

Transcription, January 2015:

Pall Mall Gazette 19(2904) (8 June 1874): 10-11 (anon.).

[p. 10]

‘The Moral Philosophy of Spiritualism.’

Every one who is tired of inconclusive gossip about the facts of spiritualism must be thankful to Mr. Wallace for raising a comparatively new question in the second of his essays on the subject in the *Fortnightly Review*. The whole of Mr. Wallace’s first article, and the greater part of his second, deal with matters of fact and of evidence, which we do not intend to discuss. But, in answering Professor Huxley, he is brought to consider what kind of morality and of religion spiritualism offers to its votaries, supposing its pretensions to be true. Professor Huxley had said that he had no time to give to the subject and that it scarcely interested him, because even if spirits did really “tattle,” tattle was a kind of conversation he did not care for. To this Mr. Wallace answers that the fact of the dead tattling shows that death makes very little difference to the habits of most of us, and this leads him to the question, What is the morality of spiritualism? This is a question which it is quite a relief to be able to ask, and to find Mr. Wallace ready to answer. We escape from the people who mutter and peep in dark séances, and from the mercenary wisdom which cries aloud in the streets that some conjurors have dealt a “death-blow to spiritualism.” By the “Open sesame” of granting facts to be true for the sake of argument, we are admitted to the pleasing science of hypothetics and the free fields of moral speculation.

Mr. Wallace’s position is that “Spiritualism is an experimental science, and affords the only true foundation for a true philosophy and a pure religion.” Spiritualist ethics, he says, are based on facts, and on a conception of man’s nature “testified to by daily experience.” “It must be remembered that these beliefs (unlike those of theology) will have a living efficacy, because they depend on *facts* occurring again and again in the family circle, constantly reiterating the same truths as the result of personal knowledge, and thus bringing home to the mind, even of the most obtuse, the absolute reality of that future existence in which our degree of happiness or misery will be directly dependent on the

[p. 11]

mental fabric we construct by our daily thoughts and words and actions here.” Now the value of a moral system depends upon its sanction, upon the efficacy of its motive power, or moral dynamic, and upon the ease or difficulty of teaching it to others. Has the morality of spiritualism a more imposing sanction, a more vigorous motive power, a more ready appeal to the untaught, than existing systems of morality possess? For the sake of brevity we may divide existing moral systems into those of the unthinking majority and of the thinking minority. The ethics of the majority of men are based on custom; on their experience, which tells them that custom gives to its edicts the sanction of rewards and punishments in this life; and on religion, which tells them that rewards and punishments are also awarded after death. An unreflecting rough hesitates to perjure himself or to kick his wife to death, because he fears an eternity of physical torture in the one case, or the inconvenience of some weeks’ imprisonment in the other. In minor morals he is guided by the customs of his class. He will not “peach,” for instance, because it is “low” or “bad form” to “peach.” This is a very crude morality, but it is pretty impressive; it is easily learned, and it is based, in part at least, upon experience. The part about which experience is silent—namely, a future of

rewards and punishments—only operates on great occasions; it is not every day that a man is tempted to commit perjury or deliberate murder, and when he is tempted he has a very definite prospect of fiery torment for a background to the proposed crime. The thinking minority of men supplement this morality with a moral dynamic or motive to action, which is not that of mere fear or mere self-seeking, but appeals in some way to the higher nature. With one the motive to conduct may be what Butler calls the love of God; with another, what Plato calls the desire to be like God; with Christians, as a rule, the desire to serve God; all which are names for the desire of perfection. The wish for perfection may take the shape of a love of “the beauty of holiness” and of order; or it may be diverted from self and from the conception of the Deity, and made to embrace all mankind in what is called the enthusiasm of humanity. People whose conduct is animated by any of these sentiments do not perhaps feel much influenced by the ideas of a life after death. They perceive motives enough for righteousness in this world, where, is one takes Emerson’s advice, and “looks to the centuries, not to the years,” experience plainly enough confesses that conduct leads to happiness.

Now, by what theory does Mr. Wallace offer, in the name of spiritualism, to replace these systems of ethics? Is his morality founded on more obvious and more generally accessible experience? is it, therefore, more easily taught? does it bring a nobler and more powerful motive to bear on conduct? Mr. Wallace states his theory of human nature in four propositions, of which we may omit the last, as it does not concern the matter in hand. He says:—1. “Man is a duality, consisting of an organized spiritual form, evolved coincidentally with and permeating the physical body, and having correspondent organs and development. 2. Death is the separation of this duality, and effects no change in the spirit, morally or intellectually. 3. Progressive evolution of the intellectual and moral nature is the destiny of individuals; the knowledge, attainments, and experience of earth life forming the basis of spirit life.” How and to what class of people does this theory “suggest,” as Mr. Wallace says it does, “motives more powerful than any which either religion or philosophy can supply”? In the first place, whatever may be the value of motives founded on beliefs as to the Deity, spiritualism seems to supply none. People who ask questions on this matter “never get more than opinions, or more frequently the statement that the spirits have no more actual knowledge of these subjects than they had while on earth.” Thus the powerful factor of beliefs grounded on faith is taken away, while faith itself is rendered useless. Spiritualism “appeals to evidence instead of faith.” Again, this moral system, apparently, can only be taught through actual evidence presented to each individual. In this it differs from the theory of Swedenborg, which relies on the testimony of exceptional seers. It would be easy to make fun of the necessity for having mediums and manifestations in every nursery and every school. And it has not been found, as a rule, by spiritualists that the spirits are fond of helping to convert sceptics. But supposing society reconstituted, and tables of the law revered in a new sense, the difficulty arises, *cui bono?* who would be the better? The minority have already all the motives to conduct they desire; the majority would be positively deprived of a rare but powerful motive to self-restraint. Do spiritualists suppose that the brutal man will be checked in his brutality by the thought that he is building up a brutal “mental fabric” for his abode in the next world? Far from that, he will only be encouraged by the abolition of a physical hell; or perhaps he will even reason that, as long as his mental fabric is pretty satisfactory on the whole, he may indulge himself in a few casual crimes. And thus “many a man will owe his ruin to a murder that perhaps he thought little of at the time.” Nor will the victims of the emancipated rough be much consoled by the thought of a heaven where there are no “winged angels” or “golden harps,” but only the continuance of a more or less battered

“mental fabric.” Clearly education must do much to refine us before the watery future of the spirits can be a satisfactory substitute for the hell of theology.

We shall not press the objection to the spiritualist morality that it seems to be purely self-regarding, and a form of other-worldliness. It is surely enough to point out that it can only be taught by turning society into a séance, and making the family circle a very noisy and disagreeable place; and that it supplies no new motive to cultivated believers in immortality, while it deprives uncultivated superstition of its one redeeming quality. These considerations do not affect the truth or scientific value of Mr. Wallace’s facts, but they seem to invalidate the moral system which he has rather hurriedly based on modern spiritualism.

[\[Return\]](#)

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.