June 28, 1890. 

LIGHT. 

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Individuality and Pre-existence.

Sirs,—In view of the point at issue between yourself and Mr. A. R. Wallace, on the one hand, and Mr. Paice, on the other, I should like to recall attention to a consideration I urged in "Letters" of August 17th of last year, upon the same subject, as it has been quite ignored, and yet seems to me to deserve an answer. It is, that upon those who believe in a "soul," as distinct and separable from the body, rests the onus of proving origination with the body, and not upon those who uphold the doctrine which Lessing described as "the oldest, and one which the human understanding, before sophistication had distracted and weakened it, immediately adopted." For every logical Spiritualist, I submit that the a priori presumption must be decided against origination of the human soul or individuality at birth, because directly we recognise the soul, or principle of conscious individuality (however else we choose to name it), as distinct and separable from the physical body, we have to show cause why an association which does not imply dependence of the psychical upon the physical, nevertheless does imply origination of the former in or by the latter. The reason why the presumption has been reversed is perfectly simple and obvious. It is the old and almost universal mistake of confusing manifestation with existence, and condition with cause. The individual consciousness is first manifested to us at birth; we see its subsequent manifestations as growth pari passu with organic development, and its mature expression as consequent on physical maturity. It requires an unusual effort of imagination to conceive the lipsing infant, just learning to name the commonest objects, as masking an individuality itself the moulding principle of the organism which is to relate it to this earthly stage of thought and action, and which it informs as the operation proceeds. What we see is for a long time predominantly physical, or related to the physical life, and undoubtably as it seems to us, we make the psyche totally identical with the earthly personal consciousness, we should postpone the moment of its independent essentiality, and therefore the power of surviving physical death, to a period of marked differentiation from mere human animality. But if defect of manifestation is no proof of defect of existence, I am at a loss to understand why the beginning of manifestation should be assumed to be the beginning of existence.

For Spiritualists there is no other reason, except the crude and easily answered one (first advanced by Tertullian) of want of memory of a former existence, for assuming psychical origination at birth, than just the unavoidable dependence of mental powers and character for manifestation, upon familiarity with the material and experience which those powers have to use, and upon which that character has to react—a familiarity only to be obtained in time and by organic facility. And if anyone will ask himself honestly the question, why he believes in the origination of psychical individuality at physical birth, he cannot but answer that it is just because of certain physical conditions of manifestation, and yet he must see upon the least reflection that those conditions, that early imperfections and gradual growth of manifestation, must be precisely the same on the supposition that behind them is a mature spiritual potentiality struggling into expression in this world, and building up its organism for such expression, as on the supposition that "the soul" is a product of parental organisation. I do not exaggerate the importance of laying the onus probandi on the right shoulders. The doctrine of pre-existence has too long been prejudiced by an illegitimate demand for extrinsic proof, as if it were a non-natural or extravagant conception. Its great offence really is that to modern Western Spiritualists it is still a novelty. As long as we accepted human immortality merely upon the authority of supposed "revelation," it was natural that the testimony of mere appearance as to psychical origin should remain unquestioned, though a similar appearance, as to our end was contradicted by the doctrine. Spiritualists believe that they have now independent proof of the fallacy of the appearance at one end of the earthly life; it is not rather strange, logically, that they cannot reverse a presumption due only to appearance at the other end? And is it not still more strange, that having, as they believe, positive evidence of materialisation by the plastic power of already existent and independent spirit, they should be unable to recognise in the phenomenon of birth just a normal and regular case of such materialisation?

Thus much as to the mere a priori presumption applicable to the inquiry when we enter upon it. I claim that we who uphold the doctrine of pre-existence have shifted the burden of proof.
 Upon you who maintain the origination of the soul—the surviving
principle—at birth. The meaning of this is that you are not entitled
lo ask us for positive evidence of pre-existence till you have
added positive evidence to the contrary. You are the plaintiffs,
we are the defendants in the argument. It is you who stand
against you. Authority, it is true, must not decide for us; but
far as you are Spiritualists—who are traversing the apparent
presumption afforded by facts which you admit—nay, claim—to
be positively proved. And you have formidable authority
against you. Authority, it is true, must not decide for us; but
having regard to the contemptuous language sometimes used in
opposition to the doctrines of Pre-existence and Re-incarnation,
it may not be irrelevant again to remind disputants of the state-
mont of the profound scholar, and student of this subject, Dr.
Henry More, that every philosopher who, independently of
revelation, had accepted the immortality of the soul, had admitted
also its pre-existence. Of this opinion also was More's distin-
guished contemporary, Glenville, who has argued the question
you, sir, contend—against the abstract proposition that what­
ever has a beginning in time is in time perishable. But in
applying this principle we must remember that when we speak
pre-existent spiritual forms and forces, and you introduce
into—nay, as the very motive power of—your
physical process. And when you have made that admission and
introduced that agency, you have made it simply impossible to
think out this distinction for myself.) But to see analogies
one must have an eye for them, and they are not per-
ceptible to anyone who has conceived a dislike to the lesson
which they might otherwise teach. The usual objection, how­
er, is that analogies are to be mistrusted. I be­
lieve, on the contrary, that real analogy is the clue to
discovery, and the principle of all generalisation; and that
the objection is only a mistatement of the obvious necessity
of severely examining our supposed analogies to see whether
they are really such, or are only superficial and casual resem-
blances. But for this purpose we must start with some guiding
principle, such as I conceive to be the law, or generalisation,
that the processes and ideas of nature are similar in very
different orders, and on very different scales of her phenomena.
But I have already trespassed too much upon your space.
June 15th, 1890. C. C. M.