

CHAPTER III

SCIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY

DURING last century the Natural Sciences, with their manifold and varied achievements, filled a large place in the thought of the age. They seemed to have conferred so many benefits on mankind, and to have dissipated so many ancient prejudices, that it appeared plausible to expect them to do even more than they had done. There were not wanting those who believed that these sciences, with their accurate methods, would cast light on the origin and destiny of man. About the middle of the nineteenth century a wave of materialism swept over the land, and some were rash enough to claim that in matter were the promise and potency of mind itself. The hypothesis was admittedly a bold one, yet how many bold hypotheses had turned out true! But the intervening years have not brought the fulfilment of these sanguine expectations, and materialism as a creed has declined in prestige. Nevertheless there is still much faith in the

Sciences of Nature; for they appear to yield precise and verifiable results, while speculative thought seems to move in a nebulous region where nothing can be proved. Hence it was to be expected that the question would be put: What have the sciences to say on the problem of immortality? Can they furnish any evidence that it is certain or even probable? Or can they give any proof that it is impossible?

The answer, as I think we shall find in the course of the discussion, will be, that neither in the positive nor in the negative direction can the sciences offer us proof in the proper meaning of the word. If they do not lend support to faith in immortality, neither do they demonstrate that such a faith is illegitimate. For the Natural Sciences deal with the world of experience at a level on which the principles that only can decide the issue do not come under review. This conclusion is now endorsed by some, if not by all, men of science. Were the standpoint of scientists the only standpoint, there would be much to be said for the verdict of one of them: *ignoramus et ignorabimus*.

It is not inconsistent with this that the sciences of nature do show us that a kind of immortality is not merely possible but is a fact. Biology has proved that there are low-grade organisms which never die in the ordinary signification of the term.

point of view the argument is defective: there is more in the conclusion than is contained in the premises. Science gives us no cognisance of the existence of elements in man which guarantee his survival after death. Those scientists who affirm the immortality of man do so on grounds which are not strictly scientific. They have supposed, for example, that divine and spiritual elements entered into the evolutionary process at the time when man began to be, and in their presence they have found the assurance of a future life. Thus Le Conte and Alfred Russell Wallace affirm that at a point in development there was an influx of the Divine, which formed the soul of man. This is a hypothesis which may or may not be true, but it cannot be justified by a purely scientific investigation. We cannot say the theory is absolutely necessary to explain the scientific facts of evolution. To the critical and scientific eye the phenomena of human development yield no conclusive argument that man is destined to outlive this earthly experience, and maintain his individuality after death has dissolved his material body. We go further than the facts warrant if we draw the optimistic inference of a recent writer: "Evolution leads straight to immortality or it leads nowhere."¹ At most the truth that man is the crown of a long evolutionary process

¹ Holmes, *Is Death the End?* 1915, p. 137.

will suggest the hope that he is a centre of value for whom some better thing is reserved hereafter.

But though science can give no positive proof that man is immortal, there are theories put forward in the name of science which, if true, would preclude any hope of immortality. I refer, of course, to those forms of naturalism and materialism which seek to construe the life and mind of man as the product of lower forces. If spirit or mind is generated by a particular combination of material elements, it cannot be independent of them and must perish when they dissolve. If "the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile," the term of the brain's existence must be the term of the existence of the mind. A perishable cause can only engender a perishable effect. It is not, however, common to state the relation of mind and matter in so crude and dogmatic a manner. Biologists and physiologists are usually content to emphasise the dependence of human thought and will on the functional activity of the bodily organism. The body is the condition of the mind; and mental processes seem to disappear whenever physiological processes cease. What likelihood is there that mental life persists when the body, its structural basis, is dissolved? To those who contend that the soul is an independent centre of life, the reply of the materialistically inclined man of science is,

that this talk about the reality of the soul is an instance of the old vice of hypostatizing abstractions. We know nothing but the changing current of our feelings and ideas. Formerly people spoke of 'faculties' and 'powers,' foolishly believing that empty words made things clearer; and it was a common practice to postulate a *vis occulta* to explain what was unintelligible. This bad habit still exists when men should know better, and the fashion of speaking of the soul is an illustration. What assurance have we that any reality corresponds to the word? All we know in experience is a fleeting series of mental phenomena which are indissolubly linked to certain cerebral processes.

So the materialistic argument runs. It is only superficially plausible, and it will not bear close examination. If you consider dispassionately whether thought can be the outcome of mechanical movements, you realise that between the latter and the former a great gulf is fixed. To speak of matter as the cause of mind is really an absurdity. To say that thoughts are just movements in the brain is meaningless; for thought is thought and movement is movement, and to identify the one with the other is nonsense. Radical materialists who hold that matter generates mind are inconsistent: professing to explain mind they set out from a material basis which is only intelligible in terms of mind. Thus they

secretly assume what they pretend to deduce. Materialism is thus involved in a vicious circle; and there is consequently a growing recognition that it is a hopeless task to try to derive mind from something other than itself.¹

But while dogmatic materialism of the kind described is now rare, there is still a decided tendency to correlate the mental with the material order: in other words, to try to establish a rigid correspondence between mind-process and brain-process. Granted that matter does not produce mind, but neither does mind produce matter. Nevertheless the mental and the physical series run parallel: each mental fact has for its correlate a definite brain-process; and the mind or soul, if it is not the effect, is at least an accompanying phenomenon. It is the constant shadow, as it were, of cerebral changes. To use a common phrase, mind or soul is an *epiphenomenon*. While this theory avoids the error of a gross materialism—it refrains from saying that matter makes mind—it does not concede to the spiritual element in man any supremacy, or admit any principle of spontaneity. Though brain changes do not produce thoughts, yet the mental series is a

¹ “Men of ability have maintained that what I call matter is nothing but my thoughts and sensations, and, at the same time, that my thoughts and sensations are nothing but an activity of my brain, which being matter, will itself be thoughts and sensations!”
—McTaggart, *Human Immortality and Pre-Existence*, p. 51.

strictly ordered reflexion of the physiological series: the two correspond point by point.

This conception of psycho-physical parallelism leaves it a mystery why each element in the psychical series should have an exact counterpart in the physical series. Such a co-ordination is unintelligible unless the separation is not absolute—in other words, unless the difference runs back to some ultimate common ground. In that case we may revert to some such idea as that of Spinoza, and postulate an identical substance which is revealed in two contrasted aspects.

But if we take the parallelistic theory as an explanation of experience, it leads inevitably to the conclusion that consciousness is an epiphenomenon: consciousness, in other words, accompanies physiological processes in the brain, but is void of any useful purpose. It is not active on its own account. It has no dynamic influence on the series of events; it is no more than a passive reflexion of an order which it has no share in determining.

Were this theory valid, it would be futile to contend for the immortality of the soul. The mind would be so essentially correlated with the physical series of events that to speak of its independent life would be absurd, and to expect it should survive the disintegration of the body would be foolish. Indeed, on this view, it is more

than doubtful that we are entitled to speak of the soul at all; for the psychical series, the series of ideas, is all that can claim to exist, and how this series could form the living unity and directive power we call the mind is by no means evident. To say with Spinoza that 'the idea of the mind' is 'the idea of the human body,' is not to explain how the multiplicity of externally related corporeal elements should have as counterpart the spiritual unity of the self. And the spontaneity and activity which are features of the soul's life are not compatible with the theory that the mental series must rigidly conform to the physical. But a psychical life which excludes activity and spontaneity has no room for a real self as a unifying principle. The self must be a fiction, and equally fictitious will be the idea that the will can carry out its purposes into the objective world. For between the inner and outer worlds all interaction is *ex hypothesi* impossible. As a provisional point of view or a rough working idea psycho-physical parallelism may be useful in psychology; if it is converted into an ultimate metaphysical theory it will not work, and it breaks down before plain facts of experience. An argument against immortality which is based on psycho-physical parallelism as a final truth is therefore invalid.

But it may be objected: Is there not clear

evidence that mental processes always presuppose brain processes? Let it be granted that, if the brain does not function properly, the activity of the mind is affected thereby. If there is a lesion in the brain, if it is affected by drugs, if it receives an inadequate blood supply, then the defective functioning of the cerebral centres which ensues induces a corresponding defect in the mental processes. These are facts which are not in dispute. But, as we have already said, we are not concerned to deny that there is a general correlation of cerebral and mental processes; it is only when this working view is turned into an absolute metaphysical statement that we demur. For before you can take this step it is essential that you should make plain what you mean by matter. And when you try to do this, it will be seen that the assumption is an uncritical one that the physical processes have, *qua* physical, an independent reality of their own. At present we know them in experience only in terms of mind, and we are not entitled to say that they are, apart from mind, just what they are for mind. To say that certain experiences which we call material elements would be just the same if they were not experiences at all, is an obvious fallacy. It is possible, or even probable, that a theory of reality will yield the conclusion that there is no such thing as dead matter, in fact, that what we

call matter approximates to the nature of mind. If this be true, the opposition of the physical and mental is only apparent: it is not ultimate. There is at any rate no warrant for setting the one over against the other in a dualistic fashion: systematic reflexion leads to the conclusion that the difference is relative, not absolute.

It is from this standpoint that we should meet the argument which is based on the apparent dependence of mind on the structure of the brain. That the development of the mind broadly corresponds to the development of the brain is a generally accepted principle. In the series of animal forms we find that increasing intelligence is matched by increasing size and organisation of the brain structure; as psychical activity increases there is an increasing complexity of the higher cerebral centres. In the case of man, whose intelligence so greatly transcends that of the lower animals, the difference in brain capacity is very marked. We have here a body of facts which no one dreams of denying. But in this instance everything turns on the interpretation of the facts, on the meaning that is read into them. To construe the relation as one of causal dependence of mind on brain, would, in the light of what has been said, be quite unwarranted. For the argument assumes the priority and independence of matter, and this is a false abstraction. We

should assume much less, and our argument would be better founded, were we to interpret the relationship in the opposite way, and to affirm that mind is the reality and brain its reflexion. In other words, we may hold that this is an instance of function determining structure; for it is the developing mind which fashions for itself an increasingly articulated instrument in the brain, not the growing brain which generates an enhanced psychical activity. To put it briefly, brain is the shadow of mind rather than mind the shadow of brain. This conclusion will no doubt not commend itself to some, but the general principle hardly admits of controversy. I mean the principle that the correlation of the mental and material depends for its ultimate significance on a metaphysical theory of reality.

One reason for the favour with which psychophysical parallelism has been received is the apparently insuperable difficulty of conceiving how mind and matter can act on one another. Between realities so disparate interaction appears to be inexplicable. It seems easy to understand how a moving ball can set another ball in motion, but it is not intelligible how a change in the brain should result in an idea, and how an idea in turn should produce a change in the brain.

To this difficulty we may reply by emphasising the statement already made: the difference

between the mental and material may not be so great as ordinary thought takes it to be. But, apart from this, it is a mistake to suppose that the interaction of mind and matter is a hard conception, while the interaction of things is an easy one. In point of fact the latter idea, under close analysis, is found to be extremely perplexing: to explain the passage of a force from one material object to another becomes baffling, when we try to think the problem out. In this reference a statement of Lotze, who bestowed much attention on this question, is worth quoting. "The kernel of this error is always that we believe ourselves to possess a knowledge of the nature of the action of one thing on another which we not only do not possess, but which is in itself impossible, and that we then regard the relation between matter and soul as an exceptional case, and are astonished to find ourselves lacking in all knowledge of the nature of their interaction."¹ The argument for parallelism has no doubt been strengthened by the prejudice that interaction between things is simple and easy to understand. Lotze's severely reasoned argument is a salutary antidote to an uncritical way of regarding the subject. It ought to convince us that the question of interaction in any form is obscure and perplexing.

¹ *Medizinische Psychologie*, as quoted by McDougall, *Body and Mind*, p. 207.

At this point in our discussion it is relevant to ask, whether the facts of biology do not require us to postulate a soul or principle of unity in organic life. If it is possible to construe the phenomena of life without an inner and purposive principle, then the case for an organising cause or soul will be seriously weakened. Unless we have ground for accepting the existence of the soul as a constitutive principle within the body, the plea for the survival of the self after death can have no cogency. A soul which was the outcome of corporeal conditions could not outlast these conditions.

In entering on this question the main point on which we must be clear is this: Can the facts of organic life be explained mechanically? Can they be interpreted adequately in terms of quantitative action and reaction? If so, the naturalistic thinker will be able to present a better case for the treatment of mind in the same way—better, not in the sense that he will manage to show that mind is reducible to mechanical principles, but he will be able to suggest more plausibly that, though a complete proof of this cannot be given, still it is likely that this is the truth of the matter. For it is probable, he will argue, that the same principles are at work in mental as in biological phenomena. In these circumstances it is important to show that not even the behaviour of the lower organisms

can be successfully interpreted by purely mechanical categories.

It will serve to disprove the adequacy of the mechanical explanation, if it can be made plain that we are driven to postulate some inner and purposive character in the acting even of the humbler living creatures. A substantial body of facts appears to point to the need of making a postulate of this kind. Thus the behaviour of the lowest grade organisms, such as the amœba, is not intelligible as merely mechanical responses or pure reflexes. For it bears a definitely forward looking character: it is steadily directed to life-conservation. No living thing, however humble, but can select from its environment what is helpful to it and reject what is hurtful: its survival depends on this. If it finds itself in an unfavourable situation, it will strive to counteract so far as it can the influences which are hostile to it. Certain animals defend themselves against enemies and manage to secure their prey by the fact that they are coloured like their natural surroundings; and they will respond to a change in the colour of their environment by a further change in their own colouring. Again, in particular animals, some reptiles, for instance, there is a capacity for replacing lost parts, say a foot or a tail, in the interests of the organism. To a certain extent living creatures can react against a poison

absorbed into the system and neutralise its effects. Once more, there is a mass of facts in connexion with the reproduction of the species, involving methods of fertilisation, preparation for the young, and their nourishment and protection, which defy any mechanical explanation. Such actings can only be interpreted in the light of final ends: they cannot be construed as mere effects. So familiar a story as the way in which a creature conceals itself from its prey, stealthily approaches it, suddenly springs upon it, strikes it in a vital place, and then proceeds to devour it, spells purposive action or it becomes hopelessly unintelligible. In these cases, and in many others of the same order, we appear to be confronted by the fact that the animal deals with different situations in a *purposive* way, and does not simply react on stimulus in a *stereotyped* way. It acts as a unity, and its behaviour is always in the interests of its own life and that of the species. That is to say, behaviour in many instances is quite meaningless unless we regard it as regulated from within, and directed towards the future. We make a mystery of it if we suppose it is the mechanical result of what has gone before. In the lowest beings this purposive element is present, and as we ascend the scale of life it is more and more conspicuously operative. A *vis a tergo* will not account for some of the most patent actings

of animals, or the selective interest which they uniformly and consistently display. Such facts compel us to credit the organism with a power of purposive adaptation to ends which go beyond the immediate present.

Our conclusion therefore is, that a living being acts as a whole and in its interests as a whole. If the organism functions as a purposive unity in this fashion, it is inconceivable that it should be nothing more than a mechanically interacting system. In the conception of a whole making itself felt in all its parts, and subordinating them to an end, we are obviously positing a spiritual and not a mechanical principle. The type of unity is of a higher order than mechanism, for it brings the parts into an intimacy of connexion, into a sympathetic *rapprochement*, which no mechanical causality could produce. This unity therefore presupposes a unifying principle; and this unifying principle corresponds to what, on the human level, we call the soul. In presence of the facts so understood, the soul is not a superfluity but a necessity.

But if the facts of biology point to some immanent principle of unity in organisms which works purposively, the need of such a principle is even more striking when we come to consider the phenomena of conscious experience. It is impossible to question the truth that man appears to

himself as a unity, and is aware of his identity in all the multiplicity of his experiences. He recognises the succession of temporal experiences as his own, and he feels himself to be present in them. As we have noted, it is not explicable how the body as a group of separate parts in space could generate this unity of consciousness. To point out that memory is to some extent conditioned by cerebral processes is justifiable, and the fact will be generally admitted. But to do this comes far short of proving that these conditions are adequate to explain that identity of the self in its changing states without which memory could not function. The notion that memory somehow arises out of the traces which our mental experiences leave on the structure of the brain is not a feasible one; for to work at all memory postulates an already existing self in order to link these experiences together and to refer them to itself as a unitary consciousness. To put it shortly: the soul or self cannot be developed in the manner of a chemical compound, for example, out of an association of mental states, since these states of themselves have no developmental capacity. They are only associated and developed inasmuch as the self is present in them and develops itself through them. In this connexion Lotze has argued cogently, that the fact that we appear to ourselves as subject is a clear evidence

of the soul's unity. Once we have grasped the significance of this experience, the attempt from the side of physiology to connect the unity of the soul with some unitary organ in the body is seen to be a useless piece of ingenuity. As a matter of fact there is no such single point in the brain, a point to which all the sensory paths converge, which could act as a *sensorium commune*. And even if there were, one cannot see how it could explain that very different reality, the unity of soul-life.

Dr. McDougall, in his recent work on *Body and Mind*, emphasises a fact which points to the priority and self-activity of the soul.¹ The fusion of sensory stimuli takes place according to laws which are psychical and have no physical counterpart. It is significant that the effects of simultaneous stimuli, when fused, are not fused in the nervous system. The fusion therefore must be *psychical*, and it must be carried out in the immaterial ground of the organism, in the unifying self or soul. Otherwise the fusion would be totally inexplicable. It may perhaps be objected, that it is hard to see how the soul can have any definite situation in the body from which to exercise its combining activity. The reply must be the reiteration of a principle on which Lotze laid much stress: the essence of being at a particular point

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 293, 297.

is just the power of acting at that point. The intimacy of the soul's relation to the body is an intimacy of action on certain corporeal elements. "The soul stands in that direct interaction which has no gradation, not with the whole of the world, nor yet with the whole of the body, but with a limited number of elements; those elements, namely, which are assigned in the order of things as the most direct links of communication in the commerce of the soul with the rest of the world."¹ Hence Lotze suggests that there may be a number of points in the brain which serve as seats of the soul; in other words, as points of action for the soul.

The previous discussion entitles us, we think, to draw the conclusion that an organism is never an automaton: it is a teleological unity whose simplest reactions have a purposive meaning. This organising principle is the soul; and at every level of organic evolution this unifying principle conditions development and makes it possible. It is not itself created by the material elements which it combines, vitalises, and uses as a means.

No doubt the argument we have developed does not prove anything directly in regard to the immortality of the soul. But it clears the way for such a doctrine by showing that the phenomena

¹ *Metaphysik*, Eng. trans., Bk. III. cap. v. p. 290.

of life demand a central unifying principle which is not the product of material factors. That this principle, after it attains its highest development in man, has a reality for itself and does not perish with the present material body, is not incompatible with the evidence, although it goes beyond it. If, however, the existence of a reality which transcends mechanical explanation be admitted, then the judgments of the natural sciences cannot apply to it. If on other grounds we are led to postulate the immortality of the soul, biology, physiology, and the natural sciences in general are not in a position to say that it is impossible. In a word, then, the issue, so far as science is concerned, is an open one.

Before we pass from this aspect of the problem, it is well to acknowledge that scientific critics have directed attention to certain perplexing considerations which arise out of the doctrine of immortality. Thus the question is asked: If immortality is a fact, where does it come in? Are all animal forms below man excluded from immortality, while all men are included? Can we say, to take a concrete case, that man in the Chellean or Mousterian age began to be immortal, but prior to that he was mortal like other animals? Is the civilised man destined to survive the death of his body, while the savage has no pre-eminence over the brutes? And the same difficulty meets us in

the development of the individual. For we may be urged to decide at what point in the growth of a human being immortality supervenes. Is the child before birth mortal, but after birth immortal? If it is thought arbitrary to draw a line of division at birth, are we to carry it farther back, and to say that at the moment of the fusion of two germ cells an immortal creation has come into being? If this sounds extravagant, would it be more reasonable to declare, that only when man attains some degree of self-consciousness does he become heir to eternal life? Or, finally, is the only logical conclusion that an immortal soul has eternally pre-existed?

From the scientific point of view it is quite legitimate to point out these difficulties, and to ask those who accept the doctrine of immortality to consider them. On the other hand, these difficulties, though no doubt puzzling, are hardly of a nature to affect the main issue decisively. The broad arguments in favour of immortality would not be discredited, even though it were not possible to distinguish narrowly the grade of life or the exact time in the development of the individual at which immortality becomes a fact. For these arguments do not hinge on our ability to define and distinguish in this fashion. It may well be that we cannot at present, and may not in the future, attain such a knowledge of the soul,

in its relations to the organism, as to be able to determine the point at which it is capable of survival after death.

Another objection which a scientific critic might urge is capable of a more definite answer. Let it be granted the soul exists, and no one will deny that, in some sense, man is a self. But, it may be argued, the personality is so bound up with the bodily functions and the habits which grow out of them, that its survival when cut loose from these is not possible. In other words, bodily habits have so gone to the making of a man's personality that the latter cannot properly exist without the former. Now the psychologist will readily admit that a man's habits are closely related to the structure of his nervous system: and these habits are reflected in character and personality. But the memory, conscious and sub-conscious, which has gone to the making of individual habits, is never a purely physiological process. Over and above the neural basis of memory a psychical basis is required to make the facts intelligible. And habits which are the expression of a formed personality involve *psychical* dispositions as a sustaining ground. It may not be possible in a given case to say how much in a habit is contributed by a neural and how much by a psychical disposition. But in every case the psychical factor is present, and its operation

is essential.¹ Hence the existence of these psychical dispositions may be able to secure for the self a degree of continuity with its previous state, after it has been separated from the present bodily organism. More than this is not necessary nor perhaps desirable. In saying this I am glad to be able to support the statement by the opinion of so competent an authority as Dr. McDougall. He remarks: "Though it is not possible to say just how much of what we call personality is rooted in bodily habits and how much in psychical dispositions, yet it is open to us to believe that the soul, if it survives the dissolution of the body, carries with it some large part of that which has been gained by intellectual and moral effort."²

So far we have been considering science as critical of the doctrine of immortality, whether by developing theories which would make mind dependent on matter, or by pointing out difficulties in the notion of a personal survival after death. I wish now before concluding this part of the subject to consider the endeavour to sift and test the so-called evidences of survival after death by a scientific method in order to reach well-established conclusions. I refer, of course, to the

¹ The silent but real influence of the psychical on the physical in man is apparent in the way subconscious processes affect organic functions like secretion and digestion.

² *Body and Mind*, p. 372.

labours of the Society for Psychical Research. The Society at all events strives to follow a scientific mode of investigation, though it may be some of its members have not always been sufficiently critical. Certainly the Society has done much praiseworthy work in carrying on experiments and investigations, collecting and testing materials, and drawing inferences. In principle, those who have conducted these researches have realised the need of caution and of verification so far as that was possible. Opinions differ widely about the value of these results and their bearing on the problem of survival after death. The late Frederick Myers, who spent so much time and thought on the subject, believed that definite evidence of existence after death had been produced. "We have shown," he says, "that veritable manifestations do reach us from beyond the grave."¹ And Sir Oliver Lodge holds the belief to be justified that "intelligent co-operation between other embodied minds than our own has become possible."² To many, on the other hand, the evidences do not appear sufficient to yield any such conclusion; for they think the phenomena under consideration are susceptible of more than one explanation. These do not point irresistibly to the conclusion that the dead are in

¹ *Human Personality*, one vol. ed., p. 352.

² *The Survival of Man*, p. 333.

communication with us. Of this opinion are Podmore, McDougall, and others.

It is more particularly from the phenomena connected with so-called 'cross references' that evidence for the activity of disembodied spirits has been found. A word of explanation in regard to the nature of this evidence must be given. Two or more mediums, living in different places, and these sometimes far apart, in the trance condition automatically write messages. The content of the messages may be, and often is, quite beyond the normal knowledge of the writer. When the automatic script produced by the separate writers is compared, it is found that the communications can be pieced together so as to form a more or less coherent message. This is not known to the several mediums, who are ignorant that they are collaborating to evolve a common idea. And the conclusion it is sought to establish is, that the character of the communication and the knowledge it implies are such, that the minds of the writers must have been in contact with or influenced by a disembodied mind, the mind of a particular person who has died. Here let me quote the statement of Lodge: "What we get is a fragmentary utterance in one script, which seems to have no particular point or meaning, and another fragmentary utterance in the other of an equally pointless

character ; but when we put the two together we see that they supplement one another, and that there is apparently one coherent idea underlying both, but only partially revealed in each." ¹ It is well known that in some experiments which have been made, the conclusion has been drawn that the spirit of the late F. W. Myers is responsible for certain vaguely connected ideas which have been put together out of the script of different persons. It is difficult to suppose, so it is argued, that telepathy between the mediums could have produced two fragments the mutual relation of which is only made clear after a careful comparison. That there is a real basis of fact in the alleged phenomena may be granted, and the phenomena are not explicable on any materialistic theory. But the question, of course, is, how far the admitted facts really carry us. On the most favourable view of the so-called communications, it would be absurd to say that they can be regarded as proofs of immortality. At the most they might be taken as an indication that the soul survived, for a time at least, the dissolution of the body. But many are not convinced that an examination of the facts warrants us in coming even to this conclusion. It may be granted there is much to show that two or more persons far apart from each other have taken part in expressing, if

¹ *The Survival of Man*, p. 329.

perhaps vaguely, a single thought or idea. But when we are asked to accept the conclusion, that the true explanation of the facts is the existence of a disembodied spirit acting on the minds of the different mediums, we can only say we are not convinced. This is certainly one way of accounting for the facts, but is it the only way? Not many who are acquainted with the evidence will categorically affirm that it is. Indeed most of those who are disposed to accept this solution would not venture to claim more than that, on the whole, it is the most probable solution. Before admitting this, however, we must consider whether the phenomena are not explicable by some cause we already know to be operative in human experience. In cases of difficulty a known cause ought to be preferred to a hypothetical one. On this point a writer we have already quoted has no doubts: he says boldly we need go no further than subliminal faculties and memories and telepathy for an explanation of the phenomena.¹ And a sympathetic observer frankly allows, that ostensible cases of telepathy from the dead can be generally explained by telepathy from the living.² The same writer in a more recent work admits that, "The possibility of what may be called normal telepathy, or unconscious

¹ Holmes, *Is Death the End?* p. 193.

² Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

mind-reading from survivors, raises hesitation about accepting messages as irrefragable evidence of persistent personal existence."¹ The hesitation here referred to is increased by the fact that the critic of spiritualism can show that the abnormal knowledge which mediums display is sometimes derived from the minds of those who consult them. An interesting example is given by Mrs. Sidgwick in the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*. In this case it seems clear that the medium in question—Mrs. Piper—was simply reproducing certain mistaken beliefs derived by telepathy from the minds of those who consulted her.²

Still, it is suggested, that the method of cross-references greatly diminishes the probability of this method of accounting for the facts. The fragmentary messages of the separate mediums must, it is said, if their connexion is to be understood, be explained by the hypothesis of a single mind acting on them and impressing the idea on them. And we are told that the nature of the communication indicates that this mind is the mind of a particular person who has died. The inference would be cogent if it could be shown that the hypothesis involved is the only adequate

¹ *Raymond*, p. 346.

² *Vide* the volume of essays on *Immortality*, Macmillan & Co., 1917, pp. 255-256.

explanation of the facts. The messages in question are very broken and vague, and one may even doubt that they necessarily proceed from a single control acting on the different mediums. Even if they did proceed from a single intelligence, it is still open to us to say it is the intelligence of some one now living. The conclusion that they can only proceed from the spirit of a particular deceased person will, I am inclined to think, only carry conviction to those who are disposed on other grounds to believe in the existence of disembodied spirits who are active in the way suggested. It would be extraordinarily hard to prove that these fragmentary and somewhat elusive messages could only have emanated from a particular deceased person. There is much to be said for the opinion, that proof of survival in any given case is almost impossible, for our knowledge is not sufficient to set limits to telepathic power.¹ Of course it will be urged that though strict proof in each instance is not possible, yet the cumulative evidence supplied by a number of cases raises a possible to the level of a probable conclusion. But this argument would only be valid if it could be made clear that the cumulative evidence served to diminish the fundamental uncertainty which attaches to each particular instance. This, however, is what it does not do.

¹ Barrett, *Psychical Research*, p. 230.

In the circumstances, whether the individual comes to a favourable or an unfavourable verdict on the problem will depend very much on the pre-suppositions he brings with him to the study of the phenomena. The sceptically minded will find an additional reason for their lack of faith in the disappointing character of the messages which purport to come from the departed.¹ In any case, I think it must be granted that the kind of existence which the messages suggest is not one which appeals to those who see in immortality a key to ethical and religious problems. The lot of the disembodied spirit—*animula vagula*—hampered and striving to communicate cryptic messages to friends on earth, seems scarcely desirable. One cannot help thinking that no real light is shed from this quarter on the problems of human life and destiny. Those who have carefully studied the evidence are sharply divided on the question of its value: Lodge, for example, finds positive evidence where Podmore finds no good evidence at all. It is just possible that in the future the obscurity which gathers round the subject may be broken by some fresh light. The

¹ I have said nothing about the alleged triviality of the 'messages.' This consideration unquestionably influences many adversely. Those who accept the communications as genuine contend that the trivial details have a peculiar evidential value, and are the means by which a disembodied spirit, struggling against difficulties, gives proof of its existence.

desire for some word from the soul which has gone from us is natural; and the longing that the veil that shrouds the unseen should be lifted, if but a little, is very human.

“Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who
Before us passed the door of darkness through
Not one returns to tell us of the road,
Which to discover we must travel too.”

But it may well be that on this great issue the final word must be one of faith and not of sight. Meanwhile the reply of the dispassionate mind to the claim that messages have been received from the other world will be, I believe, *non liquet*.

On the most favourable view the inferences drawn from *Psychical Research* do not warrant a belief in immortality. On any showing they do not imply more than a limited survival of the soul after death. The evidences, even when rated at their highest, cannot carry us further than a conviction that the souls of the departed linger on in a kind of attenuated existence, and may be ultimately extinguished. There is a great contrast between this ‘survival’ and ‘eternal life.’

If we try to sum up the results of the chapter, we realise that they are not decisive. Science can supply us neither with valid grounds for rejecting nor sufficient reasons for accepting the doctrine of human immortality. In the one case as in the other, the arguments do not stand the

test of criticism. The destiny of the soul is a problem which transcends the region of empirical science. In so far as reason can deal with the problem effectively, it must do so from a philosophical standpoint. In our next chapter we shall learn how far philosophical discussion has shed light on the subject.