

Individuality and Pre-existence.

SIR,—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 "LIGHT" 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 decidedly 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 confounding 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 lisping 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 undoubtedly as it seems to me, if 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 on 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 imperfection 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; is it 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 to ask us for positive evidence of pre-existence till you have adduced positive evidence to the contrary. You are the plaintiff, we are the defendants in the argument. It is you—so 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 statement 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 distinguished contemporary, Glanville, who has argued the question in an elaborate treatise. Of the Fathers, one of the greatest, Origen, was with us. You, on the other hand, may console yourselves with the authority of the Fifth General Council (Constantinople, 553), which anathematised our opinion.

One word now as to the specious, if not powerful, argument of Mr. Wallace, that psychical growth or development implies a psychical beginning, and that we may just as logically place that beginning at its apparent point—physical birth—as at some far-removed period prior to it. Mr. Wallace was contending—as you, sir, contend—against the abstract proposition that whatever has a beginning in time is in time perishable. But in applying this principle we must remember that when we speak of anything beginning and ending in time, by these expressions we can only intend changes of modality. To the metaphysical Spiritualist the question of temporal origin cannot concern essentiality, and belongs only to mode and manifestation. The transcendent identity is to be conceived, I submit, as taking up and transmuted its successive phenomenal modes of consciousness, and its growth, progress, or development is not to be conceived in *esse*, but only as a realisation in the experience which belongs to time. That a mode of consciousness originates at birth is unquestionable—if we understand that all "origination" is only relative to the phenomenal order, and particular plane in that order—and every mode, *as such*, is also perishable in the same sense in which it originates. It is only the *objective aspect* of the soul of which evolution postulates origination. Now I can quite suppose either Mr. Wallace or you replying:—"Your meaning is very obscure, but adopting your obscure language, the argument against you is equally valid, for what you call the objective aspect of the soul—which seems to be equivalent to its consciousness—may just as well originate in this physical life as in any previous one." The answer is that this would be an assumption opposed to the new conception of evolution necessitated by the hypothetical admission of pre-existing spirit, even as mere potentiality. For then evolution is merely a maimed and one-sided doctrine, if it does not take into account the correlative realisation of spirit at every point of the material advance, not only from species to species, but by variation within the specific difference. The transcendental doctrine, to which that of individual pre-existence belongs, attributes to the urgency of spirit seeking adequate expression all the subjective laws, the furthering variations, and the phenomena of physical evolution. If you admit the transcendental for a single moment, at that moment you admit pre-existent spiritual forms and forces, and you introduce spiritual agency 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 suggest that individual humanity starts at one and the same time upon its lowest and upon its highest levels of earthly attainment. Such an assumption would then be too evidently seen to be utterly perverse and at variance with the physical analogy and relation.

Mr. Wallace, at the close of his letter, says of the theory of Re-incarnation, that it "is unsupported by any facts or analogies either in the material or the spiritual universe." Well, I confess I do not know much about the spiritual universe; but I do know that the striking analogies to this doctrine which I find in the material universe were just what first directed my own attention to the doctrine in question. But those analogies can only be appreciated by such as are conversant with the great truth—itsself abundantly illustrated by physical analogies—that whatever in nature happens on the small scale happens also on the large one, and *vice versa*. Then we shall understand the

analogical presumption that the daily life of man, the alternations of his waking and sleeping states, are representative of the larger cycles of his being, alternate objective and subjective conditions; in other words, periods of incarnate activity, and spiritual rest and renovation. Another analogy I find in the tree, or rather in the least twig of the least bough of the tree, which sheds and renews its leaf—understand the objective life—season after season, and draws its nutriment therefrom; the case which perhaps best of all illustrates the distinction so puzzling to many, between the earthly personality—the leaf—and the successively larger individualities answering to twig, bough, branch, trunk, &c., which it subserves, perishing when it has performed this function. Not to understand this distinction is fatally to misconceive the Re-incarnation doctrine as held by its best exponents. (I am indebted to Madame Blavatsky, many years ago, for making me try to think out this distinction for myself.) But to see analogies one must have an eye for them, and they are not perceptible to anyone who has conceived a dislike to the lesson which they might otherwise teach. The usual objection, however, is that analogies are to be mistrusted. I believe, on the contrary, that *real* analogy is the clue to discovery, and the principle of all generalisation; and that the objection is only a misstatement of the obvious necessity of severely examining our supposed analogies to see whether they are really such, or are only superficial and casual resemblances. 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.