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# Dare to be Wise"

AN ADDRESS

Delivered before the "Heretics" Society in Cambridge,  
on the 8th December, 1909

BY

**JOHN McTAGGART ELLIS McTAGGART**

Doctor in Letters, Fellow and Lecturer of Trinity College in Cambridge,  
Fellow of the British Academy.

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# “DARE TO BE WISE”

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## “DARE TO BE WISE”

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At the other end of the world is a University<sup>1</sup> which has adopted for its own the motto which best expresses the nature of a University: Sapere Aude. It is of the duty laid on our Society to follow this injunction that I wish to speak.

Our object is to promote discussion upon religion, philosophy, and art. And in discussing religion and philosophy there is a special significance in the command, Dare to be wise. In seeking truth of all sorts many virtues are needed, industry, patience, humility, magnanimity. And courage also is often needed in the search, since the observer of nature must often risk his life in his observations. But there is another need for courage when we approach religion and philosophy.

And this need comes from the tremendous effect on our own welfare, and the welfare of our fellow beings, of those aspects of reality with which religion and philosophy are concerned. This effect is, in the first

<sup>1</sup> The University of New Zealand.

place, a characteristic of that reality, the problems about which would usually be called religious. But it spreads to all philosophy, for there is, I think, no question in philosophy—not even among those which border closest on logic or on science—of which we can be sure beforehand that its solution will have no effect on the problems of religion.

The profound importance to our welfare of the truth on these questions involves that our beliefs about those truths will also have a great importance for our welfare. If our lives would gain enormously in value if a certain doctrine were true, and would lose enormously in value if it were false, then a belief that it *is* true will naturally make us happy, and a belief that it *is* false make us miserable. And happiness and misery have much to do with welfare.

The practical importance to our lives of these matters has not always been sufficiently recognised of late years. This error is due, I think, to excessive reaction from two errors on the other side.

The first of these errors is the assertion that, if certain views on religious matters were true, all morality would lose its validity. From this, of course, it would follow that all persons who believed those views and yet accepted morality would be acting illogically and foolishly. That this view is erroneous seems to me quite clear. Our views on religious questions may affect

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some of the details of morality—the observance of a particular day of rest, or the use of wine or of beef, for example. But they are quite powerless either to obliterate the difference between right and wrong, or to change our views on much of the content of morality. At least, I do not know of any view maintained by anyone on any religious question which would, if I held it, alter my present belief that it is right to give water to a thirsty dog, and wrong to commit piracy or to cheat at cards.

Another form of this same error is the assertion that certain beliefs on religious matters, though they might not render morality absurd, would in practice prevent those who accepted them from pursuing virtue persistently and enthusiastically. This view seems refuted by experience, which, I think, tells us that the zeal for virtue shown by various men, while it varies much, and for many causes, does not vary according to their views on religious matters. The men who believe, for example, in God, or immortality, or optimism, seem to be neither better nor worse morally than those who disbelieve in them.

The second error is the view that certain beliefs on religious matters would destroy the value, for those who accepted the beliefs, of many of those parts of experience which would otherwise have the highest value. Tennyson, for example, maintained that disbelief in

immortality would destroy the value of love, even while life lasted :—

And love would answer with a sigh,  
The sound of that forgetful shore  
Will change my sweetness more and more,  
Half-dead to know that I shall die.<sup>1</sup>

Here, again, it seems to me, there is certainly error. Our views as to the ultimate nature and destiny of the universe may affect our judgments as to the generality of certain forms of good, or as to their duration, or as to the possibility of their increase in intensity hereafter. But I do not see how they can affect our judgment of the goodness of these good things, as we find them here and now. Indeed, if we do not start with the certainty that love for an hour on earth is unconditionally good, I do not see what ground we should have for believing that it would be good for an eternity in heaven.

These views, then, I admit to be errors, and those do well who reject them as errors. But the reaction from them, as I said, goes sometimes too far, and leads to a denial of the practical importance of the problems of religion. And this is, again, a great mistake. Whatever may be the true answer to the problems of religion, good will be different from bad, and right from wrong, and much of what we do and feel in this present life will be good, and much will be bad. But if we ask how much good exists in the universe and how much bad ;

<sup>1</sup> *In Memoriam.*



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if we ask if the main current of the universe is for right, or for wrong, or indifferent to both ; if we ask what is the eventual destiny of the universe or of ourselves—all these questions must be answered one way or the other according to the solution we adopt of religious problems, and of those problems of philosophy which bear on religion. Are there any questions which affect our welfare more than these? It is true that what primarily affects our welfare is the truth on these matters, and not our knowledge of the truth. But a belief that things are well with the world brings happiness, a belief that things are ill with the world brings misery. And this involves the intense practical importance of our beliefs on the problems of religion.

Let us consider what some of these problems are which we call religious. In the first place, there is the general question of optimism or pessimism. Is the universe as a whole more good than bad? It is, of course, possible to maintain that it is impossible for us to answer this question. But some systems maintain that it can be answered, and some of them answer that the good prevails, and some of them hold that it is outbalanced by the evil. The practical importance of the truth on this question does not require to be enforced. For the goodness or badness of the universe is the whole of which every other matter of practical importance is a part.

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Our belief on the subject, therefore, must have great influence on our happiness. So far, indeed, as I am only concerned with my welfare in this life, or with that of my friends, the more general question will have little influence, for in these limited fields we have empirical means of judging the present or inferring the immediate future, which are more certain than inferences from the general nature of the universe. But few people limit their interests entirely to those whom they know personally. And then there is always the question whether my own life, and those of my friends, may not, perhaps, extend indefinitely further than that short period in our present bodies which is all that we can now know by observation.

And there is another question, equally important. Does the universe become better or worse as time goes on, and, if it becomes either, which does it become? This is of equal importance, because it is a disposition of our nature—apparently a fundamental and inevitable disposition—to regard good and evil in the future with very different feelings from those with which we regard good and evil in the past. If the world were known to be more evil than good on the whole, we should still regard it cheerfully, if we believed that most of the evil lay in the past, and that the future was predominantly good. And, though the world as a whole were known to be more good than evil, that would afford us but little

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comfort if that part of its course which still lay in the future were more evil than good.

Then, to come to less general questions, there is the question of immortality. Our beliefs on this subject, also, will profoundly affect our happiness. Some desire annihilation, some shrink from it, but very few are indifferent. And even of these, I suppose, none would be indifferent as to the further question of what kind the future life would be, if there were a future life at all.

Then there is the existence of God. The importance of this question for our welfare has, no doubt, been exaggerated, through a failure to comprehend the alternatives. It has been supposed that the only alternative to a belief in God is a belief in some Scepticism or Materialism which would be incompatible with any hope that the universe as a whole was coherent, orderly, or good. But this is a mistake. There are systems which hold the universe to be all this, although they deny the existence of God. And, on the other hand, the existence of God would certainly not be by itself a guarantee that the universe was good. That there is some evil in the universe is beyond doubt. If it is there because God did not object to it, how do we know how much evil he may tolerate, or even welcome? If it is there—as most reasonable Theists would say now—because God could not help it, how do we know how much evil it may be beyond his power to prevent?

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Theism may possibly form a link in a chain of argument leading to Optimism, but it is far indeed from being a complete proof of Optimism.

But in spite of all this it cannot be denied that to many people the belief that there is or is not a God is most intimately connected with their happiness. And even those who are indifferent on this point would certainly not be indifferent on the question whether, if there is a God, he is such as he was supposed to be by the early Jews, or, again, by the Jesuits or the Calvinists of the sixteenth century.

Our beliefs on religious questions, then, do profoundly affect our happiness. We can conceive—indeed, we know in history, and in the thought of the present day—beliefs the acceptance of which would make life almost intolerably miserable to anyone whose interests reached beyond the immediate present and his immediate environment. And here we find the need of courage. For, if we are to think on these matters at all, we must accept the belief for which we have evidence, and we must reject the belief for which we have no evidence, however much the first may repel or the second allure us. And, sometimes, this is not easy.

When we deal with the knowledge of science, or every-day life, we have no similar struggle. In the first place, it is here often very indifferent to us *what* the true solution of a problem may be, provided that, whatever it

is, we can know it. It may be of great importance to us to know what sort of building will best stand the shock of an earthquake, but comparatively unimportant what sort it is, since, whichever it may be, we can build in that manner in earthquake districts. It may be very important to know which of two medicines will cure a disease, but quite unimportant which it is, so long as we know it and can use it.

If, indeed, we have to put the question, Is there *any* medicine which can cure this disease? then, indeed, it may matter very much to us what the answer is. And in such a case we may be tempted, for a short time, to believe that a cure has been found, when in point of fact it has not. But the temptation does not last for long. When the medicine is tried, and fails to cure, then conviction comes to all except the weakest. But there is no corresponding help in religion and philosophy. For, if there is ever to be any experimental verification of our beliefs on such subjects, at least it will not be on this side of death. If through cowardice we depart from the right path, we must not hope for experience to take us back.

The strain is so hard that often and often in the history of thought men have tried to justify their weakness by asserting that we were entitled to believe a proposition if its truth would be very good, or at any rate if its falsity would be very bad. Over and over, in different

forms, this demand meets us—not infrequently in the work of the men of whom we should least expect it. But, whenever we find it, we must, I maintain, reject it. It may well be that the universe, if this or that belief were false, would be very bad. But how do we know that the universe is *not* very bad? There is no intrinsic *à priori* connection between existence and goodness. If we can show that the nature of existence is such that it *is* good, so much the better. But then the question of the nature of existence is the one which we are setting out to determine, and we have no right to begin by assuming that that nature is good.

Nor can we fall back on the argument, which is often used, that our desires for the good—those desires the thwarting of which produce the misery we are avoiding—are as real as anything else in the universe, and form as sound a basis for an argument as anything else. Unquestionably they are real, and form a basis for an argument; but the question remains, What argument can be based on them? If they were to be any good here, the argument would have to be that, because they really exist as desires in us, therefore the universe must be such as will gratify them. And this is invalid. The existence of a desire does not involve the existence of its gratification. Each of us has had many desires which were not satisfied, and which can now never be satisfied.

We cannot argue, then, from the pain that a belief

gives us to the falsity of that belief. And, if we decide to think freely on these subjects, we run the risk of arriving, as others have arrived before us, at conclusions the pain of which may be very great. It is true that, so far as I know, no person who has thought freely on these subjects has arrived at conclusions so maddening as those of some traditional theologies now fading into the past. The ideas of an endless hell, of an unjust God, are fruits of ancient tradition, or of interpretation of alleged revelations—never, I believe, of independent reasoning. But to find no more hope, no more purpose, no more value in the universe than was found by Hobbes, by Hume, or by Schopenhauer—the pain of this, especially to one who has hoped for better results, or, perhaps, has once held them gained—the pain of this is sometimes not trifling.

Why should we not endeavour to escape it? Why should we not accept, without inquiry, some traditional faith? There may be arguments for it, there may be arguments against it. But others have accepted it without inquiry into these arguments. Why should not we?

Such a suggestion has greater attractions than it would have had two generations ago. In Europe, in the present age, a man is not likely to accept any religion in this way, except some form of Christianity. And the Christianity of sixty years ago, while no doubt

such that many men could honestly *believe* it to be true, was such that no man could *wish* it to be true, unless he was devoid either of imagination or of humanity. Much Christianity of the present day is still of this type. But it would be most absurd and unjust to deny that the type of Christianity which becomes every year relatively more powerful is very different. Its view of the universe is one which might well entitle us to call the universe good. Why should we not accept it without the risks of inquiry?

Or, if we cannot do that, why trouble about these problems at all? Is not the world we see big enough to occupy lives so short as ours? Shall we not enjoy the good, strive to increase it and to share it, and ask no questions about what is behind, beyond, and—perhaps—above?

Yet some follow after truth. And what shall be their reward? May we answer, in words which were written about Spinoza, and which are worthy to have been written by him: "Even that which true and fearless men have preached through all the generations to unheeding ears. Seek the truth, fear not and spare not: this first, this for its own sake, this only; and the truth itself is your reward—a reward not measured by length of days nor by any reckoning of men"?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sir Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*, chap. ix.



It is most beautiful and most true, but it is not the whole truth. For knowledge of the truth, though a great good, is not the only good, nor perhaps the highest good. If my friend is in pain or estranged from me, if the universe is worthless or worse than worthless, it is no adequate consolation to know that at least I see the evil clearly.

And then, is truth always the reward for seeking the truth? Always it cannot be, for if some have attained, the others must have failed who disagreed with them. The reward of the search—are we sure that it will be anything but the search?

Can we give any other bidding than that which was once given to a search yet more sacred?

Come—pain ye shall have, and be blind to the ending !  
 Come—fear ye shall have, mid the sky's overcasting !  
 Come—change ye shall have, for far are ye wending !  
 Come—no crown ye shall have for your thirst and your fasting,  
 But—<sup>1</sup>

And here we must stop, before the promise that follows. The crown of our thirst and our fasting may be the opened heavens and the Beatific Vision. It may be nothing but the thirst and the fasting itself.

No great inducement, perhaps, all this? And no inducement is needed. There are those who long for truth with a longing as simple, as ultimate, as powerful

<sup>1</sup> William Morris, *Love is Enough*.

as the drunkard's longing for his wine and the lover's longing for his beloved. They will search, because they must. Our search has begun.

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