# IMMORTALITY AND IDEOLOGY

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THE decay of an effective faith in "the life of the world to come" has not, on the whole, been due to conscious and reasoned rejection but to the action of non-rational causes arising from the character of a scientific civilization." This opinion of Dr. W. R. Matthews, Dean of St. Paul's, London, may be reinforced by the form that rejection takes when it does become conscious and reasoned. A case in point is Mr. Corliss Lamont's book, *The Illusion of Immortality*,[1] first published in 1935 and now revised, with John Dewey's laudatory review of the first edition printed as an Introduction. There are many useful facts and much cogent reasoning in the book, and yet the impression is borne in upon the reader that the argument in it is led rather than leads. This is not just the result of the author's having made up his mind on which side truth lies; unless we had convictions we should find nothing worthy of debate. It is caused by a technique that to-day is becoming more the rule than the exception in the presentation of convictions and that has come to be known as ideological thinking. Ideological thinking is essentially a rationalisation built upon unexamined, but strongly held, principles. It can most easily be detected in the too easy, and sometimes flippant, handling of the case to be proved; the adversary is underestimated and in fact never called into the ring; instead, an Aunt Sally is set up to be knocked down. It can be seen also, though less clearly, when the claim to admit the premises of the opposite side is made, and yet contradictory assumptions are introduced. It makes use of all the devices for confounding judgment now so familiar in the political sphere: over-simplification of issues, including the grouping of all opposition under one contemptuous heading; the attribution of all evils under the sun, however contradictory, to this 'enemy', and the use of all evidence, relevant and irrelevant, to support the inevitable rightness of 'the party.' The chief result of all this is that the real clash of principles is hardly discernible, so that wild accusations and unmeasured claims take the place of the give and take of rational deliberation.

The basic preoccupations of ideologies banish objectivity from the start. Their own values load each fact with an emotional charge, which explodes whenever it is touched. No doubt

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1. The Illusion of Immortality; by Corliss Lamont. Philosophical Library. New York, 1950. pp. 316. $3.95.

Mr. Lamont was scrupulously sincere when he wrote in his original preface: "When I started my study some years ago, I both desired and believed in a life after death. Hence, such bias as may have entered into my work in the field of immortality concepts was a bias in favour of survival, not against it. I have tried to follow faithfully where facts and logic have led." (p. xi). But he could go on to write: "For if men give up belief in a life beyond, then all but a few mystics who think they can sink their being into the mind of God must of necessity devote themselves to the affairs of this world; and the modern God being one who hardly ever gets into action here below, men must also rely on their own powers and potentialities. As long, however, as a future life is thought to exist, men will devote to it much time and attention that could be used for earthly enterprises." (p. 19). Here both the initial assumptions and the conclusions, overt and implied, show quite another bias and one not in the least dependent upon facts and logic, but upon several highly-debatable presuppositions. Among other things, if you accuse any one of wasting time you must establish what is a profitable employment of time for people in general and prove that he in particular is idle. Ideological thinking is less complicated. Just as democracies are decadent and capitalistic countries are imperialistic, so other-wordly creeds are dope—an ideological slogan with a distinguished pedigree. To have a bias in favour of the opposition means quite simply in ideological circles to hasten to declare it guilty of sabotaging the party programme. For an idea or an individual to be in opposition is *ipso facto*, an admission of guilt. In the ideological court the accused invariably confess—and always to the same crimes.

Mr. Lamont holds a naturalistic philosophy, and his true quarrel is with those who would bring the category of the supernatural into their picture of the universe. Comte and Feuerbach are seemingly his spiritual forbears, since he subscribes to the belief that religion, where it is not merely primitive science, is the projection of desire by fantasy. 'God is the exemplar of all that man could wish to be' (p. 5.) Ideological warfare, however, demands one simply-defined issue and one plainly-labelled enemy. If the issue is '*lebensraum*' the enemy are 'encirclers'; if 'peace', they are 'war-mongers'. Here the sacred cause is 'mortality' and the enemy are 'immortalists'. The title is as conveniently comprehensive as 'fascist', 'Communist', or 'reactionary'. Beliefs about survival may have little in com-

mon, being set within the context of particular and sometimes mutually exclusive religions or philosophies. To Mr. Lamont, provided they posit individual survival, they are all much of a muchness and all tarred with the same brush of wishful thinking. To be an immortalist is to subject oneself to an illusion—one might wonder whether 'delusion' were not the better word, seeing that some systems of thought consider the physical world to be an illusion—not only foolish in itself but fostered by vested interests of a sinister kind. As Public Enemy No. 1, the illusion of immortality is made out to be wider, earlier and more fundamental than religion itself. 'God would be dead if there were no immortality' (p. 6.) Alternatively, if you believe in God and not in immortality, the problem of immortality is at least as important to you as the problem of belief in God, Mr. Lamont insists.

With an unduly simplified perspective on the genesis of immortality-beliefs goes a caricatured account of the practical results of those beliefs. Sometimes contradictory effects are blithely assumed. The following sentences are separated only by a mild remark about the conservative (i.e. detrimental) ininfluence of religion: 'It would not be so simple to persuade millions of men to sacrifice their lives in frightful wars if they recognized that death was the absolute end' 'The very fact that disbelief in immortality can be an important factor in stirring the masses of the people to militant action makes many sophisticated members of the upper classes reluctant to have the truth about death too widely broadcast (pp. 240-1). Even the unsophisticated of all classes might wonder how the same belief could act at once as a recruiting sergeant and as a pacifist crusade and might even guess that 'militant action' and 'frightful wars' can very easily be no more than different ideological names for the same events. Again, the fighting spirit of Mohammedanism and the other-wordly emphasis of medieval Catholicism are both counted to immortality for unrighteousness, while the 'impressive outpouring of energy and devotion' of the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies is commended as the result of their here-and-now creed. Yet Islam and Western Christendom have not inconsiderable civilizations to their credit, and Communism, in spite of the praise Mr. Lamont gives it for positively disbelieving *not only in immortality, but in God as well*, has yet to prove itself either pacific or culturally creative. The social repercussions of belief in a life after death are, of course, exceedingly complex and likely

to resemble one another as little as a tenth-century Viking and a twentieth-century spiritualist might do. Even within the Christian tradition, consider the difference of impact upon their contemporary social pattern of, say, an Egyptian anchorite, a Dominican friar, a feudal baron, a Lollard, a Tudor king, an Anabaptist, a Scottish covenanter, a Moravian pietist, a Wesleyan coal-heaver, a Quaker merchant and an Anglican archbishop, all holding the same faith in another life. No sufficient analysis, moreover, can be given in terms of credal, cultural, or economic groupings alone; the individual may contribute to the mental climate in which he is set as much as he draws from it. Ideology will have none of this. The immortality-delusion is a poison in the body politic, harmless only when it is so weak as to cease to make any decisive impression, as is assumed to have been the case among the ancient Jews and Greeks. The consequences of believing that immortality and its parent wish-fulfilment are the prime and only begetters of religions and that the effects of these can be quantitatively observed are extremely odd when they are applied to past history. They are equally fanciful when projected into the immediate future. 'Mortalists of the world unite—you have nothing to lose but your illusions!' as the slogan of the new golden age on our doorstep seems to suggest that illusions are not the monopoly of one faith.

Ideology cherishes orthodoxy as much as it covers heresy with obloquy. The orthodoxy of mortality is based upon the assumption that the empirical sciences are able to determine ultimate reality and, in particular, upon the dogma of 'monistic psychology.' 'Testifying always and everywhere to the union, one and inseparable, between the personality and the body; the monistic view stands to-day as one of the greatest achievements in the history of ideas' (p. 131). 'In short, the monistic relationship between personality or mind and body is an established psychological law. And in the fact of this law God can bring about immortality only by becoming a miracle-worker in the old style, only by violating his own considered decrees and only by conjuring up out of nowhere resurrection bodies, etheric bodies and all the rest.' (p. 204). Science with mingled voices (chiefly those of biology, sociology, psychology and medical science) has spoken; the case is finished. The query as to whether the sciences in question are entitled to pronounce their confident 'verdict' is brushed aside, since science has been 'more fruitful in the progress and extension of truth' than re-

liance on religion. Reason 'at its best and most successful' and scientific method are the same. If there are any further doubts, Professor Leuba's questionnaire of 1914 showed that believers in immortality among the less eminent scientists were 59.3 per cent, while among the more eminent they were only 36.9 per cent, 'thus showing that the greater the scientist the greater the likelihood of lack of faith in immortality' (p. 267). No doubt in present-day Russia the percentage would be nil in each case; gratifying indeed, though not displaying the persuasive correlation of unbelief with eminence. The warning of Professor John Macmurray might well be heeded here: "The general beliefs which scientists tend to hold about the world in general because they are scientists are neither conclusions of science nor involved in the systematic structure of science. They are, in the strict sense, prejudices; and they are the natural prejudices of minds pre-occupied with a limited field of experience and as such are less trustworthy than the opinions of other non-philosophic thinkers' (*Boundaries of Science* p. 23-4).

The categories of the sciences are unable to pose, let alone answer, metaphysical questions. The nature of the 'self' or personality, which is involved in the issue of immortality, is undoubtedly a metaphysical issue. Though Mr. Lamont allows science to deliver the verdict, he is eager to show that philosophy toes the correct party line also. In this case, it is unfortunately necessary to speak of 'tendency' instead of anything more definite. Nevertheless, this triumphant 'tendency' reveals the antiquated spectre of 'dualism' on the way out and itself is seen 'in the rise of Hegelian Idealism, naturalistic humanism, the up-to-date Naturalism of John Dewey and others, and some variety of Materialism, the Dialectical Materialism of Karl Marx and the Communists being the dominant species in contemporary thought' (p. 124). No tendency, all the same, however dominant or up-to-date, is final and may very well represent the peculiar myopia of an age, as well as its insights. 'None are so blind,' says Morris R. Cohen, referring to those who deny the validity of metaphysics from the basis of an assumed materialistic metaphysics, 'none are so blind as those who will not see.[2] The possibility of immortality, in spite of the findings of science on the body-mind relationship, must re-

2. Morris R. Cohen, who figures in Mr. Lamont's pantheon of illustrious mortalists and who therefore may be presumed free from immortalist bias, has found John Dewey's philosophy, 'dominated throughout by what I must regard as an unwise fear of other-wordliness' (*Preface to Logic* p. 206). This may in part explain Dewey's admiration for our author's 'candor'.

main an open question for philosophy to investigate, unless ideology arbitrarily closes it.

Ideological tactics do not aim at proving a case by isolating the essential point at issue, but by building up a myth of irresistible strength for the party position, so that opposition seems at once absurd, criminal and unavailing. So Mr. Lamont argues now that belief in immortality is irrational, now that it is immoral, and yet again that the hypothesis of mortality is simply (as befits the method of science) an overwhelming probability. The use of large figures to stupefy the imagination and convey the impression of an unanswerable case is a device that was acidly exposed in the late Professor L. Susan Stebbing's *Philosophy and the Physicists*. Mr. Lamont is fond of presenting numbers (written out for maximum effect)—'25,000,000,000 miles', '300,000,000,000,000 nebulae', '600,000 fibers', '265,000,000,000,000 cells'—in order to convince us that God is not likely to trouble much about the human race, or that, mind being a function of the brain, a person is simply an organism.

If the suggestion of mathematical reasoning awes, the imputation of 'thinking in pictures' draws ridicule. Mr. Lamont finds it amusing and pathetic that immortalists should describe the environment of heaven and the mode of personal existence in eternity in terms of the present world 'He has no difficulty in showing that ideas of heaven have been conditioned by the cultures in which they have been entertained,' writes John Dewey. Just as conditioning by environment, while never absent, can never be considered absolute without denying, in consequence, the possibility of human knowledge, so picture-thinking and anthropomorphism are inevitable conditions of human thinking. The attempt to think of the non-temporal and supramundane naturally enough draws its images from the familiar temporal and material world; and its validity is not altogether dependent upon its success in freeing itself from these images. Jibes about Eskimos finding a hot hell attractive or Anglo-Saxons keeping their racial characteristics for the purposes of recognition and self-esteem prove nothing but the strength of ideological prejudices.

A wider issue opens from this last point. John Dewey states that the keynote of the book is in the sentence: 'What the religious liberals or modernists do is to abstract certain values and activities from the material world and transplant them to a supernatural one' (p. 146). Those who accept the

reality of the supernatural believe the contrary to be the case; values and acts have currency in the natural world because of their status in the supernatural one. There is a two-way traffic that makes the eternal a concern in this world and not only in the next. This affects the notion that belief in immortality is nothing more than an illicit turning of wishes into proof. As Dr. Inge, late Dean of St. Paul's, wrote: 'Desire does not determine truth, but truth does determine desire and makes itself known through and as desire' (*Faith and its Psychology* p. 158). The desire for immortality, whatever the truth about it may be, is not simply on a level with a craving to be 'as big as all space' or 'to have witnessed at first-hand the Battle of Thermopylae'. Mr. Lamont even quotes in full Rupert Brooke's pleasant *jeu d'esprit* 'Heaven' (as imagined by a fish) as 'one of the most appropriate and penetrating comments for the modern mind on this issue.' The appropriate comment on this finny parody of human speculation is that if fishes did so reason there is not the least evidence why the argument, though unduly ichthyomorphic, should not be valid; in point of fact, the author was a member of the species *homo sapiens*. The same applies to Mr. Lamont's own more cumbersome fantasy of a philosophic dinosaur. A necessary reminder to those modern minds who find a fable 'penetrating', when it supports their case, is that the poet could well have gone on to tell of the sceptical fish who, spurning all extra-aquatic speculation and denying any reality beyond Pond and Stream, taught on behalf of the greater glory of fish that energetic worm-catching was All. Convictions are built on values and so the origin of values is a vital question. Without agreement upon this the credibility of immortality and also its relation to moral conduct and ideals cannot be argued on a common basis. Linked closely to this problem, too, is the status of symbolism. Mr. Lamont regards symbolical interpretations of immortality with suspicion, as poetry that only too easily may be mistaken for prose fact. Evidently the materialist feels a threat to his ideology in the very existence of values leading beyond the here and now, so that he shies at their reflection in the waters of present experience. Religious faith, on the other hand, gladly accepts both the poetry and the prose of eternal truths. That is why, pragmatically, otherworldly creeds so often result in confidence and constructive energy, and their opposites in triviality and boredom.

By its very nature, ideological thinking cannot submit to self-criticism, and so its virtues are marred by denial of their

limitations. Mr. Lamont rightly denies that loss of other-worldly sanctions means inevitable descent into licence. It may equally result in a calm and moderate temper—sometimes. Epicurus was akin to the Stoics. Yet the name of epicurean has come to stand for the cynical dilettante rather than the uncompromising ascetic. Even his disciples had little understanding of Chuang Tse, when they found him playing on a bowl and singing after his wife's death. Mr. Lamont recommends for every one, if not the Chinese Taoist's indifference, at least a touch of Stoic resignation. Professor A. E. Taylor's comment on Marcus Aurelius's inability to conquer his internal fears of 'dying like a Caesar', that his system provided only a 'god within' with no corresponding 'god without', is relevant here. Mr. Lamont notices that 'those who think this life is all rarely take the time or trouble to say why', in spite of the importance of the matter. The inference is clear, or ought to be.

There is really very little of a paradox in the fact that belief in a future life goes a long way towards giving meaning and value to this one, and that it is the 'immortalist' who can in fact best believe in mortality. Browning's Grammarian, confident that 'man has forever', is not conscious of time or trouble expended on the philology of a Greek particle on the brink of the grave. The mere desire for an extension of life can be morally stultifying. The conviction that another world exists will have decided consequences, either for good or evil according to the content of the belief held, but it will certainly introduce values that will be effective in the life of the believer. For the Christian, to believe in an easy transference of organic life to a 'spiritual sphere' is not simply an illusion, but an act of denying the reality of man's relation to God. It was the serpent in Eden who said, 'Ye shall not surely die.' Death is real. But eternal life is real also and is to be found by faith already in this life.

Professor John Oman used to contend that man knows two environments directly—the natural and the supernatural—and that he uses the latter to interpret the former. The desire for immortality is not, as Mr. Lamont contends, the easy wish for an extension of organic existence; nor is it confined to the symbolic representation of values discovered in the contingencies of a physical universe. It is the penetration of the finite by the infinite, the discovery of value that is more than accidental 'goods' thrown up by the strange chance that the human animal

has, in the course of evolution, attained the ability to be conscious of his pleasures and miseries for a period. That is why, for the Christian, belief in personal survival is subordinate to, and wholly dependent upon, his belief in the being and nature of God. Organic life is the gift of God, and so is sacred. That is the guarantee of the worth of the individual This life is the finite stage upon which an eternal drama is enacted. That is the guarantee of the value of every life, however short or thwarted. Supernatural sanctions are often regarded as unnecessary or harmful; but once they are withdrawn there is no defence against those who would sacrifice the individual to collective or inhuman values. The omnicompetent state, the indispensable revolution, or the inevitable millenium have no scruples about the worth of that cheap and meaningless commodity, mortal life. For John Dewey it is particularly in the doctrine of immortality that religion is the opium of the peoples. That particular narcotic does not at least benumb the conscience into believing that any crime might be justified by party or class interests. Naturalism may plead that its intentions are honourable; it only desires that a good time shall be had by all. It limits itself to emptying the house of life of supernatural meaning, leaving it swept and garnished for the devils of the autonomous will, who find a highroad to their particular hell on the paving-stones of its pious intentions. Dr. Robert Law's words, written over forty years ago, have force today: 'To positivism, with the enthusiasm of humanity as its sole religion, succeeds neo-paganism, with the enthusiasm of self as the one true faith and royal law' (*Tests of Life* p. 105). If the lesson of history is not plain enough, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* will furnish an 'appropriate and penetrating comment' on the process.

In a most untypical sentence, Mr. Lamont abandons ideology sufficiently to admit: 'No single idea, such as that of immortality, is, in my opinion, all important; what is of supreme importance is an inclusive and integrated philosophy of life and one that places the individual in a definite relationship to both society and nature'. The renunciation of ideology for ideas would be a necessary first step towards this desirable goal. Conceivably, it might then appear that any philosophy of life, which is to be fully human, demands the presence of the eternal as well as the absence of illusions.