

FISKE JOHN

LIFE

EVERLASTING

John Fiske

Life Everlasting

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NOTE

On the evening of December 19, 1900, Mr. Fiske delivered in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, the address here printed. It was given at the request of Harvard University, in accordance with the terms of the Ingersoll lectureship, but it stood clearly in Mr. Fiske's mind as a continuation, and in a sense the completion, of that series of philosophic studies successively issued under the titles, "The Destiny of Man viewed in the Light of his Origin," "The Idea of God as affected by Modern Knowledge," and "Through Nature to God." Mr. Fiske delayed the publication of "Life Everlasting," and it is possible that he designed amplifying it. Yet, as he stated in his Preface to "The Idea of God," that both that book and "The Destiny of Man" were printed exactly as delivered, "without the addition, or subtraction, or alteration of a single word," so he may have intended to print this study in the same way. At any rate it is now printed exactly as it was delivered, his perfectly clear manuscript being carefully followed.

4 Park Street, Boston

Autumn, 1901

THE INGERSOLL LECTURESHIP

**Extract from the will of Miss Caroline Haskell Ingersoll, who
died in Keene, County of Cheshire, New Hampshire, Jan. 26, 1893**

First. In carrying out the wishes of my late beloved father, George Goldthwait Ingersoll, as declared by him in his last will and testament, I give and bequeath to Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., where my late father was graduated, and which he always held in love and honor, the sum of Five thousand dollars (\$5,000) as a fund for the establishment of a Lectureship on a plan somewhat similar to that of the Duddleian lecture, that is – one lecture to be delivered each year, on any convenient day between the last day of May and the first day of December, on this subject, "the Immortality of Man," said lecture not to form a part of the usual college course, nor to be delivered by any Professor or Tutor as part of his usual routine of instruction, though any such Professor or Tutor may be appointed to such service. The choice of said lecturer is not to be limited to any one religious denomination, nor to any one profession, but may be that of either clergyman or layman, the appointment to take place at least six months before the delivery of said lecture. The above sum to be safely invested and three fourths of the annual interest thereof to be paid to the lecturer for his services and the remaining fourth to be expended in the publishment and gratuitous distribution of the lecture, a copy of which is always to be furnished by the lecturer for such purpose. The same lecture to be named and known as "the Ingersoll lecture on the Immortality of Man."

LIFE EVERLASTING

Few incidents in ancient history are more tragic than the death of Pompey. The spectacle of the mighty warrior who had conquered the Orient and contended with Cæsar for the mastery of the world, a defeated and despairing fugitive, treacherously murdered and lying unburied on the Egyptian strand, was one that drew tears from Cæsar himself and from many another. Yet among the poets of the sixteenth century Renaissance there was one who took a different view of the matter. In an epigram of incomparable beauty Francesco Molza exclaims: —

Dux, Pharea quamvis jaceas inhumatus arena,
Non ideo fati est sævior ira tui:
Indignum fuerat tellus tibi victa sepulcrum;
Non decuit cœlo, te, nisi, Magne, tegi!

It is almost impossible to preserve in a translation the peculiar charm of these lines, but a friend of mine in one of the pleasant student days of forty years ago produced this happy and fitting paraphrase: —

We grieve not, Pompey, that to thee
No earthly tomb was given;
All lands subdued, nought else was free
To shelter thee but Heaven!

Here the art of the poet lies in the boldness with which he seizes upon one of the most subtle and startling effects of contrast. In the very circumstance which to the ancient mind was the acme of humiliation and horror his genius discerns the occasion for most exalted panegyric, the bitterness of death is lost in the abounding triumph of the soul enlarged and set free, the attributes of woe are transformed into crowning glories.

It is just in this spirit of the Modenese poet that mankind has sought to take away from death its sting, from the grave its victory. That solemn moment in which, for those who have gone before and for us who are to follow, the eye of sense beholds naught save the ending of the world, the entrance upon a black and silent eternity, the eye of faith declares to be the supreme moment of a new birth for the disenthralled soul, the introduction to a new era of life compared with which the present one is not worthy of the name. Τίς δ' οἶδέν, exclaims Euripides,

Τίς δ' οἶδέν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἔστι κατθανεῖν,
Τὸ κατθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν;

Who can tell but that this which we call life is really death, from which what we call death is an awakening? From this vantage ground of thought the human soul comes to look without dread upon the termination of this terrestrial existence. The failure of the bodily powers, the stoppage of the fluttering pulse, the cold stillness upon the features so lately wreathed in smiles of merriment, the corruption of the tomb, the breaking of the ties of love, the loss of all that has given value to existence, the dull blankness of irremediable sorrow, the knell of everlasting farewells, — all this is seized upon by the sovereign imagination of man and transformed into a scene of transcending glory, such as in all the vast career of the universe is reserved for humanity alone. In the highest of creatures the Divine immanence has acquired sufficient concentration and steadiness to survive the dissolution of the flesh and assert an individuality untrammelled by the limitations which in the

present life everywhere persistently surround it. Upon this view death is not a calamity but a boon, not a punishment inflicted upon Man, but the supreme manifestation of his exceptional prerogative as chief among God's creatures. Thus the faith in immortal life is the great poetic achievement of the human mind, it is all-pervasive, it is concerned with every moment and every aspect of our existence as moral individuals, and it is the one thing that makes this world inhabitable for beings constructed like ourselves. The destruction of this sublime poetic conception would be like depriving a planet of its atmosphere; it would leave nothing but a moral desert as cold and dead as the savage surface of the moon.

We have now to consider this supreme poetic achievement of man – his belief in his own Immortality – in the light of our modern studies of evolution; we must notice some distinctions between its earlier and later stages, and briefly examine some of the objections which have been alleged in the name of science against the validity of the belief.

Here, as in all departments of the efflorescence of the human mind, the beginnings were lowly, and necessarily so. Nothing very lofty or far-reaching could be expected from the kind of brain that was encased in the Neanderthal skull. Among existing savages there are tribes concerning which travellers have doubted whether they possess ideas that can properly be called religious. But wherever untutored humanity exists we find the conception of a world of ghosts more or less distinctly elaborated; the thronging simulacra of departed tribesmen linger near their accustomed haunts, keenly sensitive to favour or neglect, and quick to punish all infractions of the rules which the stern exigencies of life in the wilderness have prescribed for the conduct of the tribe. This crude primeval ghost-world is thus already closely associated with the ethical side of life, and out of this association have grown some of the most colossal governing agencies by which the development of human society has been influenced. It is therefore not without reason that modern students of anthropology devote so much time to animism and fetishism and other crude workings of that savage intelligence of which the primeval ghost-world is a product.

It is not at all unlikely that the savage's notion of ghosts may have originated chiefly in his experience of dreams, and this is the explanation at present most in favour. The sleeping warrior ranges far and wide over the country, while he chases the buffalo and joins in the medicine dance with comrades known to have died yet now as active and as voluble as himself, but suddenly the scene changes and he is back in his familiar hut surrounded by his people who can testify that he has not for a moment left them. It is not unlikely, I say, that the notion of one's conscious self as something which can quit the material body and return to it may have started in such often-repeated humble experiences. It can hardly be doubted, however, that this savage conception of the detachable conscious self is simply the primitive phase of the Christian conception of the conscious soul which dwells within the perishable body and quits it at death. Through many stages of elaboration and refinement the sequence between the two conceptions is unmistakable.

At this point the materialist interposes with an argument which he regards as crushing. He reminds us that if we would estimate the value of an idea, as of a race-horse or a mastiff, it is well to take a look at its pedigree. What, then, is to be said – he scornfully asks – of a doctrine of personal immortality which when reduced to its lowest terms is seen to have started in a savage's misinterpretation of his dreams? What more is needed to prove it unworthy of the serious attention of a scientific student of nature? On the other hand, the student whose mood is truly scientific will feel that one of mankind's cardinal beliefs must not be dismissed too lightly because of the crudeness and error in that primitive stratum of human thought in which it first took root. In his perceptions within certain limits the savage is eminently keen and accurate, but when it comes to intellectual judgments that go at all below the surface of things his mind is a mere farrago of grotesque fancies, wherein, nevertheless, some kernels of truth are here and there embedded. It is a long way from the dragon swallowing the sun to the interposition of the moon's dark body between us and that luminary. The dragon was a figment of fancy, but the eclipse was none the less a fact.

Now if we may take an illustration from the workings of an infant's mind, it is pretty clearly made out that as baby sits propped among his pillows and turns his eyes hither and thither in following his mother's movements to and fro in the room, she seems in coming toward him to enlarge and in going away to diminish in size, like Alice in Wonderland. It is only with the education of the eye and the small muscles which adjust it that the larger area subtended on the retina instantly means comparative nearness and the smaller area comparative remoteness. At first the sensations are interpreted directly, and the impression upon baby's nascent intelligence is a gross error. The mother is not waxing great and small by turns, but only approaching and receding. If, however, we consider that in baby's mind the enlarged retinal spot means more and the diminished spot less of the pleasurable feelings excited by a familiar and gracious presence, the approach of which is greeted with smiles and out-stretched arms, while its departure is bemoaned with cries and tears, we see that as to the essentials of the situation the dawning intelligence is entirely right, although its specific interpretation is quite wrong. Mamma has not really dwindled and vanished like the penny in a conjurer's palm, but has only flitted from the field of vision.

To come back now to our primeval savage, when he sees in a dream his deceased comrade and mistakes the vision for a reality, his error is not concerned with the most fundamental part of the matter. The all-important fact is that this dreaming savage has somehow acquired a mental attitude toward death which is totally different from that of all other animals, and is therefore peculiarly human. Throughout the half-dozen invertebrate branches or sub-kingdoms, where intelligence is manifested only in its lower forms of reflex action and instinct, we find no evidence that any creature has come to know of death. There is a sense, no doubt, in which we may say that the love of life is universal. As a rule, all animals shun danger, and natural selection maintains this rule by the pitiless slaughter of all delinquents, of all in whom the needful inherited tendencies are too weak. But in the lower animal grades and in the vegetal world the courting of life and the shrinking from death go on without conscious intelligence, as the blades of grass in a meadow or the clustering leaves upon a tree compete with one another for the maximum of exposure to sunshine until perhaps stout boughs and stems are warped or twisted in the struggle. Among invertebrates, even when we get so high as lobsters and cuttlefish, the consciousness attendant upon the seizing of prey and the escape from enemies probably does not extend beyond the facts within the immediate sphere of vision. Even among those ants that have marshalled hosts and grand tactics there is doubtless no such thing as meditation of death. Passing to the vertebrates, it is not until we reach the warm-blooded birds and mammals that we find what we are seeking. Among sundry birds and mammals we see indications of a dawning recognition of the presence of death. An early manifestation is the sense of bereavement when the maternal instinct is rudely disturbed, as in the cow mourning for her calf. This feeling goes a little way, but not a great way, beyond the sense of physical discomfort, and is soon relieved by milking. Much more intense and abiding is the feeling of bereavement among birds that mate for life, and among the higher apes, and it reaches its culmination in the dog whose intelligence and affections have been so profoundly modified through his immensely long comradeship with man. Nowhere in literature do we strike upon a deeper note of pathos than in Scott's immortal lines on the dog who starved while watching his young master's lifeless body, alone upon a Highland moor: —

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