life, may be brought about in two ways: (1) by

corruption, (2) by annihilation. So it is only by one of these two ways that the soul would cease to live. The proposition to be proved, therefore, is that the soul cannot be corrupted and it will not be annihilated.

By corruption is meant dissolution into parts, which may happen directly or indirectly. Direct corruption will involve two things, something was broken up into either its integrant parts or its constituent parts. For example fire-wood burning reduces wood to its essential and quantitative elements. Indirect corruption consists in destroying the subject directly and the accidents indirectly thereby. For example a ball of snow. The color and shape cannot be destroyed directly, the subject in which they inhere must be destroyed. The color and shape are mere accidents of the subject.

By annihilation is meant destruction so complete that the object destroyed absolutely ceases to be. Science knows of no instance of such complete destruction.

So the question of immortality resolves itself into this: can the soul be directly corrupted, indirectly corrupted, or will it be completely annihilated? We have already proved the simplicity of the soul, its absence of parts. Direct corruption involves a breaking up into parts. The inference is obvious. How can a simple soul be broken up into parts? Therefore it cannot be destroyed by direct corruption.

Nor can the soul be destroyed by indirect corruption. If we could destroy the soul indirectly it would mean that the

soul was an accident of the body. But again, we have proved that the soul is not an accident but a substance, and therefore cannot be destroyed by indirect corruption.

The soul of an animal ceases because the animal's soul is not spiritual. Its functions are material, dependent on material organs. Hence when these organs cease to function there is no reason for the soul's continued existence. But in this respect the soul of man is different, it has reason for continued existence. During its existence in the body it had functions above the material, so after the body is separated from the soul, why should the soul not continue to perform these functions? It is only reasonable to conclude that it will.

Now comes the final step. Since the soul cannot be destroyed by corruption, if it is to be destroyed at all, it must be by annihilation. Just what is annihilation? Actually it is the withdrawing of the power which keeps a thing in being, the withdrawal of a power from a thing upon which power the thing essentially depends. Now upon just what power does the soul essentially depend. It is intrinsically independent of matter. This power upon which the soul depends is none other than God. In fact God alone is the only power capable of annihilating anything. No action of man's can result in nothingness. But how do we know that God will not destroy the soul? The answer is simply this, were He to destroy the soul He would thereby be contradicting Himself, and this is inconceivable of a Supreme Being. We can judge God's

intentions towards the soul by a study of the soul's nature, by its acts, aspirations, yearnings, desires etc. For example all men yearn for happiness. This springs from man's very nature and is never satisfied here. Would it not be most unreasonable for God to have placed this in man, and still, through no fault of man's, never to allow it to be satisfied? Is there not, also, a final sanction to the moral law, and an adequate one? Does not reason demand that we conclude that Justice, when not administered here in this mortal life, will be administered in the spiritual life to come? This argument does not, of course, prove the soul to be eternal or immortal, for Justice could be done in perhaps a certain length of time, and does not necessarily demand immortality. But, if the soul can exist for even one moment after death, why can it not exist forever? It has been by relying upon conclusions such as these that men have come to trust in immortality as an necessary outcome of man's nature and God's wisdom.

Proving the reality of immortal life does not put an end to all inquiry. At this point there arises the highly important question as to whether immortality is universal. Is it reality for all men born into this world, without discrimination, or for only a selected few? Is it a natural or an acquired characteristic? Is it an inheritance upon which men enter, or a prize which they are challenged to win? In short, to use the technical phrase, is the immortal life to be regarded as absolute or conditional?

In ancient Pagan mythology, immortality, as a state of continued and glorified existence, was the happy fate reserved for kings and heroes, and those immediately associated with them. All the rest of mankind constituted an inconglomerate mass of beings who were consigned to a great pit beneath the earth, where they were not actually annihilated, but doomed to a condition so close to extinction that they could hardly be said to live at all. Certainly there was nothing in their existence which even remotely suggests what we now mean by immortality.

Later on the conception changed so that the division of souls was due to an ethical distinction. Immortality, in the ~~true~~ sense of the word, is here confirmed to those who are able to attain to certain exalted standards of moral worth or meet certain vigorous conditions of spiritual salvation.

The aristocratic view of immortality, so characteristic of the pagan world, was, of course, overthrown once and for all by the sweeping democracy of the Christian gospel. Jesus calling fisherman and publicans to his band of disciples, - St. Ambrose refusing the great Theodosius admission to his church until the emperor had repented and atoned for his sins - St. Francis crowning with redemptive love the poorest of the earth's inhabitants. Hence the impossibility of conceiving that the immortal life was conditioned upon anything which even remotely reflected the class or caste distinctions of human society. If there are any distinctions, they must be moral and not social.

To assert that all men are immortal does not in any sense involve the assertion that sinful men are to escape the penalties of their sins. It is simply to declare that the penalty is not destruction. Universalism holds that the punishment comes to purify, not to avenge, that the deeper the sin, the more terrible the punishment and the longer postponed the hour of recovery.

Just what immortality will be like we cannot say, further than that it will be a condition or a state of the soul. It is reasonable to conclude that the soul will have the same activities and functions in the future life that it has in the present. Physical senses with their limitations and weaknesses will have gone. Only a state of pure existence will be left.

To believe that death is the end, is to accept, whether we will or no, the whole sum and substance of materialism. To accept the spiritual interpretation of life is at the same time to accept the immortal hope. These things belong together, as the part belongs to the whole and the whole to the part. The final and perfect justification of the idea of immortality is its immediate kinship with that great family of ideas which thought of God; it matches the conception of the soul; it harmonizes with the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty; it answers to the noblest dreams and aspirations of the human spirit. Therefore and therewith it is true!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Scott, Martin. S.J. — God and Myself
P. J. Kennedy and Sons 1923
Chapter 5 and 6.
- Maher, Michael — Psychology
Stonyhurst Philosophical Series
4th edition. London 1900
- Stoddard, John L. — Rebuilding a Lost Faith
P. J. Kennedy and Sons
Chapter 6. 1925
- St. Thomas Aquinas — Summa Theologica
Benziger Press 1922
Part 1 Vol. 1
Part 3 Vols. 19, 20, 21.
- Fiske, John — Through Nature to God
The Destiny of Man
Houghton, Mifflin and Sons
Boston and New York. 1899.
- Frazer, Sir James — Man, God, and Immortality
Macmillan 1928
Pages 345 - 421.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Royce, Josiah — The Conception of Immortality
Houghton, Mifflin and
Company. 1900
- Martineau, James — A Study of Religion.

Approved

John M. Cornin Jr. Major Professor

John M. Cornin Dean

Date JUN 1 1928