



TORCH OF



REASON.

"TRUTH BEARS THE TORCH IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH."—*Lucretius.*

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NO. 1.

Passages From the "Choir Invisible." (To be Memorised.)

BY GEORGE ELIOT.

O MAY I join the choir invisible,
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search,
To vaster issues.

So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
Breathing as beauteous order that controls
With growing sway the growing life of man.

* * *
That better self shall live till human Time
Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky
Be gathered like a scroll within the tomb
Unread forever.

This is the life to come
Which martyred men have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow. May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense.
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.

The Immortality of the Soul.

BY ERNST HAECKEL.

WHEN we turn from the genetic study of the soul to the great question of its immortality, we come to that highest point of superstition which is regarded as the impregnable citadel of all mystical and dualistic notions. For in this crucial question, more than in any other problem, philosophic thought is complicated by the selfish interest of the human personality, who is determined to have a guarantee of his existence beyond the grave at any price. This "higher necessity of feeling" is so powerful that it sweeps aside all logical arguments of critical reason. Consciously or unconsciously, most men are influenced in all their general views, and, therefore, in their theory of life, by the dogma of personal immortality; and to this theoretical error must be added practical consequences of the most far-reaching character. It is our task, therefore,

to submit every aspect of this important dogma to a critical examination, and to prove its untenability in the light of the empirical data of modern biology.

In order to have a short and convenient expression for the two opposed opinions on the question, we shall call the belief in man's personal immortality "athanatism" (from *athanes* or *athanatos*, deathless or immortal). In the other hand, we give the name of "thanatism" (from *thanatos*-death) to the opinion which holds that at a man's death not only all the other physiological functions are arrested, but his "soul" also disappears—that is, the sum of cerebral functions which psychic dualism regards as a peculiar entity, independent of the other vital processes of the living body.

In approaching this physiological problem of death we must point out the Individual character of this organic phenomenon. By death we understand simply the definite cessation of the vital activity of the Individual organism, no matter to which stage or category of individuality the organism in question belongs. Man is dead when his *organism* ceases to exist, whether he has left offspring that they may continue to propagate for many generations or not. In a certain sense we often say that the minds of great men (in a dynasty of eminent rulers, for instance, or a family of talented artists) live for many generations; and in the same way we speak of the "soul" of a noble woman living in her children and children's children. But in these cases we are dealing with intricate phenomena of Heredity, in which a microscopic cell (the sperm-cell of the father or egg-cell of the mother) transmits certain features to offspring. The particular personalities who produce those sexual cells in thousands are mortal beings, and at their death their personal psychic activity is extinguished like every other physiological function.

* * *
We still find it asserted in philosophic, and especially in theological, works that belief in the immortality of the human soul was originally shared by all men—or, at least, by all "rational" men. That is not the case. This dogma is not an original idea of the human mind, nor has it ever found universal acceptance.

* * *
Differently from the primary thanatism which originally charac-

terized primitive man, and has always been widely spread, the secondary absence of belief in immortality is only found at the late stage of history: it is the ripe fruit of profound reflection on life and death, the outcome of bold and independent philosophical speculation. We first meet it in some of the Ionic philosophers of the sixth century B. C., then in the founders of the old materialistic philosophy, Democritus and Empedocles, and also in Simonides and Epicurus, Seneca and Plinius, and in an elaborate form in Lucretius Carus. With the spread of Christianity at the decay of classical antiquity, athanatism, one of its chief articles of faith, dominated the world, and so, amid other forms of superstition, the myth of personal immortality came to be invested with a high importance.

Naturally, through the long night of the Dark Ages it was rarely that a brave free-thinker ventured to express an opinion to the contrary: the examples of Galileo, Giordano Bruno, and other independent philosophers, effectually destroyed all freedom of utterance. Heresy only became possible when the Reformation and the Renaissance had broken the power of the papacy. The history of modern philosophy tells of the manifold methods by which the matured mind of man sought to rid itself of the superstition of immortality. Still, the intimate connection of the belief with the Christian dogma invested it with such power, even in the more emancipated sphere of Protestantism, that the majority of convinced free-thinkers kept their sentiments to themselves. From time to time, some distinguished scholar ventured to make a frank declaration of his belief in the impossibility of the continued life of the soul after death. This was done in France in the second half of the eighteenth century by Voltaire, Danton, Mirabeau, and others, and by leaders of the materialistic school of those days, Holbach, Lamettrie, etc. The same opinion was defended by the able friend of the Materialists, the greatest of the Hohenzollerns, the monistic "philosopher of Sanssouci." What would Frederick the Great, the "crowned thanatist and atheist," say, could he compare his monistic views with those of his successor of to-day?

Among thoughtful physicians the conviction that the existence of the soul came to an end at death has been common for centuries: gener-

ally, however, they refrain from giving it expression. Moreover, the empirical science of the brain remained so imperfect during the last century that the soul could continue to be regarded as its mysterious inhabitant. It was the gigantic progress of biology in the present century, and especially in the later half of the century, that finally destroyed the myth. The establishment of the theory of descent and the cellular theory, the astounding discoveries of ontogeny and experimental physiology—above all, the marvellous progress of the microscopic anatomy of the brain, gradually deprived athanatism of every basis; now, indeed, it is rarely that an informed and honorable biologist is found to defend the immortality of the soul. All the monistic philosophers of the century (Strauss, Feuerbach, Büchner, Spencer, etc.) are athanatists.

The dogma of personal immortality owes its great popularity and its high importance to its intimate connection with the teaching of Christianity. This circumstance gave rise to the erroneous and still prevalent belief that the myth is a fundamental element of all the higher religions. This is by no means the case. The higher Oriental religions include no belief whatever in the immortality of the soul; it is not found in Buddhism, the religion that dominates thirty per cent of the entire human race; it is not found in the ancient popular religion of the Chinese, nor in the reformed religion of Confucius which succeeded it; and, what is still more significant, it is not found in the earlier and purer religion of the Jews. Neither in the "five Mosaic books," nor in any of the writings of the Old Testament which were written before the Babylonian Exile, is there any trace of the notion of individual existence after death.

It was unknown to the earliest speaking man (the hypothetical *homo primigenitus* of Asia), to his predecessors, of course, the *pithecanthropus* and *prothyllobates*, and to the least developed of his modern successors, the *Veddahs* of Ceylon, the *Seelongs* of India, and other distant races. With the development of reason and deeper reflection on life and death, sleep and dreams, mystic ideas of a dualistic composition of our nature were evolved—independently of each other—in a number of the earlier races. Very different influences were at work in these polyphyletic creations—worship of ancestors, love of life and