

# THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

[ Interesting symposia were arranged for the observance at the Indian Institute of Culture, Basavangudi, Bangalore, of Republic of India Day on January 26th and for the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Meeting on January 31st. The Institute took advantage of the visit to South India of distinguished foreign delegates to the World Pacifist Meeting held at Santiniketan and Sevagram in December. Mr. Rene Bovard and Prof. O. E. H. Rydbeck, of Switzerland and Sweden, respectively, spoke at a meeting in that month under the presidency of Sir C. V. Raman, and Messrs. Henri Roser (France) and Wilfred Wellock (England) gave their " Impressions of the World Pacifist Conference and the Future " on January 17th.

The Institute's usual programme of lectures alternating with Discussion Group meetings has continued, among the recent lecturers having been Dr. Carsun Chang (" Why Confucianism Became Dominant in China " and " Lao-Tse the Metaphysician, " on December 6th and 8th) and Prof. Ralph E. Turner of Yale University who spoke on " The Emergence of a New Culture " on January 12th.

We publish here as much as our space permits of the valuable paper prepared for the Indian Institute of Culture by **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch** of Costa Rica, Central America, which was read and discussed at a specially convened meeting on January 14th.—ED.]

## LIFE AND IMMORTALITY FROM A SCIENTIST'S VIEW-POINT

It seems hardly possible for any one, who with an open mind reviews the vast body of positive evidence, to doubt the fact of organic evolution, although we are still much in the dark as to the intimate processes which underlie this æonian movement. Natural selection has had an important share in shaping the course of evolution, but it affords no explanation of variation within a single line of descent, without which evolution could not occur. Selection, of course, creates nothing; it merely sifts the many forms presented to its action, eliminating the less fit and permitting the continued existence of those organisms best adapted to the actual environment. When we consider the whole grand course of organic evolution on this planet, we feel the force of Bergson's concept of an *élan vital* or vital impetus, pushing life ever onward

in many directions—a movement in which the creative impulse in life is subject to constant discipline and control by the selective action of the surroundings, both living and inorganic. The *élan vital* is, we recognize, a mysterious principle, which we are unable to analyze in terms of physical and chemical forces; but I see no reason to regard it as an isolated mystery. We might define it as the creative force of the Universe operating under the particular aspect of organic bodies. Yet the fundamental significance of evolution is that living creatures are not passively moulded by this force. It sets them in motion, gives them a general direction, yet leaves them to work out the details of their own destiny as they interact with the environment. Evolution is self-creation.

Mind, no less than body, has been

developed by the evolutionary process. In its lowest, most elementary form, as in the amoeba, we recognize it as mere sensitivity to external stimuli; in man and to an unknown degree in other "higher" animals, it has achieved a measure of independence from the body, leading a life of its own; yet it is never, as we actually know it, wholly emancipated from the organism in which it resides. Here its onward march continues, now self-directed to a far higher degree than the preceding evolution of the body. The whole age-long evolutionary movement culminates, so far as each of us is concerned, in the development of his individual soul or mind. The world becomes for us, to use the words of John Keats, a "Vale of Soul-making." Only by this manner of looking at it do we reach a rationally satisfactory explanation of all earth's trials and sorrows; and nothing, said Dean Inge, is harder for a rational being to believe than that he lives in an irrational universe.

Evolution, we saw, is to a large degree self-creation. The culmination of the evolutionary movement is the formation of individual souls which are increasingly autonomous, each with a character of its own, with self-imposed standards of rectitude, with a free spiritual life detached from close association with the body. But what, more than all else, determines the character of the soul? Is it not the free choice of its own objectives or values, clinging to some and rejecting others of the almost endless lures which the world holds before it? In order to make this choice freely and without compulsion, we must live in a world whose trend and purpose are not too obvious. We must try to discover for ourselves the

significance of life. We must reach tentative conclusions from evidence which cannot be too forceful and compelling, for, if it were, the element of free choice would be correspondingly diminished.

We must, then, pick our own path and march forward boldly and unafraid. We cannot know for a certainty where the road ends; yet from a consideration of its direction and the signs along the way, we must feel a degree of confidence that it will bring us to a desirable destination. That is, each of us individually must frame, after careful consideration of all available evidence, what appears to himself a rational explanation or hypothesis of the significance and destiny of life, and he must have the courage to live by that belief. This, not blind credence in something we have been told, is the meaning of faith. And faith, we may add, is a universal attribute of life; without it no seed would germinate, no bud would open, no bird build her nest; for none can be certain that it will live to complete the process it begins. Hence it would be contrary to our whole philosophy to expect that we shall be able to prove the soul's immortality with the same certitude that we can demonstrate a proposition in geometry or in mechanics. We shall merely attempt to determine whether, in the light of our present knowledge in science and metaphysics, it is a belief we may reasonably hold; whether the postulate, that each man carries within himself some indestructible spiritual entity, seems sufficiently probable to serve as a working hypothesis by which a rational being may guide his life.

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those relatively modern religions which give the doctrine of immortality so important a position in their teachings. To early man, earth and air were so full of spirits of many sorts that his belief that he himself might contribute another to the elusive company need not surprise us. When he bent over a still pool, he was greeted by a reflection that mocked him with the suggestion that some effluence had escaped him and now returned his puzzled gaze. He was convinced that in dreams his spirit—or perhaps one of his multiple souls, for he at times believed that he possessed several—might venture forth from his body and pursue an adventuresome career of its own; that if, because he was prematurely awakened, or from any other cause, it were unable to return to its fleshly abode, it would continue to wander about the world, while without it he would die. What more natural than to suppose that it would survive the death and dissolution of that body which it could so easily leave!

Another cause for belief in the immortality of the soul is the practical difficulty of imagining an end to our stream of consciousness. A man may picture himself as dead and carried to the funeral pyre or the grave, but only at the expense of imagining some unsubstantial part of him that looks on, an unseen attendant at his own obsequies. To picture the end of this surviving ego entails the setting apart of a survivor in the second degree, and so on in endless sequence. It is like the old difficulty of trying to decide by the exercise of the imagination whether space is finite or infinite. We can in a few minutes convince ourselves that we cannot conceive of finite space; it must

have a boundary, upon reaching which we must decide whether we can extend a hand in front of ourselves or not; if we can extend a hand, we have not reached the limit of space; if we cannot extend it, there must be ahead of us some solid obstacle, which also must exist in space. Yet we might require all eternity to satisfy ourselves that we cannot picture infinite space. So it is with trying to decide *a priori* whether the soul, or the conscious part of ourselves, is immortal.

Although belief in immortality may have arisen from careless or inaccurate thinking, it is most unlikely that it grew out of wishful thinking; it was not an invention of primitive men to solace themselves for the insecurity and briefness of their mortal span. The abode of the shades was at first pictured as a gloomy, hollow land, lacking in substantial satisfactions; unlike many of his successors, the savage was apparently not eager to cast off the flesh with all its ills and fly there. The Elysian Fields, the Platonic heaven of philosophic insight, the Christian heaven of song and dancing, the Mohammedan paradise of the black-eyed houris, are later refinements, some of them apparently invented with ulterior motives by those who wished to strengthen a religious creed by offering delightful rewards for compliance with its mandates. Some of the sects which hold the doctrine of reincarnation do not look upon personal immortality as a desirable state, but rather as an affliction to be cast off by making one's self worthy of absorption into the Absolute, as the dewdrop is lost in the shining sea.

Historically, then, the burden of proof rests with those who would demonstrate the perishability of the

soul, as it must always rest with those who combat the original or generally accepted view of any matter. What do we know today of the immortality of the soul? What can science tell us? We turn first to biology, the science of life, for an answer to the question. Many biologists conclude that their studies lend no support to belief in immortality. This is precisely what we should expect, as they deal with the purely material aspects of life—its form, its transformations of matter and energy, its relations with the physical environment. They investigate the vital functions as manifested in the realm of matter; whereas the answer to the question of immortality must be sought in the realm of spirit, where their scalpels and microscopes and nutrient solutions are of no help; and these two realms of being, although they obviously interact, do so in a manner that has not yet been satisfactorily explained.

Certainly the biologist does well to conclude that his studies provide no support for belief in the immortality of the soul; but he falls short of the true scientific attitude and becomes dogmatic if he supposes that his lack of evidence decides the case against it.

The physicist can help us no more than the biologist. He has been too busy of late discovering things about the structure of the atom to spare time for investigations which after all are beyond his province. But the very newness and strangeness of his discoveries should warn us how little we know about ultimate reality and how premature it is to draw conclusions about the highest matters and the deepest. Only yesterday we thought of the atom as a solid particle; now we

are told that even the sub-particles of which it is composed may change, appear and disappear, that truly nothing is stable! If modern men have any penchant toward mysticism, the science which created the atom bomb should tend to deepen and strengthen it.

When I reflect that the room in which I write is full of music and voices in many languages to which I am perfectly deaf, because I lack a radio receptor which for a few dollars I might possess, it is easy for me to believe that I am also surrounded by spirits and spiritual influences of which I am not consciously aware only because my rational faculty is not attuned to them. Astronomers nightly take photographs of stars whose light has been millions of years in reaching the earth; for all they know, the stars themselves might have been destroyed by explosion æons ago—is not this a kind of immortality? Even the flame of a match is in a sense immortal; strike it under the open sky, and its light continues to travel outward through space long after the flame has expired—indeinitely, for all we know. Science provides many analogies for the immortality of the soul. but analogies are not proofs.

The faith that in each virtuous or enlightened human being there resides a soul, subject to his own will alone and superior to the vicissitudes of the body, was widespread among ancient philosophers but was developed in the West chiefly by the Stoics, and is the most precious concept in the whole realm of ethics. So long as a man firmly believes that he guards within his breast some sacred entity inaccessible to his tormentors, he may defy the



rack and the stake of the Inquisition and walk serenely into the gas chamber of the dictator. A strong man with such a conviction is not readily lured by transitory pleasures or temporal gains to stray from what he conceives to be the strict path of virtue and duty. In the absence of belief in the inviolability of some sanctum deep in each man's being, it is difficult to discover a firm basis for personal morality; without this faith ethics will, for most people, become a more or less dispassionate calculation of how our acts will bring pleasure or pain to ourselves or to society, rather than a consideration of how they affect our spiritual nature. If the tyrant who holds me captive in his dungeon can reach and sully every part of me, what can I preserve from profanation? What avails it for me to resist him to the end?

Thousands of martyrs have suffered incredible tortures and died without bringing general conviction of the truth of the dogmas for which they sacrificed themselves. But have they not proved, almost with the force of a demonstration in physics, some grander and more fundamental proposition in regard to the human soul: that it is beyond the reach of the tyrant and the torturer, remote, inviolate, when sustained by firm principles subject to profanation only through acts of its own? Thus the blood of countless Christian martyrs became the vindication of an earlier pagan philosophy whose coldness repelled them. When the martyr amidst the flames can hold faith in his doctrine of forgiveness and apply it even to his persecutors, he has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt the looseness of the connection of the soul

with the body. Distinctness of the soul is not a proof of its immortality, but perhaps it carries a presumption of it.

Belief in personal immortality is sometimes looked upon as an egregious manifestation of self-love, and this is in many instances true. Yet this fails to explain the spiritual force that the belief gives to a man under torture and in the extremes of adversity, when egoism withers under pain and higher forces, if any, come into play. It is simply that it is not in the nature of man or of any other animal to continue to struggle and resist when nothing is left to defend. The bird which so valiantly shields the nest that cradles its young loses interest when the nest is empty; the bees no longer protect the hive when they have lost their queen. Without asking whether they are immortal, men will bravely die in the defence of something sacred to them. But, since idea began to clash with idea, countless men have been put to the extreme test of spiritual fortitude in such circumstances that, if they did not believe that they held something inviolable within themselves, they had nothing left to defend. Perhaps in the very highest form of Stoic idealism—exceeding even that of Socrates and the Christian martyrs—men may keep faith in the inviolability of the soul without believing it to survive the body; but this faculty is rare and exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Human spiritual force is like an electric current; it needs a continuous circuit in order to flow. So is it with our hopes; they must stretch away into the boundless future in order to maintain the full force of their stream.

A blind wall anywhere ahead, no matter how great the distance, chills

our hopes with the dampness of death. Something must always lead to something else. A man may go cheerfully, or at least with calm resignation, to his death if he believe that his cause, his family or his country will survive him, will carry on the task he has left unfinished. Thereby something of himself will survive himself—even if he hold no faith in personal immortality. But if he be the last of his line, the sole adherent to a lost cause, the lone defender of a city overwhelmed, death will in truth be bitter and terrible to him—unless he believe that some part of himself will survive it.

To believe in the immortality of the soul is like building one's house upon a hilltop. How greatly it expands our outlook! If this mortal life be only a stage in some more ample existence, as the creeping larval state is only a phase in the life of the winged insect, there may yet be time for the fulfilment of those larger aspirations of spiritual growth, for which this life seems so pitifully brief and inadequate.

Although the belief in personal immortality is in general more grateful to the Occidental mind, many Orientals yearn for the loss of Self through its complete reabsorption in the Absolute.

But to feel that because the perfected soul will not endure for ever the struggle has been vain, is to take a false and narrow view. May not an hour of perfect harmony with God amply repay a lifetime of strenuous effort? After a long and eventful career, the raindrop at last returns and loses itself in the parent sea; but meanwhile it has refreshed the land, given life to the vegetation, and helped turn the mills

that grind men's bread; who shall say that its peregrination has been in vain? The tree that attains the full majesty of its stature through a thousand years of steady growth does not stop to ask whether it will stand for ever. It continues to grow year after patient year according to the laws of its nature, allowing the future to take care of the future. So must each living thing, including ourselves, develop in accordance with its own nature, in the faith that when it does this all will be well with it. There is no alternative course.

If the moral philosopher may be permitted to choose between alternative theories by the same criterion that the natural philosopher—to use the old term—has employed with such happy results, it should not take him long to decide between belief in immortality and its opposite.

Although he may freely admit that it is only a vague symbol and remote abstraction of the ultimate reality, no conscientious scientist casts aside a theory that has been useful in leading to discoveries, unless indeed he is ready to supplant it with another more adequate and fertile in results. In the great experiment of living, the doctrine of personal immortality has been fruitful as a source of moral strength and noble conduct; it probably symbolizes what is in store for us, although in no known form can it be regarded as an adequate picture of immortal life. It would seem to be the part of wisdom *to live as though the human soul were immortal*, the body the perishable organism we know it to be. Then, if immortality be in store for us, we shall be ready for it.

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