

IT DOES NOT FOLLOW

BY MARGARET SHERWOOD

NOT long since an account fell into my hands of a discussion between three learned gentlemen, Astronomer, Biologist, and Theologian, concerning the origin of life. The Astronomer began with those not unfamiliar statements regarding the immensity of the sidereal universe, the incidental nature of the birth of our planet earth, and the brevity of organic existence, to which we listen always with breathless interest. That the Nebular Hypothesis has vanished in star dust, and that our earth was born in a fortuitous clash of our sun with a greater star some thousands of millions of years ago, we accept with that grave reverence which we accord to all swiftly changing scientific hypotheses, to which, in turn, we swear allegiance as they come, pausing to let our imaginations play delightedly over the conception that we are living, moving, breathing, on a sun-flake. We accept this hypothesis with enthusiasm, and wait, with childlike wonder, for the next. For myself I cannot get enough of these astronomical theories, for I find in them intellectual stimulus; moreover, they train and keep alive my imagination in a way that is most useful in my humble task of teaching literature, while contemporary literature helps not at all. As regards the physical universe, when they are dealing with matter and the laws of matter, we follow without demur the leadership of the scientists, giving them an almost credulous faith.

When, however, on the occasion just referred to the Astronomer summarized his remarks by saying that "The precarious balance now maintained between terrestrial living organisms and their physical environment; the great extent in space and material of the sidereal universe; the great extension in the time scale relative to the duration of life phenomena; the eccentric position of the sun and its commonness; and, finally, the incidental nature of the birth of the planet earth, constitute five fairly specific

reasons why our theologies and philosophies would find it advantageous to reconsider and possibly reevaluate the meaning of life," one wonders why the Theologian did not see that the Lord had delivered his enemy, or his friend, as the case might be, into his hands. Why have the voices of those who interpret life in anything except terms of matter become so faint? Possibly in this case it was the humanist's scruple in regard to sticking to the point, for he confined his brief and apologetic remarks concerning the mechanistic theory, the vitalistic theory, and the elder theologian's belief in the supernatural, to the subject as stated, the origin of life, a very different matter. Whatever the reason, he did not take up the gage thrown down in the phrase "reevaluate the meaning of life".

The Astronomer, in emphasizing the vanishing littleness of man, was doubtless scoffing at the old conception, especially beloved in the eighteenth century, of man interpreting himself as the centre of a material universe, subordinate to him and ministering to his needs—a vanity long ago outworn and forgotten. That, also, was a shallow and materialistic conception of life's meaning, but probably, in the long run, a better one than would result from too long or too irrelevant a contemplation of "man as part of an organic scum that, for the time being, coats part of the surface of one small planet, itself a cast-off fragment of a star".

Surely it might be suggested by philosopher or theologian, or plain layman, that size is not synonymous with significance. If we are discussing the question of the meaning of life, the unimaginably great number of miles in the sidereal universe has no more to do with the point than the unimaginably great number of German marks that go to make up the American dollar. Would the Astronomer then think life of greater value if man were the size of the greatest sun, or could whirl in some celestial gyration in record speed, faster than any other sun? We need Bergson among us again to help us differentiate between quantity and intensity. Mass, weight, velocity, the properties of the outer universe, are not the determining factors in that inner world wherein the values of human life are found; matter may reach to the uttermost immeasurable outpost of space, but the

human soul is supreme and invincible in its own domain. The question is, surely, if we are discussing the meaning of life, what are the powers, the inner possibilities, the duties of this strange being, who, in an illimitable universe of matter, finds himself not wholly subject to material law? Our experience tells us that we are partly, at least, responsible for our deeds, that we have the power of choice, as, evidently, these masses of matter, these burning and clashing suns, do not. If the size of these has any bearing on the question, it would almost seem as if man's dignities were increased by his difference from such immeasurable lumps. If the surmise as to other planets being inhabited has any bearing on the question,—and the suggestion has been sometimes made that this, in some strange way, would decrease man's dignity on this planet,—it can only be in the way of suggesting possible future sidereal sympathies and affinities.

Should our Astronomer dispute this claim to partial freedom of the will, we can but remind him, and he will admit the charge, that he had it in his power to debate or not to debate; to stay on strictly scientific ground, or to invade, as he chose to do, the province of metaphysician, philosopher, and theologian, suggesting that they reevaluate the meaning of life. Belief in freedom of the will, in power to choose one's course, underlies all human action; it is at the basis of every religious system that at all involves conduct, of every ethical system that the world has known. Strange dignities and strange responsibilities attach to this faith, which are in no way lessened by the size of the sidereal universe, or the illimitable time required for evolution. If the astronomy professor should, for instance, walk down the street and commit a murder, his conception, after the deed was done, of the kind of scum he was, would differ wholly from his present contemplation of himself as part of an organic scum on the surface of a cast-off fragment of a star.

The dignity of man lies in his power to rule his life from within, not in his weight, mass, or velocity. Outside of sporting, and possibly of thieving, circles, his worth has even depended more upon his power of choosing between good and evil than upon his speed or his *avoirdufois*, and all five considerations advanced by the scientist in regard to revaluing life would not prevail against

this fact. There is no marvel in the material universe so awe-compelling as the power of man to choose, and to hold, through struggle, hardship, bitter blow from outside and inner misgiving, to an ideal of right conduct, constrained not by outer force but by inner will. Such endurance, though it is not measurable in terms of time, has, I do not doubt, more piercing significance than the "inconceivably great duration of various recognizable stellar manœuvres".

If the largest two suns in the boundless universe should collide to-morrow and send masses of burning matter through space, wholly disorganizing our solar system, we should still, so long as we were conscious and until we were hit, feel ourselves bound not to rob, steal, or lie, and in that sense of allegiance to an inner, not a physical, law, we find the meaning of life. Moreover the fact that, as the Biologist remarked during the aforesaid discussion, our bodies are largely composed of sodium rather than potassium, does not interfere. We do not know wholly how this law of the inner life has come into being, though we can give some guesses. I dare say as valid as many of the scientific guesses about the solar systems of endless space and the enchanting hypothesis of the solar system of the atom. The law is there, and against it the weight of matter of a million universes shall not prevail; nay rather time and space immensities, the æons that have gone into the spiritual as into the physical evolution of man, enhance the marvel of his growth. And how profoundly spiritual, how much more potent in touching imagination, will, the secret springs of action in men's souls, than the tale of the fall of man, is this conception of man's struggle upward!

The fallacy in the Astronomer's statement comes, of course, from a confusion of terms; "significance of life," "revalue the meaning of life," are shorn, as is so often the case in modern speech and modern writing, of their deeper reach of meaning. He should have contented himself with a lesser phrase, physical existence. I sometimes think that scientists of this turn of mind—I mean only those of this turn of mind—ought not to be entrusted with anything so precious as language, which has come down to us enriched by the inner experience of the race. They who use with half meaning words and phrases capable of high

spiritual import rob us of our heritage. The very dictionary confutes them, with its freight of words testifying to the growth and the reality of the inner life. Love, hope, faith, aspiration toward higher thought and conduct, increasing ability to discern between good and evil, are as surely a part of humanity's development as are the changes in bone, sinew, and nerve tissue, whereby, we are taught, the power and the perfection of the human body have come to be, from rudimentary beginnings. Philosophies and theologies may differ in regard to points innumerable, but the power to philosophize and theologize bears witness to the marvel of man's progress upward from the brute into the thinking, willing being, with possibilities of unfolding to which no limitation can be set, of inner growth—over-shadowed by no end. Shall they who, rightly, teach physical evolution in the light of ascertained fact, deny spiritual evolution and the facts of the inner life, surely as valid as the facts of the outer life? The results of this inner development, in which both thought and emotion play their great parts, are as trustworthy, as much to be depended on, as are the results of physical development, and need no revaluation in the light of new interstellar measurements. When, as sometimes happens, departing from the basis of all scientific endeavour, deduction from observed fact, our scientists become metaphysical and take a tremendous jump, perhaps without knowing that they are taking it, into denials that have no basis in observation, they draw after them into mental confusion and disaster a great part of the civilized world which so obediently follows them to-day. Might not they who deny the validity of the inner life be deprived by constitutional amendment of those qualitative terms whose very existence bears witness to that life, and be asked to confine themselves to figures, geometrical lines, hieroglyphics, algebraic symbols, and other similar mediums for setting forth the quantitative properties of space?

Surely the question of the revaluation of life could come up legitimately only in the face of a higher challenge, when one—perhaps poet or prophet—with conceptions of higher ethical or spiritual import than we have yet reached, speaks. As yet there is no need of this, so far ahead, so divinely difficult to measure up to, is the Christian life, the Christian faith. The value of life is

not a matter of the scales or of the yardstick, but of the potential development of the human soul, that part of personality not wholly dominated by physical law. What have the new discoveries in regard to extension and duration to do with this? The confusion of ideas recalls the reasoning which some one—I think it was Lowell—once attributed to Whitman, that “because the Mississippi is long and the prairies are broad, therefore immorality is beautiful”.

The size of one world or of the universe or anything merely quantitative is no determining factor in man’s abasement or his pride. His pride is that he has the power of choice, obeys a spiritual law, can rise to the dignity of sacrifice, the least act of which is of more significance than the whole material universe. His task is to interpret life in the light of his highest possibility, his sternest duty, his most searching faith—to live up to the best he can hope or conjecture. Wordsworth’s great affirmations still are valid:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music.

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Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live and act and serve the future hour.
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, through faith’s transcendent dower
We feel that we are greater than we know.

MARGARET SHERWOOD.

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE

BY HENRY A. PERKINS

THE American abroad is sometimes asked to explain the meaning of his college degree and the character of the institution which gave it to him. It sounds like an easy question to answer, but the more he tries the more puzzled becomes his hearer and the more the conviction is forced upon him that not only does the European find the American college enigmatical, but that he himself has no very clear idea of it either. It is the case of a bewildered sphere trying to explain three dimensions in Flatland, and one begins to wonder whether even those august spheres of large diameter, the College Presidents, really grasp the true inwardness of their institutions, what they are trying to do, and how inherently they differ from the universities of the Old World.

To rule out the first, the most obvious, and yet strangely prevalent misconception, let me explain that by American College I mean an institution like Williams College, Yale College, Trinity College, Harvard College. They are all alike in scope, ideals and methods, and differ only in degree and in size, but not in kind. Yale College has more students, more teachers, more courses than Williams, but otherwise they are as alike as two peas.

But, the reader will protest, Yale is a University and Williams only a College, and quite different in their scope and aims. Quite so. Yale *University* is different from any mere *College*, but Yale *College* within Yale University is only a college and its students college students, however much they may like to talk about the university, of which they are members by virtue of the greater including the less. Strictly speaking, if we adopt the European meaning of university, the graduate schools alone have a right to that splendid old title. The college, from this point of view, is a feeder for the university; but considering that in America the college preceded the university, and that so small a proportion of its product is "fed" into the professional schools,