

Transcription, February 2015:

Buchanan's Journal of Man 1(5) (June 1887): 13-18 (Joseph Buchanan).

[p. 13]

‘The Grand Symposium of the Wise Men of the Nineteenth Century.’

The question of our future destiny is paramount to all others in dignity and importance. Upon this subject all wise men must have clear and positive views. The editor of the *Christian Register* of Boston, according to the very common idea that men in prominent positions as professors and decorated with college honors must be the wisest, thought it well to ask them if science could take cognizance of the question of immortality, and if its verdict was for or against a future life. Such questions he addressed to twenty-three professors, presidents, doctors of laws, etc. But he did not reflect that there were several hundred gentlemen in Boston who had more knowledge on this subject, and who could give him positive and reliable information, and he entirely forgot that the only scientist who has examined this question from the physiological standpoint resides in Boston.

The editor did not obtain what he was ostensibly seeking, but he did obtain an amount of evidence of ignorance, in high places, which I should be happy to record, but for the fact that it would occupy more than half of one number of the *Journal of Man*. Nevertheless, I cannot deprive my readers of the pleasure and amusement derived from this correspondence. I have condensed the responses into a readable compass leaving out their useless verbiage, and putting them in a poetic form, as poetry best expresses the essence and spirit of an author’s thought. I think the learned gentlemen, if they could peruse these doggerel rhymes, would acknowledge that their meaning has been expressed even more plainly and forcibly than in their own prose. The reader will observe that of the whole twenty-three only two appear to have any knowledge on the subject, the famous A. R. Wallace and the brilliant Dr. Coues. The following is the essence or rather quintessence of the voluminous responses in the order in which they were published. The learned gentlemen ought to feel grateful for the increased candor, brevity and explicitness of their replies, when boiled down into the rhyming form, bringing out new beauties which were not apparent in the original nebulous condition of vagueness in which some of them disclaim opposition to immortality, while their only immortality is that of atoms and force.

While there is something amusing in these responses (which I shall carefully file away for the future), which may furnish matter for surprise and laughter in a more enlightened age, and which may cause the writers, if they live long enough, to realize a feeling of shame for the wilful ignorance or affectation of ignorance displayed, we cannot overlook the very serious fact that the educational leadership of our country is in the hands of men of whom a large proportion are destitute of the very foundation of the sentiment of religion, while another large portion are so utterly regardless of scientific truth as to ignore the best attested facts, which are continually in progress within their reach—a degree of bigotry which is not surpassed in the history of the “Dark Ages.” Verily the shadow of those ages rests upon the leading institutions of to-day.

1. Response of Prof. Charles A. Young, LL.D., of Princeton College.

I must confess this creed of Immortality

Hath not in the light of science much reality;
But all such questions are beyond our science,
And revelation is our sole reliance.

2. Prof. James D. Dana, LL.D., of Yale College.

Though very much hurried—not to say flurried,
I will venture to say, as my answer to-day,
There is nothing in science to prevent our reliance
On the solemn reality of life's immortality.

3. Prof. Asa Gray, LL.D., Harvard University.

Were the gospel light out, we should all be in doubt,
For science looks on, astride of the fence,
And never can tell us the whither or whence;
But I shrewdly suspect it is slightly inclined
To harmonize now with the Orthodox mind.

4. Prof. Joseph Leidy, M.D., LL.D., University of Pennsylvania.

Your doctrine of life eternal
And everything else supernal
Might well be pronounced an infernal;
Delusion!
For Solomon said at an ancient date
That everything dieth early or late,
And man or beast, or small or great,
Hath but one fate.
Your future life is an awful bore;
I've tried life once, and I want it no more.
You may guess and imagine o'er and o'er,
But where's the proof?
Yet nevertheless, I won't deny
You may live without brains in realms on high,
But as for myself I'd rather not try,
I'd rather die.

5. Simon Newcomb, LL.D., F.R.A.S., etc.

Science deals only with matters of sense,
It has nothing to do with a mere pretence.
'Tis one thing to say, that the soul survives,
And another to say that a cat has nine lives;

But I do not say the one or the other,
Nor affirm nor deny that the monkey's my brother.
I've nothing to say of angels or sprites,
Or the spooks that appear in the darkest of nights.
For if we can't see them, nor chase them nor tree them,
They can't be detected, nor caught and dissected,
So science must be mum—and I, too, am dumb.

6. J. P. Lesley, State Geologist of Pennsylvania, an ex-Reverend.

Science knows nothing about this matter,
But fancy may come to talk and flatter.
And as all mankind in this agree,
There's a future life for you and for me.
Let science slide; we'll go with the tide,
Uplift ourselves above the sod,
And claim to be a part of God;
Though God extends through time and space,
While man, alas! soon ends his race,
And whether he lives his own life again
Or is lost in the infinite, I do not think plain.

7. Lester F. Ward, A.M., of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

As for immortal life, I must confess,
Science hath never, never answered "yes."
Indeed all psycho-physical sciences show,
If we'd be logical, we must answer no!
Man cannot recollect before being born,
And hence his future life must be "in a horn."
There must be *parte ante*, if there's a *parte post*,
And logic thus demolishes every future ghost.
Upon this subject the voice of science
Has ne'er been ought but stern defiance.
Mythology and magic belong to "*limbus fatuorum*"
If fools believe them, we scientists deplore 'em
But, nevertheless, the immortal can't be lost,
For every atom has its bright eternal ghost.

8. Edward Morse, Ph.D., of Salem.

That immortality which Science denies
Cannot be admitted by those who are wise,
For if we give up and concede Immortality,

There's nothing to check its wide Universality.
The toad-stool and thistle, the donkey and bear
Must live on forever,—the Lord knows where.
I tell you, dear sir, that Science must wake up
And grapple these spooks to crush them, and break up
This world of delusion of Phil. D's and D.D's,
Who are all in the dark, as dear Huxley agrees,
Proud Huxley's "The Prince of Agnostics," you see,
And Huxley and I do sweetly agree.

9. Prof. Josiah Parsons Cooke, LL.D. of Harvard University.

I freely confess that the life of the dead
Is a mystery alike to the heart and the head
Of all the mortals that dwell on earth,
Although revealed since our Saviour's birth,
And I fully believe in the old-fashioned God,
Who, walking in Eden, made man of a clod;
And I fully believe the same Deity still
Controls all things, here by the fiat of will.

10. Edward D. Cope, A.M., Ph.D., author of "Theology of Evolution." Dr. Cope answers in a very voluminous and intricate manner, but the following is the essence of his answer.

Of life eternal little can we know,
And yet we hope some glimmerings may grow,
By patient inference as facts appear.
I hope there's something coming near.
Science but sees extinction in our death,
And life the incident of fleeting breath.
We travel round the ologies to see
Naught but a grand revolving mystery;
But then if we have a controlling mind,
Why should not God have the same kind?
"Kinetogenesis" was ruled by will,
The conscious thought goes with it still,
And as conscious thought erst "ruled the roast,"
Why may it not become a ghost?
But as ghosts are like a vapor mixed,
All speculation is lost betwixt
The possible this, and the possible that,
And so philosophy falls flat.

11. Sir John William Dawson, LL.D., F.R.S., Principal of McGill University, Montreal.

We are bound to believe in eternal life,
'Tis an instinct which in humanity's rife,
Of savages, some have been found so low,
As neither a God or a heaven to know;
If civilized men sink down to their level,
They are on the highway to the realms of the Devil.

12. J. Sterry Hunt, LL.D., F.R.S.

In a terrible hurry, I cannot say much,
But Science, I think, opposes all such
Belief in the future. But God is so great,
I accept what he gives as my future state.

13. William James, M.D., Prof. Philosophy, Harvard University.

I can only say my philosophy floats
In the German life-boat of Prof. Lotze,
At one opinion we both arrive,
That all who ought to will survive.

14. Benjamin Apthorp Gould, LL.D., Astronomer, Cambridge.

My faith is firm, but I have no time
To explain it all in this tuneful rhyme.
Science cannot say much, I fear,
But must admit that God is here,
And if the priests would let us alone,
Perhaps a little more might be known.
Spirit is fact, and this I assume,
For Matter is nothing but solid Gloom.

15. Alfred R. Wallace, the compeer of Darwin.

Spiritual science has told the whole story
Of the claims of mankind to realms of glory.
Our facts are abundant, harmonious and true,
They satisfy me and should satisfy you.
No baseless hypothesis shapes our knowledge,
No dogmatic rule derived from a college,
As we fearless explore the worlds unseen,
And learn what all their mysteries mean.
The science we study is truly Divine,

They only reject it who are mentally blind.

16. Thomas Hill, D.D., LL.D., Ex-President of Harvard.

As for life after death, a life without breath,
Though science says no, I don't think it's so,
For 'tis well understood our God is too good
To create us and cherish, and then let us perish.

17. Prof. Asaph Hall, LL.D., of the National Observatory, Washington.

Metaphysics and science are still our reliance,
Taking them for our guide, we can't quite decide,
But as we incline, a doctrine we find.

18. Prof. Elliott Coues, M.D., Ph.D., Scientist and Theosophist.

I think that science is bound to answer
Every question that comes to hand, sir.
Then why do some scientists fail to acknowledge
Discoveries made outside of their college?
There's a reason for all things that come to pass,
And no man likes to be proved an ass;
And hence they refuse to agree with St. Paul,
The spiritual body is all in all.

19. Herbert Spencer, British Philosopher, as reported by Rev. M. J. Savage.

'Tis all in a muddle we cannot make out,
Nor does evolution diminish the doubt;
The facts that we get prove very refractory,
And I cannot find anything quite satisfactory.

20. Prof. Charles S. Pierce, A.M., of Johns Hopkins University, (a voluminous reply).

I've looked this question through and through,
But for future life the prospect's blue.
Psychic Researchers have gathered up much,
But it crumbles to dust beneath my touch.
'Tis nothing but rubbish that Society brings,
For the ghosts they have found are the stupidest things,
Poor "starveling" idiots, all of that ilk,
Who are coming back here to cry over "spilled milk."
Serenely we smile at "the lamp of Aladdin,"

And stories of ghosts about this world gadding.
Yet after all, I don't believe in Spencer,
In Kant or in Comte, or in any of them, sir;
Nor in Christendom's sacred and reverend creed,
Though weaklings adopt it because they have need;
But I believe in this world's events,
And a life regulated by common sense.

21. Daniel Coit Gilman, LL.D., President of Johns Hopkins University.

Man hath soul-freedom here on earth,
And from Almighty God hath birth;
Therefore, should stand in faith sublime,
And fear no science of our time.

22. F. A. P. Barnard, President of Columbia College, New York.

Your question stands outside of science,
Of any science that is mine,
The only doctrine worth reliance,
Comes from the old Bible—Still Divine.

23. Prof. T. Huxley, British Philosopher, etc.

If a soul works with brains, can it work without?
Would seem to be a matter somewhat in doubt.
If you know that it can, pray tell me why?
If you know that it can't, you know more than I.
You may answer such questions if you know how,
But I'll not wait a moment to hear you now!

[\[Return\]](#)

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